

Crying Wolf

Albertan's love for the wolves he trains for movies unveils gentler side of animals

By Eric Volmers,
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*Andrew Simpson and one of the Eurasian wolves he trained, on the set of the Chinese film **Wolf Totem**. Simpson has released a book and documentary called **Wolves Unleashed**.*

It's quite something to hear 35 wolves howl. Haunting. A little creepy.

On a ranch north of Calgary earlier this week, Andrew Simpson's partner and fellow wolf trainer Sally Jo Sousa starts it off: Howling into the wind to encourage dozens of wolves to follow suit on the couple's sprawling and remote property.

It's a performance of sorts for the wolves, who are used to performing. Granted, not all are enthusiastically participating.

Digger, a male tundra wolf and the scene-stealing star of both the 2009 Russian-shot epic *Loup* and Simpson's 2011 documentary *Wolves Unleashed*, is not particularly interested. On this day, the friendly animal wanders around and whines softly but generally lets his lupine pack-mates make all the racket, including his pal and fellow thespian, 2-Toes.

"Digger hates to howl," explains Simpson. "2-Toes will howl all day. Digger is like: 'I'm not howling.' He's above howling."

Both wolves are nevertheless given dog biscuits. 2-Toes, a silver and black wolf, gobbles his down. Digger, the dominant grey male, gingerly takes his away and buries it.

But when Digger turns his attention to Simpson and a visiting journalist, 2-Toes cagily wanders away, digs up the biscuit and eats it himself when the bigger wolf isn't looking.

There are plenty of myths out there about wolves: that they are prone to attacking humans (untrue); that they organize around an alpha male in the wild (this perception is based more on how wolves act in captivity than the wild, Simpson says); that they are lethal and efficient hunters (they are actually "lousy hunters" and, in the wild, sometimes have to go for days without eating.) But the one impression people

have that is absolutely true is that wolves are extremely intelligent. They know how to figure stuff out.

"They are very easy to train," Simpson says. "They learn things very quickly. And once they have it, they never forget what you've taught them."

Spend any amount of time at Simpson's peaceful ranch, and it also becomes clear that each wolf has its own distinct personality and they all seem rather enthused when it comes to meeting new people.

"They like to say hi to everyone," Simpson says. "It makes their day."

That includes Jack, a keener wolf who continuously returns to his actor's "mark" — a round paving stone — to receive biscuits from Sousa. Sweet Pea was arbitrarily named at birth but has certainly grown to embody her name. She's so sweet, in fact, that getting her to snarl on cue for the camera can be a bit of a chore. Scrunch is another friendly wolf, a "runt" who was born blind and abandoned by his mother in Russia. When he was brought to Calgary, Simpson paid for an operation that restored his sight.

Yes, raising wolves for film can be an expensive proposition, one that requires constant attention. Simpson's company, Instinct Animals for Film, has four full-time employees, including Sousa. They care for the 35 wolves, feeding them, playing with them and training them for movies, TV and commercials.

"That's the thing with a lot of other areas in the film business," Simpson says. "For everyone else, their equipment goes to the back of a truck. If they are not working, it's not costing anything to put it in a truck. With these guys, they still have to be fed and have vet care and housing. So it's a seven-day-a-week job. It never ends."

Simpson's last project is certainly a testament to his devotion. *Wolf Totem*, shot in Inner Mongolia, is one of the most expensive films ever produced in China. Directed by French filmmaker Jean-Jacques Annaud (*Seven Years in Tibet*, *Enemy at the Gates*), it is based on the bestselling Chinese novel of the same name and

follows the true tale of a student who travels to Inner Mongolia in 1969 to teach shepherds and discovers they have a spiritual bond with the area wolves.

The project took up more than three years of Simpson's life, most of which he spent in Beijing. He first went to China in 2010 to work with zoos in finding proper parentage for the pups that would eventually be used in the film. He raised 16 Eurasian wolf pups in China. And when he returned to Alberta just before Christmas, he brought them all back with him.

Now three years old, the fully-grown wolves scamper about or lazily sun themselves in the fenced-in area where they live on the ranch. As with the others, they love attention.

"We spent so long with them and we raised them from pups," Simpson says. "Every single day I was in China was with them. So it's hard to walk away from that situation."

Born in the Scottish Highlands, the soft-spoken Simpson has been raising and training wolves since the early 1990s, when he lived in British Columbia. He left Scotland at the age of 20, travelling to Australia where he fell into film work, including an early stint as the unofficial assistant to a dingo trainer in the Meryl Streep film **A Cry in the Dark**.

Since then, he has trained just about every creature imaginable for film, from insects to birds to raccoons, bears and reindeer. But he is best known for his work with wolves. His profile got a boost with **Wolves Unleashed**, a documentary he directed, narrated and assembled out of 70-hours of footage that he took while working on the Siberian set of the 2009 epic **Loup**.

The documentary, which is now available on DVD, introduced the world to Digger and Sweet Pea, among others. **Wolves Unleashed** (Rocky Mountain Books, 216 Pages, \$39.95) is also the name of a handsome coffee table book that Simpson will be signing today (Saturday) at Chapters Chinook.

Both the book and the film chronicle the frigid, five-month shoot Simpson and 13 of his wolves endured for the 2009 film **Loup**. It found them surviving -60 degree temperatures and even, in Digger's case, a plunge through the ice.

Like **Wolf Totem**, it was a long shoot that required intensive training. And as with **Wolf Totem**, Simpson brought some of the pups back home with him (and a dog) when filming stopped. Both those films portrayed wolves a little more sympathetically than Hollywood often does.

Part of the reasoning Simpson had for making **Wolves Unleashed** was to help dispel the myth that the animals are dangerous, evil creatures. He is planning a followup documentary about his time on **Wolf Totem** as well.

So he understandably admits to feeling conflicted at times about contributing to the myth. Because he was in Beijing, he did not participate in 2011's British Columbia-shot movie **The Grey** with Liam Neeson. It was the latest Hollywood offender that portrayed wolves as vicious maneaters, a perception that has been drummed into the public for generations.

"It's funny, **The Grey** came out just as (**Wolves Unleashed**) was coming out at a lot of the film festivals," Simpson says. "There were numerous sites — on Facebook and the Internet — that said 'boycott

The Grey and go see **Wolves Unleashed**.' So, in a way I was happy I didn't work on that show. In a way it helped me because everyone was saying 'Don't go see the bad wolf, go see the good wolf.' "

Still, that doesn't mean that members of Simpson's friendly pack aren't often called upon to play those "bad wolf" roles.

"That's what movies stuff is about and what people want to see," Simpson says. "And a lot of times when people write the movies, they don't really have any more understanding than what they've been told. The hard part is, that's the bread-and-butter. That's what pays the bills, those type of films."

So Simpson and his staff train his wolves for "attack work" and to snarl on cue. The cover of **Wolves Unleashed**, both the DVD and book, shows a picture of Digger in mid-snarl. It also shows Simpson carrying him on the frozen set, a tender and heartwarming shot that was taken after Digger was required to fall through the ice for a scene in Siberia.

Given his bond with the wolves, training them to snarl can be a bit confusing for them, Simpson says. He starts by giving the wolf a meaty bone and then pretending to take it away.

"At the start, it's hard for them to understand why you want to take something you just gave them," Simpson says. "They don't snarl at you because you raised them. They are going: 'Well, OK, if you want to take it you can take it because you're in charge.' So sometimes it's really hard to get them to that snarling point. But once they understand what you want them to do, it's a pure game for them. They get praise when they show their teeth a little bit, you say 'OK, that's good.' And when they really show their teeth you make a bigger fuss and they say 'OK, this is what he wants.' Suddenly it's like the child getting permission to talk back or swear at you."

