

Leopard Seals - friendly monsters

by Bartosz Strozynski

Probably the most spectacular Antarctic subject for wildlife photographers is the leopard seal. Antarctica and surrounding waters is the only place in the world where this mammal can be encountered. It is called a leopard seal due its characteristic spots on skin, but after spending some time with the animal, I found it to be more similar to a big dog than to a leopard.

There are a great number of leopard seals around Antarctica waters and you may often see them sleeping on small icebergs. They seem to be very lazy and uninterested in jumping into the water to help us in our photographic endeavours but as soon as they get in, they transform into extremely fast moving and, at first sight, scary monsters. With a bit of luck though, you can meet the leopard seal while diving and play with them, making spectacular pictures and recognising that, in reality, although really wild, it is a very friendly, playful and graceful animal.

For underwater photographers this is a really amazing experience to make portraits of 3 meters long and 500 kg heavy mammals in underwater action. A Leopard seal may change its face from baby looking into killer looking mode in just couple of seconds, still keeping photogenic and inspiring nature. Having made numerous picture of this seal so far in different places and conditions, I see each of them as very unique. I have not made any



“Wild beauty”, Antarctic Peninsula, Leopard Seals fascinates people because of their opened, dangerously looking mouths with huge teeth, but they look also very attractive smiling to diver, (f/10, 1/125, ISO400), Canon EOS-1Ds Mark III, Canon EF14mm f/2.8L II USM, housed with Seacam

duplicates. A bit different timing or angle always makes real difference in composition.

In my view, the frightening, crazy killer and unpredictable devil stereotype presented in famous movie “Happy Feet 2” is unfounded and doesn’t reflect reality. It is true, leopard seals are predators and eat meat, but eating penguins is only a small part of its diet. Surprisingly, the major share of its

food is krill. Big, heavy animals usually eat small shellfish! The scary reputation of seals is caused by its bloody way of penguin hunting. It comes over so badly because killing penguins looks more like killing for fun than for food. Leopard seals patrol the coast where penguins enter and leave the water for feeding, looking for its victim’s mistake. It is really difficult to hunt penguins, because they



“Noon nap”. Leopard Seals summer activity is usually limited to two tasks, eating krill and penguins and sleeping. When sleeping, they do it on beautiful icebergs, (f/16, 1/160, ISO400), Canon EOS-1Ds Mark III, Canon EF14mm f/2.8L II USM, housed with Seacam

swim really fast. Leopard seals don't kill penguins immediately after the catch, just injure it a bit to stop it from escaping and then it starts a ritual dance around its victim, scalping it piece by piece and finally after making a bloody show, kills it. It is interesting that very often the corpse is left uneaten. Many skeleton remains can be found on bottom and it looks like a penguin cemetery.

The completely opposite face of a leopard seal may be observed

when diving with them. I believe this is truer view of this fascinating mammal. When we manage to find leopard seal in the water willing to play, the game starts. In the beginning it keeps its distance, watching the stranger but with time it starts to be braver when approaching a diver. It is circling around testing our reactions, step by step getting closer and closer finally reaching face-to-face phase. It is not clear why leopard seals enjoy looking at underwater camera



“Smile”. Leopard Seal with closed eye in lovely view, (f/9, 1/125, ISO400), Canon EOS-1Ds Mark III, Canon EF14mm f/2.8L II USM, housed with Seacam

“Abyss”, Endless sculptured Ice bottom, (f/16, 1/125, ISO400), Canon EOS-1Ds Mark III, Canon EF14mm f/2.8L II USM, housed with Seacam





“Paparazzi”. Leopard Seal playing with diver and making morning toilet at the same time. It is very unique to catch this animal doing it underwater and in the same time playing with diver. Excrement is red because is made of krill pieces, being main food for Leopard seals, (f/13, 1/125, ISO400), Canon EOS-1Ds Mark III, Canon EF14mm f/2.8L II USM, housed with Seacam

dome port, presenting its grace and jaws attributes. There may be two hypotheses for it. The first says, that because dome port is reflective, they use it as a mirror, admiring itself, but another, probably more realistic, says that mirror reflection is seen as another seal and all the show is simply about competing with each other, expressing its grace, strengths and domination of another seal.

Looking at pictures of leopard

seals, you may see very different faces of these mammals, like smiling, warning, biting, but also pushing the dome. To give you some feeling how close I was making some of these pictures, it is worth saying they were made using 14mm lens, in distance of 0-30 cm from teeth. At first sight it may be scary but I never experienced any aggression from these animals. I felt a lot of fun from this close interaction and enjoyed it. For sure



“Giant”. Giant Iceberg passing waters of Antarctica in north direction. This region of the world is full of enormous ice formation, but this one was exceptionally huge; our boat looked like Lego of my son next to room wall, (f/16, 1/125, ISO100), Canon EOS 5D Mark II, Canon EF14mm f/2.8L II USM

“Push”, Antarctic Peninsula, Leopard Seal pushing underwater housing dome port with its nose. Leopard Seal is very curious mammal, but pushing diver with nose, is very exciting experience, monster pushing diver to start closer interaction, play, (f/7.1, 1/125, ISO400), Canon EOS-1Ds Mark III, Canon EF14mm f/2.8L II USM, housed with Seacam





“Dance“. Leopard Seal circling around diver, it looks like underwater dancing, (f/11, 1/125, ISO400), Canon EOS-1Ds Mark III, EF14mm f/2.8L II USM, housed with Seacam

it is nature and risk always exists but respecting wildlife and not breaking frontiers limits threats to a minimum.

Antarctica is really challenging environment for photography, especially for underwater activity. Everything looks very

beautiful, ready to catch, but being exposed to wind, coldness, waves, cold water, rapidly changing weather and shining snow in huge contrast to rocks and water, photography becomes an extreme exercise. In this environment any planning

and execution are under serious exposure.

During all my trips to Antarctica, fortunately I was always lucky to dive with leopard seals, play with them a lot and make many shots. It was very demanding time, exposing my skills, but finally

successful and rewarded. Fascinating mammals with very bad reputation became my favourite underwater photographic subject of cold waters and I am sure I will meet them in short future again.

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Awarded in many international photographic competitions, including the prestigious International Photography Awards, European Wildlife Photographer of the Year, International Nature Photo Competition Asferico and Great Photographic Competition of National Geographic, presents his photographs in many international publications. Participated in numerous photographic expeditions, including the prestigious Elysium Epic Shackleton's Antarctic Visual Epic

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