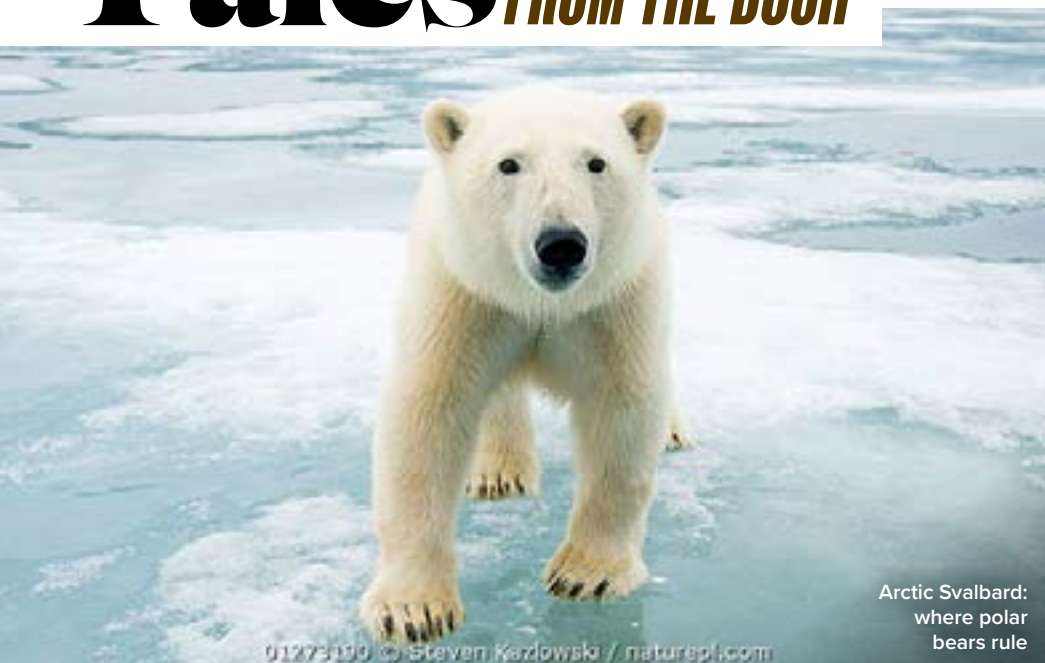


Tales *FROM THE BUSH*



01273490 © Steven Kazlowski / naturepl.com

“There was a very sudden, very loud crack”

Filming polar bears in Norway

BY JAMIE MCPHERSON

“OUR SMALL PLANE DROPPED through the clouds to reveal a vast expanse of sea ice, the low sun picking out the distant peaks of Svalbard. It was March 2016 and, with series producer Alastair Fothergill, I was about to start a four-week shoot for the Netflix series *Our Planet*.

Peering out of the window, I hoped to glimpse the animal we were here to film – the polar bear. I’ve filmed polar bears before, but this time would be different: I had designed a rig that allowed me to attach a gyrostabilised camera to the front of an all-terrain vehicle (ATV). With guide and driver Einar Eliassen, we’d head onto the ice to film these predators hunting seals.

It’s an approach that has never been attempted before. And we would soon learn why it would never be attempted again.

The standard way to film polar bears is on a snowmobile, towing your camera and tripod on a sled. When you locate a bear, you jump off the vehicle, fumble around with freezing hands to assemble the camera and hope the bear is still within filming distance when you’re ready to record.

If it’s not, you pack everything away – and rinse and repeat. Should the bear approach, you do the packing-away part very quickly and get out of there.

The ATV rig – which resembles a small jeep – was designed to be both faster and safer than a snowmobile. It allowed us to follow and film the bears without having to constantly stop and start over, and it also enabled us to stay nice and warm inside the cab, drinking tea and eating the giant Wotsits I’d brought as a gift for Einar.

Filming got underway, and within a few days we were capturing never-before-seen images of polar bears. The new approach was delivering everything I’d hoped for.

We found a female with a cub and filmed an extraordinary scene of the pair playing ‘Grandma’s Footsteps’ with a seal that was resting on the ice. Every time the seal looked away, the bears crept forwards a few steps, pausing whenever it looked back. It was utterly mesmerising.

Nonetheless, the fact that we were essentially driving on ice floating on the Arctic Ocean was always on our minds. Particularly as, with each passing day,

the temperature was rising and the ice was getting thinner.

A snowmobile is relatively light and has a large footprint. It can travel on ice you would crash through on foot because it spreads the load. An ATV is heavier and, unlike a snowmobile, has a roof. Should it break the ice and sink, swimming away Wim Hoff-style is not an option.

Safety was, therefore, a primary concern. We each had a grab-bag of dry clothes and survival equipment on the roof, and we regularly drilled the ice to check it was thick enough to support the weight of the ATV. These measures served us well – until the final day of the shoot.

We’d been following a beautiful, large male all morning, heading towards the edge of the sea ice. We stopped so I could drill the ice. We had 20cm – all good.

I had just returned to the vehicle to discuss filming options when there was a very sudden, very loud crack. Before we could even begin to comprehend what was happening, the front of the ATV dropped through the ice. We were sinking.

Instinctively, I slammed down my door-release button, but the door was already blocked. The vehicle paused momentarily as the hefty camera on the front had caught on the ice, but it wasn’t going to hold.

“Everyone out, NOW!” I yelled.

Because the vehicle was tipped forwards, Alastair, who was in the back seat, was able to exit the rear door. But Einar had the same problem as me – his door was already below the ice and jammed shut.

There was no other option than to literally tear our way out. Using all my strength, I managed to bend my door in half, top to bottom, and scramble to safety.

Einar then clambered over to my side and I hauled him out, seconds before the vehicle upended violently and disappeared into the dark, freezing water.

We were left staring into an ATV-sized hole in the ice, with no safety equipment, no spare clothes and a very large, probably very hungry polar bear for company.

We stood in shock and disbelief, our eyes fixed on the bear. He glanced at us for a moment, then, with what looked like a smirk, turned on his heel and ambled off.

Luckily, Einar’s phone was in his pocket, and when he came to his senses, he called for help. All we could do was wait, taking in the surreal scene as the giant Wotsits bobbed to the surface, one by one. **W**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jamie is an award-winning cinematographer. He has worked on many landmark series for the BBC, Netflix and DisneyNature.