



Mark Carwardine's Wild Thoughts

I'm finding it increasingly difficult to predict where and when wild animals will appear. Is this just bad luck or are more sinister forces at work?

I've just started writing a book called *You Should Have Been Here Last Week!* about all the spectacular wildlife I've almost, but not quite, seen over the years. I can't even count the number of times I've arrived at top wildlife sites around the world, each renowned for one particular species at a specific time of year, only to be faced with days or even weeks of disappointment.

The idea developed in Patagonia, after an overwhelmingly uneventful 10 days trying to photograph non-existent orcas. They had been seen off the beach at Peninsula Valdez, hunting sealion pups, until just over an hour before I arrived.

According to friends working there at the time, who took great delight in e-mailing me their good news, the whales reappeared en masse the day after I had given up and left.

I know there are never any guarantees in wildlife-watching. It's not like following football (the players are always going to turn up), waiting for another American environmental disaster (you're never going to have to wait very long), or train-spotting (though, on second thoughts, there are probably no guarantees if you're watching British trains). The challenge in observing – and especially photographing – wildlife is all part of the fun. But I'm beginning to think I've had more than enough 'fun' to last a lifetime.

What I don't understand is why I seem to be experiencing that heart-sinking feeling when someone utters the dreaded words "I don't know where they've all gone – you should

have been here last week when there were hundreds/thousands of them all around the camp/lodge/boat" more often these days than ever before.

Just last week, I was shark-diving off the remote island of Guadalupe, a great white shark hotspot in the middle of the North Pacific. I say I was shark-diving but that's a bit of an exaggeration. The sharks had other ideas and, for the first time in five years, didn't turn up for our annual rendezvous.

A wildlife photographer friend of mine has just returned from Churchill, Canada, where he was taking pictures of polar bears. He wanted to shoot them on ice, which normally forms on Hudson Bay around the end of October or early November, but this year it was many weeks late. He didn't get the shot.

I know my relatively limited observations are subjective and unscientific. I am convinced, however, that wildlife seasons around the world are becoming less predictable and, quite possibly, changing altogether. Gone are the days when you could turn up at a wildlife hotspot during peak season and be fairly sure of encountering whatever it was you were hoping to see.

The big question is why? I'm pointing my accusatory finger at global warming. As I write, some 10,000 delegates from 189 nations are meeting in Montreal for yet another heated debate on greenhouse gases. My guess is that they will fail to reach agreement and, ultimately, if they fail too many times, great white sharks, polar bears and all the other wildlife struggling to cope with the consequences will fail to adapt.

Mark Carwardine is a zoologist, radio presenter and writer.