

Wolves Unleashed offers intimate look at misunderstood animal



Photo by Guillaume Mazille

For those who think making films is a glamorous affair reserved for the overpaid and privileged, *Wolves Unleashed* should once and for all set the record straight.

The documentary, made with loving care by Calgary-area animal trainer Andrew Simpson, certainly has loftier goals than bursting this hoary myth. But it's a definite byproduct in the tale about Simpson's arduous journey with 13 wolves to an end-of-the-earth shoot in Siberia, where filmmakers brave temperatures that dipped to -60 in a remote camp. The endured no running water, a woeful lack of bathroom facilities, long travels on icy roads in shoddy trucks and nourishment of the "what-exactly-are-we-eating?" variety.

Wolves Unleashed, which had its world premiere in front of a packed house as part of the Calgary International Film Festival Saturday evening, is all about breaking down myths. It's an old-school documentary, told with gentle humour, gorgeous scenery and voice-of-god narration by Simpson in a plaintive voice that still harbours hints of his Scottish brogue.

For 20 years, Simpson has been supplying wolves, or training others, for films from his home base outside of Calgary. In fact, he flew in for the premiere from Beijing, where he is working on another wolf-based film. But his

documentary was at least partially motivated by a desire to counter popular ideas about wolves that have been formed by the movies.

"Most of the films we do with wolves portrays them as snarling and evil, the werewolf and all that kind of thing," Simpson said, outside the Plaza Saturday night. "Hopefully, with this movie people will see the gentler side of wolves. They will see that they are capable of showing affection and emotion and are bonding with people in a positive way."

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For all the many triumphs of Simpson's fascinating film, this may be its most poignant. Simpson shows the inner-workings of the pack as they shoot the "biggest wolf film ever attempted" in the wilds of Siberia. (The film-within-the-film, entitled *Loup*, was released in Europe in 2009 but has yet to find its way to North America.)

We meet the alpha male Digger, the reliable and motherly Tyka and Sweet Pea, the somewhat ironically named diva of the pack prone to the occasional temperamental outburst.

At the heart of the film is Simpson's relationship with Digger. In one touching segment, Simpson has to trick his star wolf into falling into a hole in the ice for a climatic scene in the film. We see the trainer's overwhelming feelings of guilt for the act, a testament to the friendship shared between the two. (Spoiler alert: Digger forgives him.)

Despite the harsh conditions, *Wolves Unleashed* is not a film about life-or-death situations. It's a gentle tale, that unfolds with a grace and beauty that reflects its otherworldly surroundings.

Simpson has yet to find a distributor for the film, but it's hard to imagine that it wouldn't find a home on numerous specialty channels. It's more than a nature film, of course, but it does have those classic elements that make animal documentaries so appealing: the exploration of instincts and how they serve an animal in a natural setting doing what appears to be very unnatural work.

Catch an encore screening of the film Sunday at 2 p.m. at the Plaza Theatre.