



# WILDLIFE WINNER

Twin Polar Bear Cubs, Wapusk National Park, Manitoba, Canada

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*“Polar bear young are born inside a snow den on land near the Arctic sea ice or, less often, on floating pack ice. They are tiny and helpless at birth, weighing about 1.5 pounds. After three months, when the mother bear breaks open the natal den, the cubs have grown to approximately 20 to 30 pounds. The family typically remains at the den site for about a week, exercising and adjusting to the cold. When the cubs are ready to travel, the family leaves the den permanently. Once back on the sea ice, the mother bear will hunt for her first meal in many months. In Canada’s Western Hudson Bay region, pregnant polar bears endure an astonishing 8 months of food deprivation from July to March, while they construct a den, undergo gestation, give birth, nurse their offspring, and wait for the cubs to be sufficiently developed so that they can travel to the sea ice. Due to warmer temperatures in recent years, the breakup of sea ice on Hudson Bay is occurring earlier each summer, and these bears now have significantly less time in which to accumulate necessary fat reserves before being marooned on land. Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS) scientists predict that if present climate change trends continue, within the next 15 to 20 years most female polar bears in the region may be unable to reach the minimum body weight necessary to sustain pregnancy.*

*“While accompanying CWS polar bear biologists during field research in Wapusk National Park, I had the extraordinary opportunity to photograph these young twin polar bear cubs inside their snow den. In one of the world’s largest known polar bear denning areas, we located a mother bear near her den, and saw that her cubs were still inside. So that the health of this family could be assessed, the mother bear was immobilized with a tranquilizing dart. When she was safely unconscious, the biologists began their evaluation of the mother, weighing and measuring her, and I slowly approached and crawled inside the opening of the den. The cubs became so comfortable with my presence that they paid me the highest compliment by falling asleep while I photographed them.”*

*Canon EOS-1V; Speedlite 580EX; 28-135mm lens; 1/125 sec at f/8; Fujichrome Provia 100F Professional; fill-flash; hand-held.*



Anne Chadwick