

Benoist Clouet

Interview

The Arctic archipelago of Svalbard has become **Benoist Clouet's** obsession in recent years, culminating in his stunning book, *80° Nord*. He tells *Wild Planet* about breathtaking encounters with walrus and polar bears, and why he fears for the future of this Arctic paradise...

82.4° North

*Nikon D700, Nikkor AFS 16-35mm f/4-5.6
VR at 35mm, ISO 500, f/4.5*

Interview by Keith Wilson





When was your first trip to Svalbard?

My first trip to Svalbard was in 2008. The year before, I was in Norway to take some pictures of sea eagles in Flatanger with my friend Ole Martin Dahle. In his guesthouse, I saw a flyer about an expedition in Svalbard. It was written in Norwegian and I didn't understand anything, but I saw the great pictures of Arctic birds, walrus and of course polar bears and I read an email address. Back home, I decided to contact the expedition leader and the year after, I was in Svalbard on a small boat with Norwegian photographers.

What were your first impressions?

In 1906, in his book *The French at the South Pole*, the famous navigator Jean-Baptiste Charcot asked himself, "Where does this strange attraction for the Polar regions come from? An attraction so powerful and unshakable that, on your return home, all you can think about is going back there. What makes these deserted and terrifying lands so appealing?" It's a good question! Such a strange attraction, and from the very first moment I set foot on the Arctic, it cast a spell on me too. I had the indescribable feeling of being completely lost in nature. Nature so wild, so harsh, yet so extraordinarily beautiful, that I knew right there and then that this would be the first of many expeditions to come.

82.4° North

Nikon D800, Nikkor 500mm f/4 VR, ISO 800, f/4

How many times have you been since?

I've been to Svalbard every year... and sometimes twice a year – in summer and winter – so it will be eight expeditions by the end of this year.

What makes Svalbard special compared to other Arctic locations that you have been to?

Svalbard is an ice paradise, a land of striking contrasts, a pearl, a gem of the Arctic. Every expedition has been a moment of deep emotion for me, and through the magic of photography I have been able to capture moments, fractions of a second of pure nature.

I am particularly struck by the magnificence and force of these great virgin territories of Svalbard. In this harsh, elementary world, I am always transfixed by its vastness, but also by the extraordinary purity of the light there, and the fragility of life. In this polar Eden, seals, whales, walrus, reindeers and Arctic foxes live harmoniously side by side, and the Lord of these lands, the polar bear is never too far away. So Svalbard is an Arctic paradise.

*“Svalbard is an ice paradise,
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80° North – kittiwake

Nikon D200, Nikkor AFS 80-400mm
f/4-5.6 VR at 320mm, ISO 400, f/5.6

Do you have a favourite time of year to visit the Arctic?

Definitely, I prefer winter. The animals are less abundant and much more difficult to see, but what an amazing atmosphere! It's pure nature – pristine, wild and incredibly beautiful.

How does the light and weather conditions affect the way you work as a photographer?

As a wildlife photographer, you have to stay a long time in the field, searching for animals in this white expanse. You must protect yourself and your equipment from intense cold. Battery drain can be a problem and that's why I sleep with my batteries in my sleeping bag, so they are warm as long as possible. During summer in Arctic, the most important problem as a photographer is that you don't have enough time to sleep! The sun never sets and photo opportunities are never ending, so you sleep when you're just too tired.

80° Nord is a beautiful book. How long has it taken and how did you decide which images to include, or leave out?

It's a project that matured in my head during my first voyage to Svalbard in 2008. I took the decision to effectively finish my book at the beginning of 2014. The book was released in November of the same year.

I started thinking about how I wanted to build my book and what story I wanted to tell. I then made an initial selection of about 250 pictures. Then, I worked with a graphic designer who helped me to make good choices. It is not always obvious which ones to include and sometimes it's very hard to leave out others, but a book requires compromise.

What is the primary purpose of 80° Nord?

The book is built around one year in Svalbard, from the first lights after the polar night in February until the return of the dark before the polar night in October/November. Images and text alternate and describe the beauty of nature in Svalbard as well as anecdotes experienced in the field. For example, the experiences of absolute silence during the polar night; meeting a female polar bear with two cubs one winter morning; a very close encounter with a walrus; the magical lighting during the summer.

The primary purpose of the book is to show the beauty of Svalbard and more broadly of the Arctic. I hope that this book will make people aware that the beauty of our world is not limited to what we know and some remote areas are extraordinarily beautiful and must be totally preserved.

Which images in the book are your personal favourites?

Maybe the last one. There is a polar bear photographed in late September 2013 on Kvitøya island, the island furthest east in the archipelago. It is also called the 'white island' because it is totally covered with ice. It was the first light of day, and the bear walked against the light – a perfect time to capture this scene as almost black and white.

Can you describe your first sighting of a polar bear and what it was like to photograph?

It was of course in Svalbard in 2008. We had reached around 81° North. It was cold, our ship was surrounded by ice, the weather was grey and there was fog, which made it difficult to find bears. It was an area where we could watch many seals – we know that when there are seals, there are also potentially bears! After several hours of scanning the horizon in search of a speck of yellow through our binoculars, we finally found a polar bear, to the left in front of the boat, almost bang on the horizon! The yellow tint of a polar bear's fur makes it stand out against the immaculate white of this ice desert. My face and fingers throbbed from the cold. We slowly moved towards the bear, and 20 minutes later, I no longer needed my binoculars to see him. He was calmly strolling along the bank, and decided to approach the boat, inquisitively. What a stroke of luck! An icy wind was blowing and the boat pushed through the water, sometimes breaking the ice aside in order to move forward.

The deep blue of the ocean is a stark contrast to the ice floes. In this hostile environment, I realized for the first time that this icy and seemingly lifeless universe really is no place for humans. Since that day, every time I see a wild polar bear, I can't help but think how unbelievably fortunate I am to be able to observe this mythical predator in its natural environment.

Interview

What is significant about 82.4°N?

Every year, the ice recedes farther and farther from the Svalbard islands. Sadly, at the end of September 2013, our polar exploration vessel reached the previously unreachable point of 82.4° North.

We keep hearing about the Arctic becoming ice-free during the summer. Is it too late to prevent this?

How can the Arctic be saved?

It is a controversial and much debated topic. Yes, the Arctic ice is melting faster, and yes, it is a serious problem. Every year, I see the glaciers retreat and sea ice takes longer to return to the coast, which is a real problem for the bears, who must wait ever longer to get onto the ice to hunt, otherwise they will starve. Can we still save the Arctic as it is today and as it was 50 years ago? I do not know, but I'm not very optimistic. Today, Svalbard is nice because there is ice, animals, birds. If tomorrow it becomes just a rock desert, this Arctic gem will lose its lustre. It is the same everywhere in the north. But there are in the Arctic political and economical issues far more important to our leaders and politicians: new deposits of natural resources, but sadly not the best for preserving the Arctic.

Is there a photograph by another photographer that particularly inspires you?

A recent picture of an Arctic wolf walking down a slope by Vincent Munier. It is an incredible image where we can find everything – beauty, purity, wildness, delicacy, mystery, poetry – a truly extraordinary image.

What has been your greatest moment as a photographer?

I've had many great moments as a photographer and it's hard to choose only one: the time I found myself face to face with a walrus that came a little too close while I was lying on the shore to photograph it; a winter morning on the east coast of Spitsbergen where I observed for the first time a female polar bear with her two cubs. There are many more from longer ago, such as the time I first saw a stag bellowing in the woods near my parents home in Normandy. This memory reminds me that I am still primarily a wildlife photographer.



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Benoist Clouet's Arctic photo kit

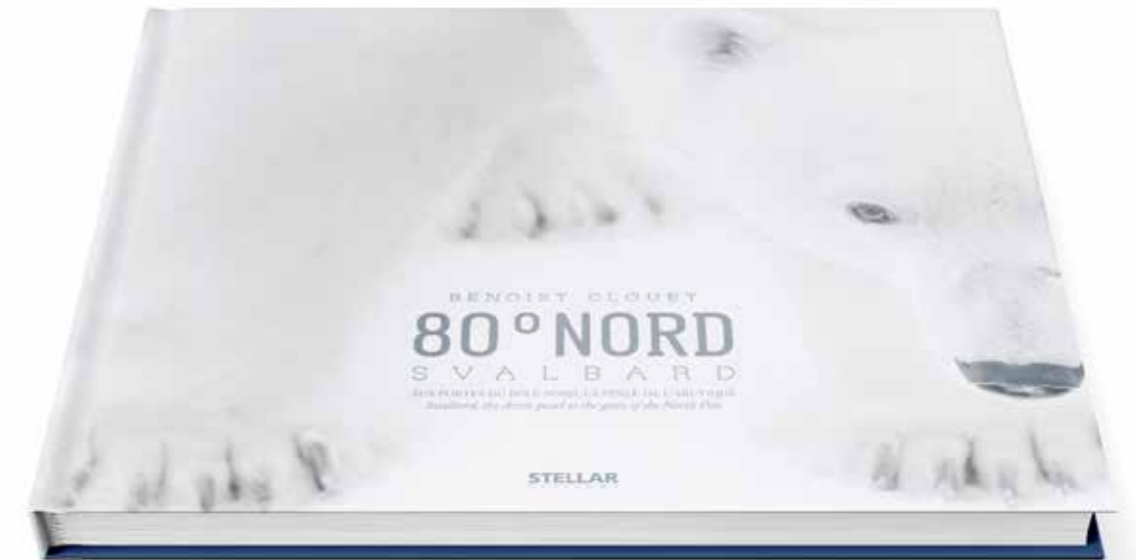
- Nikon D4S
- Nikon D800
- Nikon D700
- Nikkor AFS 500mm f/4 VR
- Nikkor AFS 80-400mm f/4-5.6 VR
- Nikkor AFS 70-200mm f/2.8 VR
- Nikkor AFS 16-35mm f/4-5.6 VR
- Nikkor AFS 105mm f/2.8 VR MACRO
- Nikon Flash SB900 flashgun
- Swarovski 8x10 binoculars
- MacBook Pro 15"
- Carbon fibre tripod with Arca Swiss Z1 head and Wimberley Sidekick
- Lots of memory cards!
- Gura Gear Kiboko backpack



Benoist Clouet grew up in a small village in Normandy. His parents and grandparents were farmers and he developed a love for nature and the outdoors from a young age.

As well as the Arctic, Benoist also specializes in photographing the wild terrain of Scandinavia, Iceland and Hokkaido. His photographs have been honoured with several Global Arctic Awards.

www.face-nature.com



HOW TO GET YOUR COPY OF 80° NORD

Benoist Clouet's book *80° Nord* captures the magnificence of Arctic Svalbard's incredible landscape and its extraordinary wildlife in 160 beautifully printed pages. With both English and French text, *80° Nord* can be ordered direct from Benoist's website for €48, including shipping. A deluxe edition limited to just 100 copies, each signed and numbered by Benoist and including a signed print, delivered in an elegant stamped box, is priced at €120, including shipping.

<http://www.face-nature.com/fr/books-prints>