

# Ice spectacular

David Neilson has made his name photographing some of the Southern Hemisphere's most inhospitable places. We find out about his adventures and how they have led to his latest masterpiece, a new book of photos about Antarctica called *Southern Light*.

WORDS ROSS TAYLOR PHOTOS DAVID NEILSON

**D**AVID NEILSON shares his home in the Dandenongs with his partner, the environmentalist Karen Alexander. Their house is on a hill – below is a creek surrounded by lush ferns and forest, then grassy paddocks stretch to the horizon. When I walk in, floor-to-ceiling windows make me feel like I am in the middle of this beautiful landscape. Somehow, it makes perfect sense for David, a wilderness photographer and conservationist, to live in such a place.

I am here to talk to David about his fourth book of photos, *Southern Light: Images from Antarctica* (2012, Snowgum Press). But I am also curious to find out how a man who trained as a civil engineer became one of our finest – and entirely self-taught – wilderness photographers.

David got a taste for the outdoors on school bushwalks, but it was at university that things got serious. He joined Monash's Bushwalking Club and went on trips to Tassie's wild south-west. This was the late 1960s; there were no EPIRBS or satphones if things went wrong. "We did these long, four-week trips that were real adventures," he says.

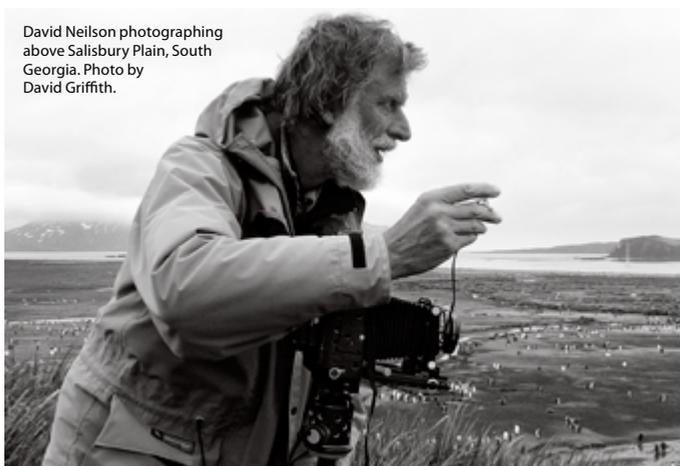
David's first trip was to the south-west's most inaccessible mountain, Federation Peak. It wasn't just a bushwalk: David and three others climbed the first ascent of what is still Australia's longest rock climb, Blade Ridge – an outrageous quartzite spine. The ascent wasn't without drama: one of his party fell 20m, cheating death only because the rope snagged on a bush.

## THE DECISIVE MOMENT

The tail end of that trip changed David's life: "I went to Lake Pedder after Federation Peak and I saw how beautiful it was, and I guess that set the seed for me to want to show people what it was like."

A few years later, the Tasmanian government decided to flood Pedder. This motivated David to quit his job as a civil engineer. "When the flooding of the lake was imminent I decided that I would go and take a lot of photographs and try and publish a book."

Well before the campaign to stop the damming of the Franklin River and Peter Dombrovski's iconic photo of Rock Island Bend, David clearly understood the power of images and the importance of people connecting with a landscape



David Neilson photographing above Salisbury Plain, South Georgia. Photo by David Griffith.

David and three others climbed what was the first ascent of Australia's longest rock climb, Blade Ridge...

before they could be motivated to save it.

Sadly, things didn't work out as planned. "The book was called *South West Tasmania: A Land of the Wild*," says David, "but disappointingly the book didn't come out until after the lake was flooded; there was some delay in the publishing program. So when it eventually came out, it couldn't save the lake."

## PATAGONIA CALLING

While Pedder was flooded in 1972, David had found a vocation. His next project would be a book about Patagonia and over the next few years he made several trips there, culminating in an epic eight-month expedition sailing a yacht he helped build from Scotland to Patagonia. "The whole sailing trip was by far the biggest adventure I had ever had – it was fantastic," he says.

The yacht journey was action-packed. At one point, they were in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, becalmed, when the engine room started to fill with water and they were forced to bail it out, while in the Straits of Magellan they experienced terrifying force 10 storms.

On arriving in Patagonia, they climbed in Tierra del Fuego, then crossed the Southern Patagonian Ice Field on skis. In his book, *Patagonia: Images of a Wild Land*, David describes one of Patagonia's famed storms: "The strength of the wind was incredible – it was almost as if the jet stream had descended to the altitude of our tent and was

blasting us with all its force."

The travellers survived the storms, only to be arrested on the other side of the ice field by the Argentinian army for a border violation. Only after some sweet-talking by David were they released.

David returned to Australia, but couldn't find a publisher for the Patagonia book (20 years later, he would self-publish it). Disappointed, he decided to change careers and a few years later found a job with the Australian Conservation Foundation, as publications officer.

## SUCCESS AT LAST

But the lure of photography could not be ignored. In 1993, after 10 years at the foundation, he quit to do another book, this time self-published. *Wilson's Promontory: Coastal Wilderness* was not only a financial success but, unlike *South West Tasmania*, it was also well-timed. "As it turned out," says David, "by total coincidence, almost a month after the book came out, the Kennett government came up with this proposal to put a hotel at Tidal River, so a conservation campaign did evolve and the book was handy for that."

In 1991 David made the first of six trips to the Antarctic and sub-Antarctic islands. But it was only in 2004, on an Australian Antarctic Arts Fellowship, that he decided to create *Southern Light*. Between 2004 and 2009, David made another four trips to Antarctica, three times on a chartered yacht and once on a Russian passenger ship.



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1. Elephant seals, Ocean Harbour, South Georgia.  
 2. Royal penguin at Sandy Bay, Macquarie Island.  
 3. David Nielson photographing with partner Karen Alexander on Hovgaard Island. Penola Strait and Mount Cloos in background, Antarctic Peninsula. Photo by Nick Yates



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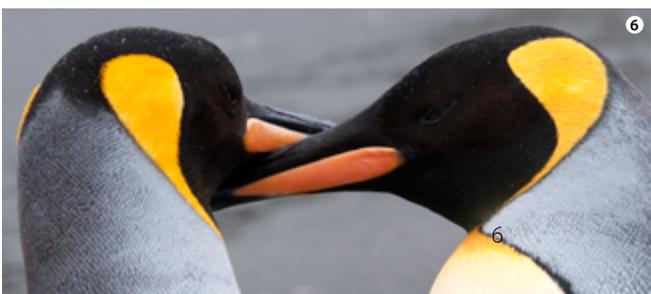


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4. Bivouac on first ascent of Blade Ridge, Federation Peak, South West Tasmania. 1968. David Neilson left, Peter Heddles centre and Jack Woods right. Photo by Rod Harris  
 5. Geologist Tony Norman in the distance, Rumdoodle Peak beyond. East Antarctica.  
 6. King penguins, St Andrews Bay, South Georgia.



6

Evening view from Pleneau Island towards Cape Cloos and the southern entrance to Lemaire Channel, Antarctic Peninsula.



Sailing through the Southern Ocean was certainly exciting stuff. They battled huge seas and at one anchorage on South Georgia Island were nearly blown onto rocks when a ferocious storm struck and a stray rope tangled around their propeller.

The result of these six trips – plus Karen’s albatross photos from Macquarie Island – is an object of great beauty, and clearly the work of a perfectionist. In his study, David shows me a huge printer and pulls open drawers to show hundreds, if not thousands, of colour prints of the book’s images – each with little blue dots where he has measured with a spectrophotometer to make sure each image’s colour profile is perfect.

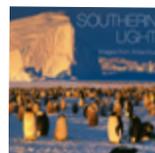
### PERFECT LIGHT

Light, as the book’s title suggests, is a major preoccupation for David and what makes Antarctic photography so special. David describes it beautifully in the book: “The spectrum of Antarctic colour is often narrow but the variation of intensity is considerable. If any colour symbolises Antarctica it is blue: cobalt, Prussian, aquamarine, cerulean, azure, peacock, eggshell. The names seem inadequate for the infinite shades of Antarctic blue. At its strongest it is like a colour with its own energy source; it emanates blueness as if radioactive.”

While David was initially drawn to shooting the landscape, as he spent more time in Antarctica he began to appreciate other aspects. “You can’t help

but be entranced by the seals, the penguins and the sea birds – and they’re in such huge numbers.” Sadly, environmental pressures – climate change in particular – threaten the survival of some of these animals. Following the thread of conservationism David has held throughout his life, *Southern Light* has two essays about the pressures on Antarctica.

A month after our rainy-day meeting in the Dandenongs, I attend *Southern Light*’s Melbourne launch, where Bob Brown – speaking on his last day as a parliamentarian – holds the book above his head and excitedly flicks through the pages in a way that makes book-lover David wince. Brown makes one point clear about the images: in each, David’s great love of Antarctica shines through. But, to me, it is not only love that is apparent, it’s also a profound sense of wonder. Perhaps this is the book’s greatest gift. Seen through David’s eyes, Antarctica – this incredible continent few of us will ever visit – is a place of majesty and beauty, exceptional for both the grandness of its landscape and the adaptability of its unique wildlife.



### GET THE BOOK

*Southern Light* is available at bookstores or online at [www.snowgumpress.com.au](http://www.snowgumpress.com.au)

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