



TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY PAUL NICKLEN

**L**eopard seals have a reputation for being vicious beasts. That's how they're portrayed in movies such as *Happy Feet* and *March of the Penguins*. As a wildlife photographer, I set out to prove that these animals are actually misunderstood predators.

With this as our mission, my friend Goran Ehlme and I head for Antarctica, where leopard seals live and hunt penguins. When we spot a massive female leopard seal, I quickly launch our Zodiac (an inflatable boat) and set out to get a closer look.

**Almost immediately the seal initiates an encounter,** swimming over to our 13-foot-long Zodiac and ducking underneath. She is as long as the boat and three feet wide—massive for her species. While I try to come to terms with her size, she swims off, grabs a chinstrap penguin that was swimming out to sea, and comes back with the penguin in her jaws. She starts ramming the bird against the underside of the boat with such force that she lifts the bow out of the water. We sit on the pontoons to brace ourselves.

Goran is comfortable with this level of activity in a leopard seal, a species he's grown to admire and respect. For me, however, this is my introduction to leopard seals, and I am thankful to be safely in the boat and not in the water. After she kills the penguin against the hull of the boat, the seal swims to within a few feet of us. While it's hard to watch the leopard seal kill and skin the penguin, the biologist-naturalist in me understands that she is a predator and the penguin is her prey.

**Goran turns to me and says, "It's time for you to get in the water."** Even though my goal is to discover if leopard seals are truly vicious, the thought of getting into the water with her makes my adrenaline surge. My mouth goes dry, and my legs are numb; I am momentarily paralyzed with fear. Goran says, "It doesn't get any better than this. Get in the water!" I can barely part my trembling lips to





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MY FRIEND GORAN TAKES  
HIS OWN SHOT OF THE SEAL.

force the snorkel into my mouth. I pick up my underwater camera and slip over the side of the little rubber dinghy into the cold 30°F Antarctic water.

**Objects appear 30 percent larger underwater**, so as big as the female leopard seal had looked from above, she seems incomprehensibly huge underwater. Her head is much larger than that of a grizzly bear. I remain motionless on the surface, planning to slowly introduce my vulnerable self. She immediately swims in my direction and, without slowing down, comes right up to me. She opens her huge mouth and lunges at me so that the front of my camera lens is almost at the back of her throat, her teeth virtually engulfing my camera and my head. Her upper teeth are just inches above the top of my head, and her bottom canines come close to the bottom of my chin.

She maintains this pose for a few

seconds, then pulls back and observes my reaction. She repeats this threat display several times, striking out like a cobra but always stopping within inches of my underwater camera housing.

### Taking pictures helps calm me as she repeatedly bluff charges,

trying to establish her dominance. I am happy to concede, but I do not retreat. I see this meeting as being all about communication, and I don't believe she will bite me. In a strange way, it's a very gentle gesture, as if she's saying, "Look how big I am."

Suddenly she stops all of her threat displays, and I just continue photographing her. She swims off, and I think the encounter is over. Then the truly unexpected happens. She quickly returns with a live, fresh-caught penguin in her mouth. Swimming about 10 feet

away from me, she holds the penguin by the feet and then releases it. The live penguin swims toward me and veers off at the last second. She chases it, brings it back, and lets it go again, right in front of

PENGUIN OFFERING



me. She does this several times, each time looking me over as she swims by to chase down the fleeing penguin.

I feel like she flashes me a look of disgust as she speeds past me to snatch the escaping penguin. I believe that she's trying to feed me penguins because she realizes that I am an absolutely useless predator in her ocean. I believe that she thinks I'm going to starve to death if I don't receive her help.

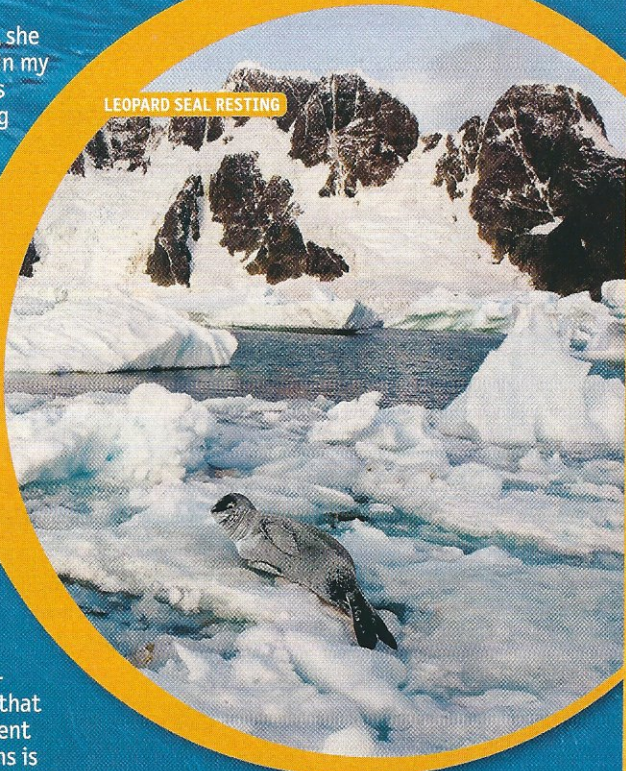
### **She captures another live penguin and slowly brings it over.**

When she's just inches away, she lets it go, and it immediately takes off. She quickly catches it and eats it right in front of me. She then captures another penguin, plays with it, wears it down, and then offers it to me in this exhausted state. Of course, I do not accept these offerings but keep photographing, tears welling up in my eyes from the intensity of the encounter. Finally, perhaps realizing the full extent of my incompetence as a hunter, she brings me a dead penguin and leaves it floating in front of my mask. She then withdraws a few feet and watches

me. When I don't touch her offering, she looks frustrated and blows bubbles in my face, grabs the penguin, and devours it. I keep following her around trying to photograph her. Ultimately she forcibly places dead penguins on my head and my underwater camera. Throughout these encounters, I often flood my mask because I am laughing so hard that water trickles in the sides.

Over the course of four more days she tries to feed me penguin after penguin, and I keep shooting the whole time. Once during those four days, I become concerned that I'd overstayed my welcome; she seems to have tired of my presence. Suddenly, during one of our "normal" feeding sessions, she visibly tenses and makes a deep guttural jackhammer-like sound—a threat display that I feel reverberate through my entire body. I sense that she is about to attack, but the moment quickly passes. What actually happens is that another leopard seal has sneaked up behind me. Her threat display is intended to protect me, and clearly it works. As if to prove her point, as soon as the marauding seal turns away, she gives chase, takes that seal's penguin, and brings it to me.

LEOPARD SEAL RESTING



### **Knowing that I will soon leave, I feel heavyhearted**

as I join her in the water one last time. My relationship with this magnificent seal, so approachable, so tender, and yet so fierce, is something that will stay with me forever. I don't know if she ever quite figures out who or what I am, or whether some part of her memory retains the experience of my visit. What I do know is that I will never forget her. Sometimes as I'm falling asleep at night I remember this astonishing gift from the sea. These were indeed the five greatest days of my photographic career.

