

OBITUARY

## Adventurer Natalie Gillis found beauty in cold, wild places

The remarkable photographs she took of wildlife and far-flung landscapes contributed to her election as a fellow of the Royal Canadian Geographical Society and earned her a strong online following

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SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED JUNE 28, 2024



Natalie Gillis takes a selfie in Antarctica in 2019. She posted this picture to Instagram with the message, 'Happiest girl in the world right here.'

COURTESY OF NATALIE GILLIS' FAMILY

Canadian wilderness guide and photographer Natalie Gillis built her extraordinary life around the pursuit of adventures, which took her from the High Arctic down to Antarctica.

Irresistibly drawn to frozen worlds and other wild places, she reached them by kayaking, sailing, cycling, trekking and piloting airplanes.

Her photographs were sparse, curated and startling: An intimate embrace between a polar bear and her cub, a wind-battered muskox, a lone Arctic wolf searching for something unknown.



Natalie Gillis looks over the horizon in Nunavut, in 2020. COURTESY OF NATALIE GILLIS' FAMILY

She developed a strong social media presence, which was peppered with images of a cheerful, accomplished young woman who lived not just the length of her life, but the width of it, too.

Her [personal Instagram feed](#), features a 2019 selfie showing Ms. Gillis perched atop the mast of a sailing yacht in Antarctica, captioned “Happiest girl in the world right here.” Other photos show her diving into the warm, blue waters off Fiji and trekking alongside a massive glacier in Nunavut’s Quttinirpaaq National Park.

Earlier this year, she posted from Costa Rica where she was executing an aerial survey project mapping, in one region, “the vertical structure of the rainforest.”

Meanwhile, her [professional Instagram account](#) – billed as an image bank inspired by the spirit of exploration and the beauty found in cold, wild places – features one stunning image after another. The strength of these photographs contributed to her election as a fellow of the Royal Canadian Geographical Society (RCGS) in 2022.



Satiated polar bear in Nunavut, 2017. NATALIE GILLIS/BLACK FEATHER





'Little One' South Georgia, South Sandwich Islands, 2023. NATALIE GILLIS



Stepping stones, Nunavut, 2021. NATALIE GILLIS



Her photos include sea birds in flight, breaching whales flanked by icebergs, yawning leopard seals and statuesque king penguins – all infused with a soulful, minimalist photographic style uniquely her own.

Ms. Gillis died on June 17, at the age of 34, when the plane she was piloting crashed shortly after take-off in Upstate New York. She had been heading from Albany International Airport to Montreal in a Piper PA-31 Navajo, according to her employer, KASI Aviation Services of Quebec.

Just weeks earlier, after 1,500 hours in the air, she received her Airline Transport Pilot certification, the highest level of training and certification. She was “very well qualified,” as a pilot, according to U.S. National Transportation Safety Board air safety investigator Lynn Spencer, who was quoted in a news report by WRGB Albany. A final report on the crash will be issued in 18 to 24 months, Ms. Spencer said.



Natalie Gillis in the Northwest Territories, in 2022 COURTESY OF NATALIE GILLIS' FAMILY

Laval St. Germain, a mountaineer, endurance athlete and Calgary-based pilot with Arctic specialists Canadian North Airlines, had multiple interactions with Ms. Gillis over the years.

“We were both pilots and both adventurers,” Mr. St. Germain said. “I interviewed her once for a podcast and she brimmed with confidence and, most importantly, competence – the competence born from sailing southern ocean seas, guiding in the Canadian Arctic, long solo bike-packing trips and piloting bush planes in some of the most remote and challenging areas on Earth. Nat was daring, bold, unique and uniquely competent, which makes her sudden loss so tragically sad and frustrating for all who knew her.”

Celebrated Canadian photographer Dave Brosha said he was “gut punched” when he heard the news of the crash. Mr. Brosha, who became good friends with Ms. Gillis after meeting her on an adventure in Nunavut, was holding a photography workshop in Mongolia when he and photographer Paul Zizka were copied on a message announcing her death.



CAPTION ▾

Muskox in Quttinirpaaq National Park, Nunavut in 2018.

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'Stare of the albatross', Falkland Islands, 2019. NATALIE GILLIS



“It was one of the tougher days I’ve known. Nat had a pretty big presence in my life. She exemplified really living life, but always with a balance of humility and kindness. She wasn’t drawn into the ego that a lot of people can get in the adventure photography world,” Mr. Brosha said.

“She was a kind, big-hearted person who went after it,” he said.

Ms. Gillis leaves her mother, Mary Yap; her older brother, Matthew Yap; and her faithful companion Stikine, a raggedy-eared rescue dog.

“Natalie was an inspiration to us all,” her family wrote in a statement. “... We know that she lived every day to the absolute fullest, and we are grateful for every moment that we shared with her.”

Natalie Rose Gillis (Gillis is her mother’s maiden name) was born in Toronto on April 29, 1990, to Mary Yap and Victor Yap. She attended North York’s St. Gabriel Catholic School and then Earl Haig Secondary School.

During an interview with Banff, Alta., writer Meghan Ward on Dec. 6, 2022, the well-known adventurer said that she was “born into a family that did not enjoy the outdoors.”

“To get out of the city and go camping wasn’t something that happened,” Ms. Gillis explained about her early years. She discovered her passion for the outdoors when she made a friend in elementary school whose family owned a summer property up north.

“One summer, my mom let me go to my friend’s cottage. She had a pair of kayaks and I went out with them – these, like, little Canadian Tire sit-on-top kayaks,” Ms. Gillis recalled. “I remember being out on the water and being so enamoured with the idea that it was quiet, it was green and you’re paddling. It was such a beautiful, transformative experience.”

She returned home determined to purchase her own kayak, picking up a job delivering papers to save her pennies. Her mom was impressed. “She said, ‘you know, you’ve worked really hard all winter. I can see you really want this,’” recalled Ms. Gillis, who would soon become the proud owner of her own kayak.



Natalie Gillis looks down at Lake O'Hara in B.C. in 2022. PAUL ZIZKA

In the summer of 2006, when she was 16, Ms. Gillis joined Outward Bound on a kayaking expedition on Lake Superior. “It was the first time I’d ever gone camping,” Ms. Gillis continued in her conversation with Ms. Ward. “And I just knew, this is it. This is what I want to do with the rest of my life.”

Ms. Ward – who published a profile titled “What’s next, Ms. Gillis?” in Kootenay Mountain Culture magazine in 2023 – notes that while Ms. Gillis is often portrayed as superhuman, she was just human.

“She worked hard for what she wanted, and knew what was being sacrificed,” Ms. Ward said, acknowledging the challenges involved when balancing ambitious professional goals with creative and social time. “She was travelling a ton. Because she was literally off-grid in some places, she would come home to texts about gatherings and birthdays and things she’d missed when she was away.”

Despite her nomadic existence, Ms. Gillis was a dedicated learner, graduating from the University of Guelph (Bachelor of Arts in environmental governance

and political science, 2013), from Humber College (post-graduate diploma in literature, 2014) and from England's University of Gloucestershire (Master of Arts, creative and critical writing, 2021).

Her first book of poetry, *This is Where Atlantis Sank*, was self-published with Calgary's Northland Publishing House in 2021 as part of a dissertation for her master's from the University of Gloucestershire.

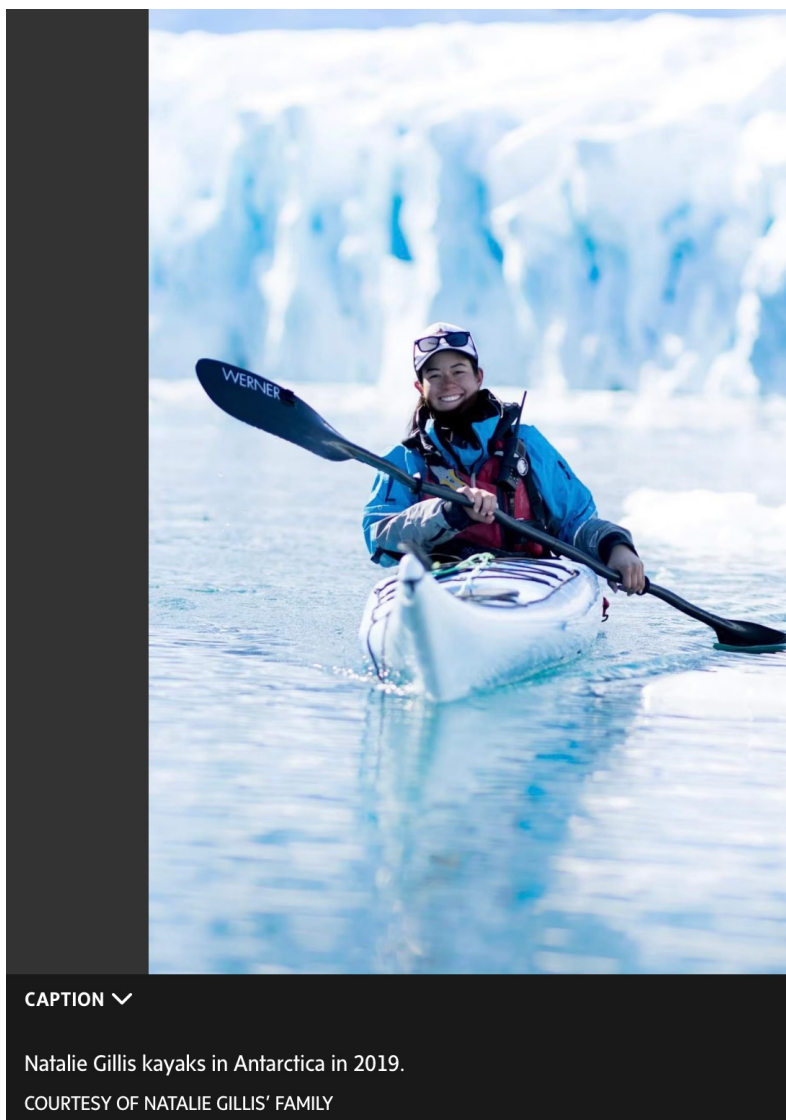
At the time of her death, Ms. Gillis was working on a Master of Arts in Natural Resources and Environmental Studies (focussing on landscape ethnoecology) at the University of Northern British Columbia.

Alexandra Pope, the editor-in-chief of *Canadian Geographic* (the publication of the Royal Canadian Geographical Society), said Ms. Gillis began contributing to the magazine soon after she was elected as an RCGS fellow.

"We recognized a kindred spirit in Natalie. I know she will be remembered forever by everyone here," Ms. Pope said, adding that Ms. Gillis "embodied the ethos" of the RCGS, demonstrating a lifelong commitment to learning about Canada and sharing what she learned with the world.

"I'm glad we were able to publish some of her beautiful photography. Now those images are part of the permanent record of Canada. It's really powerful for any photographer or writer to be part of that," Ms. Pope said, referencing a polar bear image by Ms. Gillis from Nunavik, Que., that made the magazine's cover in the January/February 2023 issue and five photos of muskoxen from Cornwallis Island, Nunavut, that were published in the July/August 2023 issue.





CAPTION ▼

Natalie Gillis kayaks in Antarctica in 2019.

COURTESY OF NATALIE GILLIS' FAMILY

Wendy Grater, who has been with the Ontario-based wilderness adventure company Black Feather since 1984, hired Ms. Gillis as an apprentice in 2010.

“She felt like a daughter to me, as well as an employee,” Ms. Grater said, describing Ms. Gillis as a very logical, quietly confident and efficient person.

“She also had a sense of fun,” Ms. Grater said. “You’ll see that in many photos. But she wasn’t just a machine that was efficient. She had a little vulnerability about her that made her very relatable, as well.”

Longtime friend and fellow Black Feather guide Candice Stuart speaks about Ms. Gillis’s warmth and her beautiful smile.

“I’m not ready to say goodbye yet. I think I need to hold her a little bit closer for a little bit longer,” Ms. Stuart said.

“I’ll be up in Ellesmere Island this summer,” she added. “That will be my processing time. We had a lot of deep conversations up there over the years.”

Shortly after the tragic news spread to fellow guides up north in the field, Ms. Stuart said, an Arctic wolf was reported to have appeared above their campsite. “It howled and cried for 15 minutes. They said it was surreal. Then over the next few days, the wolf kept reappearing. They said, ‘It had to be her.’”



The Calm in Antarctica, 2023. NATALIE GILLIS

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-adventurer-natalie-gillis-found-beauty-in-cold-wild-places/>

Friends of mine have a similar daughter—bright, brave, full of life—who flies professionally in often-demanding circumstances. With such a child, all you can say is “Go for it girl!” But you know the risks being taken, even if probably a skilled, careful pilot is safer than someone driving bleary-eyed in the dark to work in the early morning, one tiresome day after another. If you have that Life in you, better to have Lived and died than to have never lived at all. Even if, after all the masterful attention to detail, heartbreak comes ...TJB