

TWIN BEAR CUBS IN SNOW DEN

Polar bears are born inside a snow den located either on the floating Arctic pack ice or on land near the frozen sea. They are tiny and helpless at birth, weighing less than a kilogram. But by the time their mother breaks open the den when the cubs are about three months old, the little bears have grown significantly.




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Like the young twins, I have been privileged to capture, photographically of course, polar bear cubs usually weigh about 10 to 15 kilograms when they first see the world outside their natal den. The family typically remains at the den for about a week, exercising and adjusting to the cold outside temperatures. Eventually the mother decides the cubs are ready to venture onto the sea ice, and the family leaves the den permanently. Then the mother bear will hunt for her first meal in many months.

In Canada's Western Hudson Bay region, mother polar bears endure an astonishing 8 to 9 months of food deprivation from July through March, while they construct a den, undergo gestation, give birth, nurse their offspring, and wait for their young cubs to be sufficiently developed so that they can travel out onto the sea ice. Canadian Wildlife Service scientists have determined that climate change

is impairing the ability of female polar bears in this population to gain sufficient weight to undergo successful pregnancy. Due to earlier breakup of the sea ice on Hudson Bay each summer, which is a direct consequence of warmer ambient temperatures resulting from climate change, the bears now have significantly less time in which to accumulate essential fat reserves before being marooned on land. Scientists predict that if present warming trends continue, within the next two decades female polar bears in the Western Hudson Bay region may be unable to reach the minimum body weight necessary to sustain pregnancy. Tragically, if that occurs, the extinction of this polar bear population will be the ultimate result.

While accompanying Canadian Wildlife Service polar bear biologists during their field research near the western shore of Hudson Bay, I had the extraordinary prospect to capture these exquisite young twin cubs inside

their snow den. Traveling by helicopter within one of the world's largest known polar bear denning areas, we located the mother bear near her den, and saw that the cubs were still inside. To assess the health of the family, the mother bear was immobilized with a tranquilizing dart. Once she was safely unconscious, my colleagues began evaluating her condition, and I was able to approach the den. Keeping in mind that the cubs had never seen another living creature other than their mother, I was careful to approach extremely slowly, and not get any closer than their comfort zone. The cubs became so comfortable with my presence that they paid me the highest compliment by falling asleep while I worked on their sleeping portrait. I got a bit of frostbite that day; but the extraordinary experience, and the pictures I was able to obtain, certainly made the pain very worthwhile! 

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