

A polar bear walks into a bar, and nods to the horse who's already enjoying a drink. 'What can I get you?' asks the barman. 'I'd like a pint of bitter,' says the polar bear, 'and...'

A long silence follows.

'...a packet of crisps.'

'Certainly, sir,' says the barman. 'But why the huge pause?'

Everything about these creatures is massive. An adult male, standing five foot at the shoulder and as much as 10 rearing up, can weigh more than 100 stone. The world's largest land carnivore ranges over vast territories of hundreds or thousands of square miles. It actually spends most of its time at sea – hence its scientific name, *Ursus maritimus* – and can swim for days. Not that polar bears are all blubber and brawn. According to one research scientist, they are 'very intelligent [and] highly cognitive', on a possible par with apes.

There was a time when the polar bear was an icon of amiable cool. Fox's Glacier Mints had as their mascot a specimen named Peppy, which was specially shot and stuffed in the Twenties and shown at carnivals and promotions. A soft drink called Cresta was advertised by a bear in sunglasses who was given to shouting, 'Rimsky-Korsakov! It's frothy, man!' Coca-Cola used polar bears in its ads as far back as 1922, with a new, 'fun'-filled animation produced by Ridley Scott released this year ([bit.ly/ZP6lKW](http://bit.ly/ZP6lKW)).

Polar bears live only in the Arctic (which is, by a happy coincidence, named – from the Greek *arktikos*, 'to do with bears' – after the constellation of Ursa Major, which hangs overhead). They are thus, in nature though not in popular culture, total strangers to impertinent penguins.

They are not strangers to cheeky foxes, however, which scavenge behind them and even nip at their heels to drive them off their prey. An even more surprising example of *lèse-majesté* has been watched by millions on YouTube, where some extraordinary videos show wild bears playing with huskies.

The persistent idea that polar bears are 'cute' has always made them popular exhibits in zoos, though increasingly this



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Huw Spanner

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is frowned on. Even in the latest, multi-million-dollar enclosures in Canada and the United States, captive bears go through endless repetitive motions that suggest that for them life is anything but cool.

Wildlife documentaries tend to major on the aah! factor of mothers with their cubs, but the alien dignity some see in these creatures has its greatest expression in the *panserbjørn*, or iron-clad 'armoured bear', Iorek Byrnison in Philip Pullman's fantasy trilogy 'His Dark Materials'.

Lately, the polar bear has acquired a new status as the unlikely 'canary in the coal mine' of global warming. In 2006, the World Conservation Union declared the species 'vulnerable' (primarily to climate change but also to pollution, shipping, oil and gas exploration and stress from tourism). Two years later, the US Department of the Interior listed it as 'threatened'. The global population has been estimated at 20–25,000 and falling.

Thus, the great predator (or, to give it its snide climate-sceptic name, 'the fluffy polar bear') is recast as a victim. In 2009, a truly shocking cinema ad by Plane Stupid showed dozens of bears dropping bloodily out of the sky ([bit.ly/t1DdIh](http://bit.ly/t1DdIh)). In 2012, a Greenpeace ad had a 'homeless' bear wandering wretchedly around London ([bit.ly/YNmyok](http://bit.ly/YNmyok)). WWF has presented a series of sculptures of polar bears carved not from marble (like François Pompon's timeless *L'Ours Blanc* [1922] in the Musée d'Orsay) but from slowly melting ice ([eg bit.ly/1R0I4NL](http://bit.ly/1R0I4NL)). An evening of comedy for Friends of the Earth is titled 'Laugh or the Polar Bear Gets It'.

Given the recent contention that the world has not actually warmed since 1997, it may seem apt that some naturalists are now insisting rather crossly that (largely as a result of restrictions on hunting) polar bears have if anything actually been increasing in number. These animals have a new role: as a political football.

In Genesis 2, God brings the birds and beasts he has created to Adam to see what he makes of them. Fluffy or fearsome, majestic or threatened – or just of no real concern, to be honest: in its Arctic Eden, the polar bear has been waiting four million years for our final judgement. □