

NatGeo's riveting series Hostile Planet puts you in the center of the action

Enlarge / "This is not your mother's natural history series." Host Bear Grylls filming in the Swiss Pennine Alps for the "Mountains" episode of National Geographic's new series, *Hostile Planet*.

National Geographic/Oliver Clague

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It's more than an hour into a whale-watching excursion organized to promote National Geographic's new six-part series, *Hostile Planet*, and folks are starting to get restless. We saw our first Pacific gray whale before we'd even left the harbor. It swam right up to the boat to give us a good, long look at its telltale gray-white pattern over dark slate-gray skin. But now we're in the open sea with not a whale in sight.

According to Executive Producer Tom Hugh-Jones (*Planet Earth II*), it's just the tiniest taste of what it was like shooting this visually arresting series—except the intrepid camera crews and producers weren't sipping mimosas on a balmy 70-degree day in March off the coast of Malibu as they waited for the animals to show themselves. It took months of preparation followed by weeks of tracking various species, all to capture that perfect unexpected shot. They endured the same extreme conditions as the animals, for more than 1,300 days of

filming, on all seven continents. Out of the resulting 1,800 hours of footage came the six segments of *Hostile Planet*, each focusing on a distinctive biome: “Mountains,” “Oceans,” “Grasslands,” “Jungles,” “Deserts,” and “Polar.”

(Some spoilers for the series below.)

These biomes have always been extreme environments, but they are becoming even more so thanks to a rapidly changing climate—change so rapid that there isn’t much time for the creatures to learn to adapt their behaviors to survive. Yet life (to quote *Jurassic Park*’s Ian Malcolm) finds a way. Despite this rather downbeat theme, the series never becomes overly didactic or preachy, preferring to leave the messaging in the background and simply tell compelling visual stories about the various animals’ struggle to survive. That’s a markedly different approach to how nature shows are usually produced, and the result is positively riveting. I say that as someone who, frankly, is not usually a big fan of nature documentaries. Yet at several points, *Hostile Planet* had me on the edge of my seat.

“The visual language is what takes over. It’s a much more immersive experience.”

“The old traditional way was pretty much a voiceover being illustrated with images,” said Executive Producer Guillermo Navarro. “Here, the visual language is what takes over. It’s a much more immersive experience. That’s the basic use of film language, how the power of an image can build emotion and connectivity. You can actually build a sequence and have an emotional connection with the journey of the species.”

Navarro won an Oscar for his cinematography in the 2006 film, *Pan’s Labyrinth*, and has worked on many more Hollywood hits, including the first two *Hellboy* films with director Guillermo del Toro. The biggest difference between producing *Hostile Planet* and Navarro’s usual work for film and television: he

doesn't have any control over the animals. "They don't obey you here," he said. "There's a lot of luck involved in getting the right shots."

And wow, did they luck into some amazing footage. The filmmakers captured Arctic wolves hunting a herd of muskox—the first time such a kill has been filmed—and a determined jaguar taking down a very large caiman along a jungle river bank. We get to see rare underwater shots of orca whales on a speedy hunt, and a jaw-dropping segment showing a snow leopard pouncing on its ibex prey, only to tumble several hundred feet down a steep, rocky hillside. It never lets go of its prey, and a few days later, it's back on the hunt.

Whale of a tale

- Hark! Is that the tail of a whale?
National Geographic
- A gaggle of reporters trying in vain to capture gray whales in the distance with their smart phones.
National Geographic
- *Hostile Planet* executive producers Tom Hugh-Jones and Guillermo Navarro spot a telltale ripple.
National Geographic
- A Pacific gray whale off the coast of Malibu, California.
National Geographic
- A whale of a water spout with bonus rainbow.
National Geographic
- Navarro and Hugh-Jones strike a pose on deck.
National Geographic

The team made use of all kinds of innovative technology to capture this dramatic close-range footage, rather than relying on the long camera lenses typically used to shoot wildlife shows. "We always start with a story and then we find the technology that will enable us to tell that story," said Hugh-

Jones. For instance, he hired a racing drone pilot to maneuver a small camera-mounted drone through the mountains, speeding through narrow crags and along sharp ridges with the occasional spin, all to give viewers a literal birds-eye view of an eagle's flight through the same mountains.

To capture what it feels like to move with a herd of 1,000 monkeys, Mateo Willis, who served as director and cinematographer on the "Mountains" episode, outfitted his camera operator with a stabilized rig that was exactly at head height of the monkeys. But one of the craziest camera angles he had to execute was capturing an approaching avalanche head-on with a plucky GoPro mounted on a stake right in the path of the cascading snow. The force of the avalanche was so strong, it ripped the locator beacon off of the pole, as the camera flew off in the opposite direction. The avalanche technicians managed to find both within ten minutes of being on the ground. Somehow both the GoPro and its precious footage survived.

Willis hired a helicopter pilot and ski safety instructor familiar with avalanche behavior who knew just how close the helicopter could get to the action safely. Still, "Even when you know you're in the hands of an experienced pilot, when you feel that shock wave coming through the cabin and little bits of snow drifting in through the windows, your heart is just racing," he said. "We really tried to take the audience on that roller coaster ride down the hill, to make them feel like they're traveling with this avalanche."

"You've only got one chance at this, and by the time it happens, your nerves are shot to shreds."

One of the most white-knuckled sequences in the series focuses on a family of barnacle geese. The chicks hatch high up the basalt cliffs of Greenland but must move to where the food is on lower ground within a few days to survive. They can't fly yet, so they do it by literally base jumping from the cliff

and, if they're lucky, landing safely in the snow below. Statistically, roughly half of the chicks survive the process. *Hostile Planet* follows the fortunes of three baby chicks. The first survives the jump but is quickly snatched by a hungry hawk—a bad day for the chick, a good day for the hawk, who must also survive in these extreme conditions. The second keeps bouncing off jagged rocks. It's rather horrifying to watch, and this chick does not survive. The third lands safely, finds its waiting parents, and the family waddles off in search of sustenance.

Getting those spectacular 30-second base-jumping shots meant lugging a heavy kit for two hours up a steep mountain trail in the middle of June, when the region experiences 24-hour daylight, and setting up right at the edge of the cliff. Willis used a 26-foot crane with a camera on the end sticking out over the cliff's edge. Then he watched and waited around the clock, since the chicks can jump at any point in the two days after they hatch. "You've only got one chance at this, and by the time it happens, your nerves are shot to shreds," said Willis.

This is extremely rare footage, according to Willis, because it's such a remote part of the world. It's only been captured on film a few times over the last 40 years. "Everything has to be flown in by helicopter and once you're dropped off, you're completely isolated," he said. The basalt rock that makes up the cliffs has been frozen and fractured over thousands of years, so it's also not especially stable. "It's like standing on top of a pile of bricks that could give way at any moment," said Willis. "I've never felt so unsafe in my entire working career, although we were roped in and had safety harnesses."

Caught on camera

- Emperor Penguin colony at Cape Washington, Terra Nova Bay in Antarctica.

National Geographic/Tanja Bayer

- Cameraman David Reichert filming the Emperor Penguins' march to the ice edge.

National Geographic/Tanja Bayer

- Cameraman Barrie Britton prepares to film barnacle geese on 400 foot basalt cliffs in Greenland.

National Geographic/Miguel Willis

- Producer and cameraman Mateo Willis filming barnacle geese nesting.

National Geographic/Miguel Willis

- Cameraman Miguel Willis filming gelada monkeys in the Simien Mountain National Park, Ethiopia.

National Geographic/Rob Morgan

- Sloth in the flooded forest in Brazil.

National Geographic/Cristian Dimitrius

- Camera operator Cristian Dimitrius, capturing an immersive landscape piece on the wettest time of year in the Amazon jungle.

National Geographic/Cristian Dimitrius

- A pair of nosy killer whales spy hop to check out cameraman Didier Noirot and his filming team in Skjervoy, Norway.

National Geographic/Dan Beecham

- After digging its way to the surface, this turtle hatchling must now run a gauntlet of predators to reach the ocean in Nancite, Costa Rica.

National Geographic/Kevin Flay

- Cameraman Roger Munns captures the vicious bite of a male green turtle.

National Geographic/Jason Isley

- A predatory lionfish stalks the shallows as it waits for nightfall to hunt in the Red Sea, Egypt.

National Geographic/Corinne Chevallier

- Filming with a habituated ocelot to capture an immersive feeling for the clay lick sequence in Peru.

National Geographic/Adrian Seymour

- A dead ant that has been taken over by a species of

Cordyceps in the Rio Claro Reserve in Colombia.

National Geographic/Justin Maguire

- Cameraman Tom Walker uses a gyro-stabilized camera to film meerkats in the Kalahari Desert.

National Geographic/Holly Harrison

- Walker uses a gyro-stabilized camera to film Nubian ibex on the top of a steep cliff in the Negev Desert, Israel.

National Geographic/Matthew Wright

- Jaguar hunting a crocodile on the river banks in the Pantanal, Brazil.

National Geographic/Adrian Seymour

There's always an element of serendipity at work, but all those months of preparation, and learning to trust one's gut instincts, honed over years experience, can make those lucky shots more likely. Hugh-Jones was on location for the timber wolves sequence, and the team couldn't find the pack for the first week of shooting. Then an eagle-eyed cameraman noticed a paw sticking out from the trees, and they were able to track the wolves by helicopter for the next three days as the pack stalked a herd of musk ox, ultimately succeeding in making a kill.

The crew caught the snow leopard's spectacular tumble with its prey in part because Willis, on a hunch, opted to extend the shoot beyond its original four-week limit, because there had been reports of a hungry male leopard in the area. All the footage for that sequence came from the last three days of the extended shoot, when a local spotter caught sight of the snow leopard behind a rock. That's another secret to making your own luck on these shoots. "Our job would be nothing if it weren't for the scientists and local people who live around and study these animals," said Willis. "We are almost completely reliant on their generosity and goodwill."

Hostile Planet debuts tonight at 9pm ET/8pm CT on the National Geographic Channel.

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