

A mother and yearling cub pause on an iceberg trapped in the sea ice in the Davis Strait off the coast of Baffin Island. After emerging from the dens, bears hunt around the bases of these giant 'bergs for unsuspecting seals.



# *Going with* **THE FLOE**

Baffin Island is one of the planet's most remote denning areas for polar bears. As the mothers and cubs emerge from their winter sleep, photographer **Andy Skillen** tracks them onto the sea ice.





**LEFT** Newborn cubs never stray too far from their ever-watchful mother while experiencing their first taste of life outside the den. During the first few months of the cubs' lives, their mother has to balance keeping her new additions safe with the critical need to hunt and restore the bodyweight she lost over the denning period.



**ABOVE** Local Inuit trackers say the female cub is the one that always stays closer to the mother. Although this has not been the subject of any major study, there's no doubt that, even in the early months, the cubs already exhibit differing levels of independence.



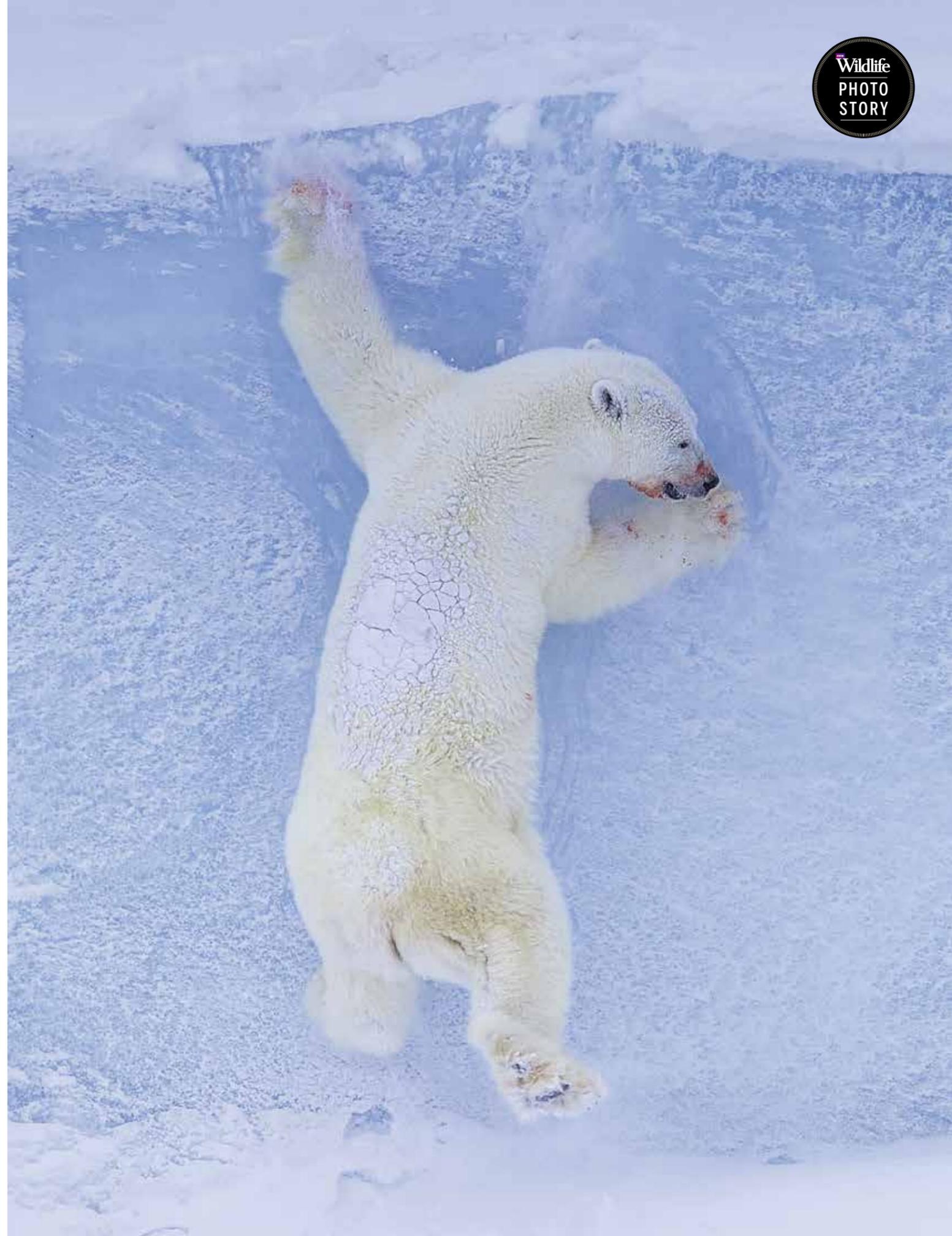
**LEFT** Like mother, like son: a mother bear has a long two years ahead of her if she is to successfully ensure a new generation survives, and the learning process starts the minute they leave the den.



**ABOVE** Even in the brutally cold temperatures, long walks across the sea ice in search of seals can still cause bears to overheat. In this regard, the ridges of trapped icebergs provide a welcome chance to rest and cool off.

**RIGHT** Adult polar bears are very conscientious about washing off the blood of a kill to prevent it becoming matted in the fur around their faces. Cubs, however, like to play with their food, which, as well as being messy fun also helps them learn about the importance of personal hygiene.

**FACING PAGE** Measuring around 9ft (about 2.5m) from head to tail, mother bears have little to fear. With males even further out on the sea ice, the pressure ridges around the bergs closer to Baffin's fjords and bays provide a relatively low risk environment in which to hunt and raise newborn cubs.



**BELOW** Emerging in March, after months in their den, young cubs are full of energy and the desire to explore their environment. At this point, their tireless mother has multiple roles to play, from mobile food-source, to climbing frame, to oversized duvet.



**ANDY SKILLEN** is an award-winning wildlife photographer with a passion for all things polar. For details of Andy's work, photography courses, trips and assignments, visit [www.faunavista.com](http://www.faunavista.com)



**ABOVE** Dens on Baffin are virtually inaccessible, located high in the mountains, far from potential intrusions. The deep snow that lies on these granite slopes can make it difficult for cubs to keep pace with their trail-blazing mother, but it's a small price to pay for the security the location provides.

**LEFT** Play and interaction are important parts of a polar bear's development and in such a harsh environment there's no time to waste in terms of getting on with the job. With mortality rates as high as 50 per cent for newborn cubs, asserting dominance in the early months can literally be a lifesaver in the long term.