



Encyclopedia of Life

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Polar Bears

Ursus maritimus

In this podcast, host Ari Daniel relates two close calls with polar bears. Listen as Heather Cray recalls how, dumped by a storm on a small Arctic island, she got an unexpected wake-up call. And when researcher Steve Amstrup accidentally crashed through the roof of a polar bear's den, no one could predict what happened next.

Transcript

Ari: This is One Species at a Time, the story of Earth's biodiversity, one organism at a time. I'm Ari Daniel Shapiro.

Ari: This time, we've got two stories about polar bears. The first comes from Heather Craig. She's a student at Northwest Nazarene University in Idaho and she's spent time studying shorebirds in the Alaskan National Wildlife Refuge. On her 20th birthday, she found herself on a small, 18-foot inflatable boat with her boss and a coworker motoring towards an island. But a huge storm with 40-50 mile an hour winds complicated things.

Craig: And we got caught sideways and our boat flipped over with one of these big waves. All of us got dumped into the Arctic Ocean: it was probably below freezing. After probably about our 30 minutes, our boat and our gear got pushed onto the shore by the storm. We realized that our shotguns, which we used for protection, had sunk when we flipped our boat. My boss and the other coworker walked up and down the island looking for them. And they didn't find the shotguns, but they did find a rather large, rather fresh track of a polar bear, probably about the size of a dinner plate. We just did what we could: we set up a tent that we found and we just set up our boat as a windbreak, and we went to sleep. And then the next morning, we woke up to the sound of this polar bear ripping our tent open. And we see a huge polar bear paw right on the outside of our tent. And we all kind of startled, and started yelling, and eventually he just kind of wandered off and disappeared into the fog. You never really know what's going to happen when you do science like this. It's always just a huge adventure to be up there.

Ari: Okay, onto story number two about polar bears.

Amstrup: They're just incredible creatures, and of course, when they're on the ground, they all look as big as a house.

Ari: Steve Amstrup is in charge of polar bear research at the US Geological Survey in Alaska. Back in 2001, Amstrup was in the field, measuring the dens where female polar bears give birth and raise their cubs. The idea was to identify and predict den locations, in order to inform oil and gas companies so they would avoid those areas for exploration and drilling. There was one den in particular that Amstrup remembers pretty vividly.

Amstrup: There was a snowstorm that came through and actually drifted the mouth of the den closed. And for two or three days after that, there was no evidence that the bear had made any attempt to open that den again. So we thought this particular bear had left her den and that it was safe for us to go in. So we went down to the den site and since the entrance had blown in because of the recent blizzard that we'd had, I wanted to only open up a hole in the den as large as I needed to allow me to get inside and make the measurements that I needed to make. <fade up music> And I took a big shovelful of snow and my right leg plunged through the snow right up to my thigh. I had punctured through the roof of the lair. And I looked down, and there was the head of the female polar bear within inches of my leg, and I immediately rolled away from the den. And she came running out, and looked at me kind of rolling across the snow, and turned around and ran up towards one of my coworkers, and he hollered and actually he stepped through a hole in the snow and fell down. And the bear turned around and ran away. I can't explain why she didn't bite me. I mean, she could've grabbed onto my leg and pulled me into the den, and that probably would've been the end of it. But she didn't: she looked up at me, gave me that fraction of a second that I needed to just roll away across the snow. <fade out music> All of this happened within about ten seconds or something like that, but it was a pretty exciting ten seconds.

Ari: The impact of Amstrup's research has lasted well beyond 10 seconds. Years later, the oil companies still rely on his recommendations to protect the polar bears in their dens. Amstrup said it's made falling into that den well worth it.

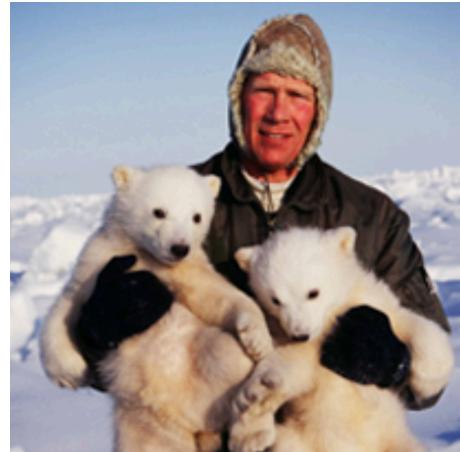
Our series, One Species at a Time, is produced by Atlantic Public Media in Woods Hole, Massachusetts. For the Encyclopedia of Life, I'm Ari Daniel Shapiro.

Meet the Scientist

Meet Heather Craig and Dr. Steven Ampstrup, the scientists you heard featured in our Polar Bear podcast.



Heather Craig



Steven Ampstrup

Where do you work?

Heather: Fish and Wildlife Service Seasonal Biological Technician. Biology student at Northwest Nazarene University, Nampa, Idaho, USA

Steve: United States Geological Survey (USGS), Alaska Science Center.

What do you study?

Heather: I participated in post-breeding shorebird surveys along the coast of the Beaufort Sea in Alaska.

Steve: Minimizing the impact of the ever enlarging human footprint on the rest of life on earth.

What are three titles you would give yourself?

Heather: Biology student, adventurer, naturalist

Steve: Ecologist, conservationist, Husband and Father

What do you like to do when you are not working?

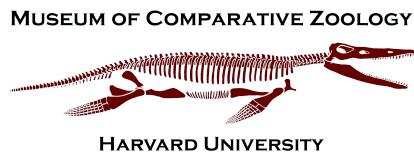
Heather: When I am not in school or doing research, I enjoy exploring the outdoors, hiking and boating. I also love reading and spending time with my friends and family.

Steve: I do my own home renovations/improvements, and soon will be building a new home. My favorite recreational pursuits include hunting, fishing, camping skiing and other outdoor activities.

What do you like most about science?

Heather: I love having the opportunity to get off the beaten path and satisfy my sense of discovery. Through my work I have explored remote locations and seen rare species throughout Alaska, the western US and South America. These are experiences that I will always treasure.

Steve: Field work-every season, even after 29 years, seeing wild polar bears roaming on the sea ice makes me catch my breath. Writing papers-contributing knowledge that can help managers and policy makers improve conservation efforts.



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