

# NANUQ

The great **white** one



Pablo Trilles Farrington



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# Foreword

# Foreword

Inuit are a group of culturally similar indigenous people inhabiting the Arctic, throughout most of Northern Canada. Inuit are the descendants of what anthropologists call the Thule people, who emerged from western Alaska around 1.000 CE. Inuktitut, also known as Eastern Canadian Inuktitut, is one of the principal Inuit languages of Canada. In Inuktitut language, the word **Nanuq** means polar bear. In poetic and sacred language, the Inuit have many names for the great white bear of the North, such as “those who make one frightened”, “the ever-wandering one”, “the one who walks on ice” or “the great white one”.

As the greatest predator of the Arctic, the one animal that is at home both on land and in the water, and the one whose hunting habits most closely resemble those of humans, **Nanuq** is a powerfully respected animal. Interest in the habits of polar bears goes beyond the details needed for the Inuit to hunt them and avoid being preyed upon. Their immense power, both in the natural and spirit worlds, and their uncanny resemblance to humans, breed curiosity in how these great white bears live.

# Introduction



# Introduction

In August 2023 I took a 10-day photography trip to the west of Hudson Bay, in the state of Manitoba in the center of Canada. My goal was to enter the inaccessible kingdom of the polar bear, live for a few days the experience of being surrounded by oceans of tundra and boreal forests, and ultimately photograph the largest terrestrial predator on the planet. In this book I try to summarize the most notable aspects of that trip and accompany it with the photographs I was able to take of both the wild animals and their surroundings. Thanks the team at Churchill Wild ([www.churchillwild.com](http://www.churchillwild.com)) for the “once-in-a-life-time experience” of one of the best wildlife trips you can take.

The trip began when I arrived, along with the rest of the people, in the city of Churchill. Churchill, in Hudson Bay, has a fixed population of 400 people (900 in summer) and is considered the polar bear capital of the world. There are no roads to reach by car, so train, plane, and boat (when the bay is not frozen) are the only means of transportation.



From Churchill, heading north, we traveled by small plane to the first of the two places where we were going to spend the first days, near Seal River. Surrounded by endless tundra, the place can only be accessed by flying or snowmobile when the bay freezes in the winter months. The place, Seal River Heritage Lodge, is a set of cabins equipped for extreme climates where temperatures can reach  $-60^{\circ}\text{C}$ . They are enclosed by a metal fence that acts as a deterrent for those unwelcome guests, in this case polar bears.





Tundra is one of the most inhospitable terrains for humans. A hostile place infested with mosquitoes in summer, surrounded by thousands of lakes and ponds, and with an extremely cold continental climate. Furthermore, the soil is made up of permafrost, preventing any type of agricultural activity. Only animals like polar bears, adapted to this type of environment, can survive here until the arrival of the bay ice and thus begins the hunt for seals, their preferred food.





A characteristic of Hudson Bay is its tides. The water level rises and falls every six hours, and since it is so shallow, the tide at its lowest level can retreat 5 km away from the coast. To this we must add complex navigation due to the topography, plagued by thousands of rocks that, hidden under the surface, can pierce the hull of a boat with extreme ease.





The other camp, called Nanuk Polar Bear Lodge, is located 120 km southeast of Churchill, on the Kaskatamugan coast, facing Hudson Bay, on the edge of the boreal forest. As in Seal River, it is only possible to get there by plane or when the bay freezes. The closest town is Churchill itself. Between them, kilometers of tundra and boreal forest, dotted with dozens of polar bears, gray wolves, and black bears.





The boreal forest, characterized by its coniferous forest formations composed mainly of pines, firs, and larches, is one of the largest forest masses on the planet. Habitat for wild animals such as gray wolf, black bear, elk, etc. It is a leafy area and very difficult to access.





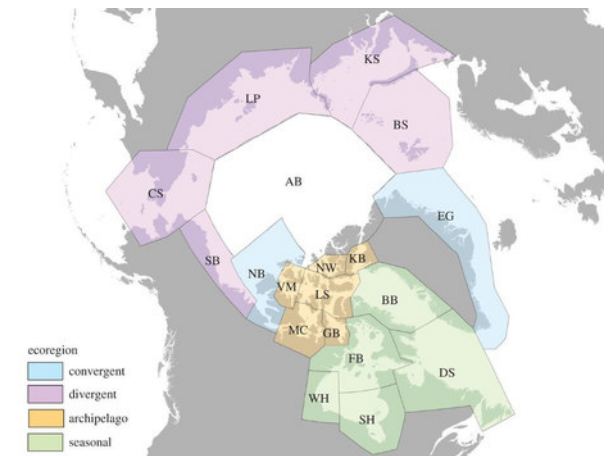


# Polar bears

*(Ursus maritimus)*

## Western Hudson Bay polar bears

For the study and census of polar bears worldwide, they are grouped by geographical areas. There are 19 zones depending on where the polar bear resides or usually migrates. Of these areas, I was in the so-called WH or Western Hudson Bay. Which, as its name indicates, is located west of Hudson Bay in Canada. And it is in that area where I was able to observe and photograph polar bears.



Polar bears are the largest predators on the planet. Except for humans, they have no natural predators. For bears, size does matter, and they can weigh up to 800kg and are very voracious. In this image we can see a huge female that if it weren't for the two enormous calves that accompanied her, could have been mistaken for a male given her size. You will see a better picture of her in page 20.





By default, they are solitary beings. They rarely group together, usually because there is food nearby. In this photo taken from the plane we can count up to 6 bears in the same location. Can you spot them? This is not usual. But in quieter times such as summer or early fall, scenes of games between young adults can be seen. They are very intelligent animals and too much inactivity can cause boredom.



In the summer season, when there is no more ice or seals in the bay, they remain around the coast waiting for the next sea frost, to enter the bay and thus begin the seal hunt. Therefore, in summer they don't have much to do, other than sleep, eat berries, and from time to time socialize with peers of equal size. At the beginning of summer, the bears are relatively calm and appeased since their stomachs are full of the dozens of seals they have hunted while there was ice, and furthermore, the courtship season, which occurs in spring, has already ended.







One fine morning, just after sunrise, a young polar bear approached the camp, attracted by the smell of the kitchen where they were preparing breakfast. I took the opportunity to get as close to him as possible and photograph him. The guide who accompanied me warned me that the young bear was too close, about 5 meters, and I had to move away from the enclosure.



Polar bears are especially dangerous just before the bay freezes over because they are very hungry. They are starving and desperate to hunt seals. So, any living being is food for them. During the summer, with a full stomach, they can go days without eating a bite.



They are intelligent, curious and opportunistic animals. The fact that in summer they have a full stomach does not mean that they do not have the capacity to eat. In this season, one of their favorite foods are berries. And it is possible to find several bears gathered in the same place feeding.



They are tireless marathoners. Every day they travel dozens of kilometers, usually motivated by the smell of food. They move at high speed. And despite their size they are very fast in the sprint.







One of the most notable characteristics is smell. They are able to perceive odors from many kilometers away. It is even possible to observe how they retract their upper lip inward to better capture odors.







Although their fur is almost white, they are able to easily blend in with the summer environment of the tundra and disappear from your sight in seconds, especially in the bush area and in the water.







## Beauty overload

One morning, an adult specimen approached the cabins where I had the opportunity to take several photos. The morning light, the closeness of the animal and its calm but curious attitude towards me, converged in some shocking and at the same time endearing photos.













Dried blood can be seen next to his right ear, the result of a fight with a female who was defending her calf the day before. These clashes are very common. Adult polar bears are characterized by the scars that adorn their faces. They tend to mostly fight over food and mating.



## Fights

Bears are not social by nature and fights are frequent. Even more so when there is food involved. Several bears approached this area attracted by the smell of carrion. A mother also approached with her baby, and she had to defend her from the excessive curiosity of a male. Females are very protective and defend their young with all their will, teeth, and claws. They know that if not, the male will kill her young.









## Dangerous approaches

One of the activities we have carried out has been walks outside the enclosure to observe and photograph the polar bears up close, stepping on the same terrain and without fences in between. To do this, the team of guides trained us on how to behave when we are in polar bear territory and even more so when we are close to one of them.

One afternoon we took a hike outside the camp, walking through the tundra and surrounded by bushes and other vegetation. At one point, we were able to see two adult polar bears, in the distance, that were resting together. The guides directed us so that the wind would carry our scent to the bears and thus alert them to our presence from a safe distance. One of the bears, who caught the scent and saw us, got up and calmly approached us, not directly but in a detour, as if he were not really interested in us.



As he approached, he stood in profile so that we were aware of his size. Size in polar bears is very important, the bigger, the higher their rank. And that is why it was at that moment when the guides told us to face the bear side by side without leaving gaps or spaces.





The goal is for the bear to see a large mass instead of a small individual. Furthermore, it was absolutely forbidden to kneel because that could signal to the bear that it was a seal. And seals are their favorite food. And of course, running away from the bear was totally prohibited since that would activate its hunting instinct.



The bear continued to approach, and at that moment two of the three guides stood in front of us, hitting two stones together and making noises to make the bear stop.



This worked, but only briefly, as the bear continued its approach. At that moment the guides told us that the group should take two steps towards the bear in unison, and so we did. The bear stopped, hesitated, hid, thought about it, and still continued his walk towards us.



The guides, prepared with fireworks guns and shotguns, told us to take two steps forward again but this time shouting and making noise. At that moment the bear stopped again. And this time he made no further progress. The bear was just 20 meters away from us.





But what is scarier than an adult polar bear staring at you just 20 meters away? The answer is two polar bears at 20 meters staring at you. The other bear that was dozing when the first one began to approach, also wanted to get to know us up close and at a constant pace arrived at the first one.



But perhaps with more knowledge, this second bear circled around us to reach an area of comfortable vegetation. Therefore, at that moment we were surrounded by two bears, but both with casual attitudes and little curiosity towards us.





When both bears had moved away, we were able to continue our walk without any further surprises.

## Mother's love

During the trip we were able to observe mothers with their babies. Mothers usually give birth to two young. These will spend the first 3-4 years of their life with her. And the mother will protect them tooth and nail from the dangers that lurk in the environment, one of them being the adult polar bears themselves. The mortality of the offspring is very high.





Curiously, when we came across a mother and her cubs, they were the ones that approached and made threats to attack us. While the mother stayed at a safe distance. The young, unaware of danger and inexperienced, are born with alpha predator genetics. But only intelligent bears reach adulthood. Since they have known how to avoid dangers.



The females become pregnant in spring, and although they do not hibernate, they do look for caves or holes to gestate and give birth to their young during the winter. If for some reason a pregnant female feels that during the winter, she will not have time to complete the management of the breeding, the process is paralyzed until the following year.





This mother, as a precaution, wants to scare away the male to protect the calf from her. Both three are feeding on berries.





## Play time

We have mentioned that bears are very intelligent and therefore can get bored. When a bear meets another of a similar size, games, cuddling, gestures of affection, etc. can occur. These two adults took advantage of the afternoon to interact and play.





## Sea lovers

Bears are categorized as marine mammals just like whales or dolphins. They are expert swimmers and love the water.







The documented record for a bear swimming was in Alaska, and in this case, it was a bear that swam over 600 km for 9 days. Scientists believe she became disoriented. The bear, which was swimming with her cub, which died, lost 20% of its mass.



In this location we were able to see 12 bears, two of them swimming in open water. This area is famous for the exceptional beluga hunting that bears have developed. Thanks to the topography of the area with a shallow depth of sea, kilometric tides and strategically located rocks, large adult bears have learned to hunt belugas. The bears stand on top of the rocks. And they stay there waiting. Waiting is not a problem because the bears can stay in the same place for hours and hours resting without moving. When sea level rises, there is enough water space for belugas to swim near rocks. And the moment a beluga swims close enough, the bear pounces on it, sinking its teeth into it and clamping down with its strong jaws. Thanks to its powerful claws, it drags the beluga to the shore where it can finish killing it and feed. We were able to observe how one of the bears jumped from a rock to try to hunt a beluga, but it did not succeed.







## Great sleepers

As we have indicated before, bears at this time of year have nothing to do nor guaranteed food. Therefore, the best activity is inactivity, and they spend almost the entire day sleeping, saving energy consumption.





They use the moist and cool soil to lower their body temperature. That's why they often lie down like this.







# Gray wolves

*(Canis lupus)*

## Patrolling

Gray wolves are one of the largest wolf species on the planet, and can weigh up to 45kg. Along with polar bears, they are the alpha predators in the area.



Around the camp, on the Kaskatamugan coast, resides a pack of gray wolves made up of 14 individuals. The pack makes rounds of an area of several kilometers, always in search of food.



While at camp one afternoon, I was in my room when there was a loud knock on my door. When I opened it, one of the people who made up the group warned me that the pack of wolves was roaming the cabins. Indeed, just on the other side of the fence were the adult members with their cubs. I quickly grabbed my photographic equipment so I could immortalize the moment. But it's amazing how quickly time passes when you're setting up your camera to take the photo and the wolves started walking away from the camp, continuing their rounds. Almost out of breath and at the last moment I was able to approach the fence at the end of the camp and get some photos (next page) of the gray wolf just 2 meters away. It is important to mention that this photo (next page) was not taken with a camera trap.



One of the features that amazed me the most was the wolf's gaze. A look full of self-confidence and perhaps a hint of mocking arrogance. The wolf trotted exuding complete confidence, giving the sensation of absolute control of the situation. And of course, I was not the slightest bit of a threat to him or the rest of the pack.



## Dinner time

One afternoon, we went on an excursion with the vehicles to look for the wolf pack. As the vehicles traversed a trail surrounded by berry bushes, one of the guides signaled to stop. 10 meters away, on the edge of the road, there was an adult gray wolf resting. He sat up, looked at us, and continued sleeping. Always respecting their space, we got out of the vehicles and were able to get closer to take some photographs. He didn't care much. Furthermore, the wolf did not allow us to continue along the path since he blocked the path.





A lot of time passed while the guides were figuring out what to do, when we spotted some wolf cubs sleeping and playing not too far from the place. And shortly after another adult appeared and met the first one again.







They called to the cubs who hurriedly ran to meet the adults. Happy and enthusiastic they were received, between licks and caresses. Once the commotion died down, the two adults and the cubs began eating berries around us. Wolves are mainly carnivorous, but their diet also includes wild fruits.















Later, after filling the bellies with the fruits, the pack disappeared as if by magic.



## Babysitting

In this area of Hudson Bay, the shoreline consists of sloughs and flats with tall grass. This is where it borders the beginning of the boreal forest, as well as bushes and other vegetation. It was on these plains that we found two adults who were caring for the wolves. This occurs when the rest of the adults in the pack have entered the boreal forest to hunt, usually elk and other large prey. Wolves hunt by wearing down the prey, chasing the elk until it can't take it anymore, gets tired and the wolves hunt it down. The wolves, being greater in number, distribute the work as if it were a relay race and therefore when the first ones are tired, they are replaced by others and so on until they reach their prey. This can last for days, and the pups cannot keep up, so two adults are left in the nursery until the rest of the pack returns, or the pups are directed to where the dead prey is so they can feed.



Cubs are very curious. They watch us and some approach us.







When an adult arrives at the nursery, the young run up to him and lick his snout to make him regurgitate food stored in his stomach.









An adult is looking for the two adults and the cubs. He makes the call using his characteristic howl, which can be heard several kilometers away. In this case, the wind that was blowing was so violent that it could not be heard, and we imagine that the pack could not either because he had to continue their search in another area.





# Other wildlife encounters

## **Black bear** (*Ursus americanus*)

Black bears are the third predator in this area. Even though they are larger than an adult wolf, there have been cases of wolves hunting black bears. And in this area of Canada there are no grizzly bears. These black bear specimens are very common, and we were able to observe them many afternoons from the cabins. An adult, a mother with her baby, and another adult, although quite young, were roaming around the area. In this photo we can see the baby lost in the bushes looking for its mother who is a few meters away feeding on berries. Unlike polar bears, black bears do hibernate so they are accumulating calories to face the winter.





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## Beluga whale (*Delphinapterus leucas*)

Belugas are migratory marine mammals. At this time of year, more than 50,000 belugas and their babies gather in Hudson Bay. The number is so high that they are visible from the air, like white lines on the dark sea. A curiosity that characterizes them is their ability to turn their neck at will, something unique in this type of cetacean. We were able to approach them using zodiacs, and without any fear they swam around us. But, although there were thousands of them, they have the habit of showing their heads very little (just enough to breathe) so it is difficult to get photos out of the water.









Belugas are completely white, but their babies are gray at birth and over the years they change this color to the distinctive white of the adults. In mid-September they will completely disappear from Churchill to move to other areas.



**Bald eagle** (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*)



**Sandhill crane** (*Antigone canadensis*)



**Sandhill crane** (*Antigone canadensis*)



**Snow goose** (*Anser caerulescens*)



**Canada goose** (*Branta canadensis*)





**Arctic hare** (*Lepus arcticus*)



**Arctic ground squirrel** (*Urocitellus parryii*)



**Groundhog** (*Marmota monax*)



# Northern lights

## Northern lights

The Northern Lights are one of the most beautiful natural spectacles that exist. They occur predominantly in the Arctic and Antarctic regions. Auroras are the result of disturbances in the magnetosphere caused by the solar wind. During my stay, some nights I had the opportunity to photograph these colorful trails of light that cross the clean skies of the starry night.





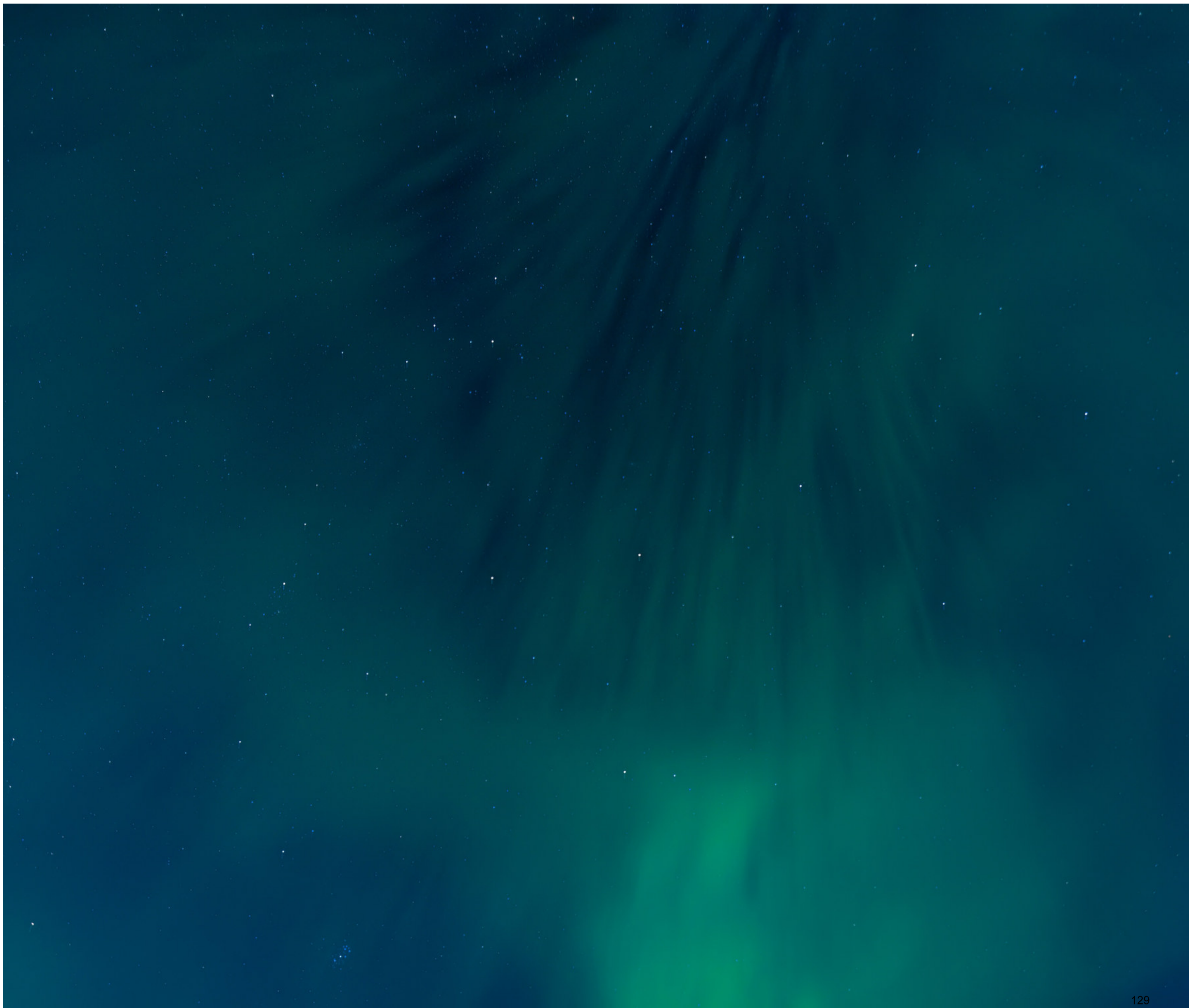
















**Author**

## Author

Hi, my name is Pablo and I enjoy capturing moments with my camera. In this wide photography world, I am focusing my energy on two photography types: Wildlife photography and Street&Portrait photography.

Since I was little I was fascinated by animals, especially wildlife. I loved learning about them, their habits, behaviors, most remarkable characteristics such as size, speed, height, feeding, etc. As I grew up, that passion for wildlife began to fall asleep, giving way to other types of concerns. During my youth, my father gave me his SLR camera with interchangeable objects and taught me the basics of photography. I liked taking photographs of all kinds, from portraits to landscapes. They weren't good pictures, although it amused me. But after a few years, when I lived in my apartment, they broke in and took the photographic equipment. That was the end of my adventure in photography. Many years passed until, on a work trip I had to make to Guatemala, I managed to visit the Mayan ruins of Tikal recommended by my father, which he visited in the past. That trip, in the middle of the jungle and surrounded by wild animals, reawakened in me the passion for wildlife and the adventure of exploring natural places. At the same time, smartphones appeared and with them photography within everyone's reach. So I took pictures again this time with my mobile.

The mobile was fitted with mini lenses for macro photography. Then I bought a zoom lens that connected to the mobile via Bluetooth. From there it went to a 70-200 lens connected to the phone, which I took on safari to Kenya and the Corcovado peninsula in Costa Rica. I finally understood that my passion for photography and wildlife justified investing in a mirrorless camera as well as better lenses. Until today I have two cameras and seven lenses that I have been using in my travels through Uganda, UAE, Morocco, Svalbard, etc. Always learning to achieve photographs that transmit and connect with the observer. Although in recent years I have obtained prizes, recognitions and honorable mentions that have sweetened the path, the real prize is the opportunity to live unique experiences and to invest the vital energy in this art called photography.



*Churchill, CANADA - August 2023*

Pablo



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[@pablofarrington](https://www.instagram.com/pablofarrington)

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