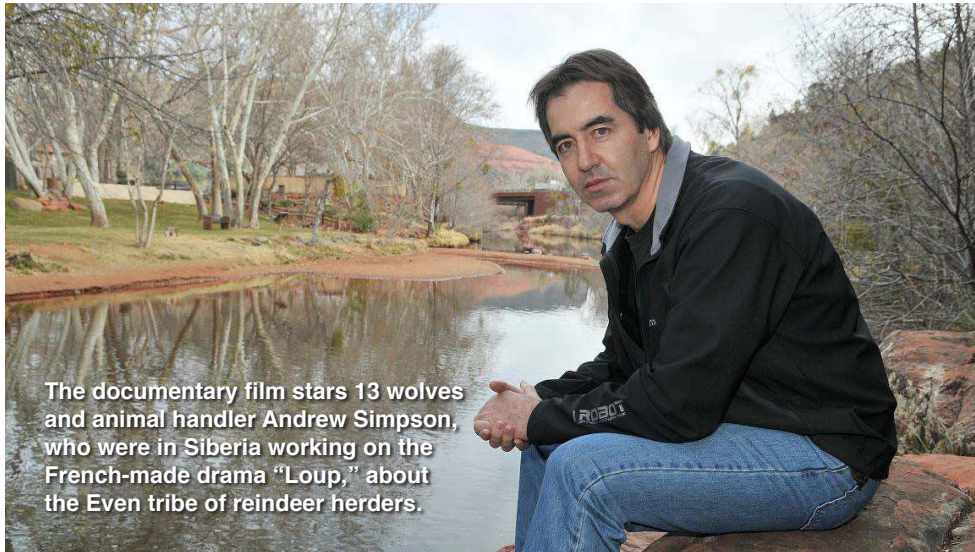


Simpson teaches wolf pack to act

Written by Christopher Fox Graham



The documentary film stars 13 wolves and animal handler Andrew Simpson, who were in Siberia working on the French-made drama "Loup," about the Even tribe of reindeer herders.

Simpson has worked with all sorts of species from flies needed on a dead body to mice, chimpanzees, dogs, bears and, of course, wolves, with which he primarily works now.

Since about 2006, Simpson has mostly worked on projects overseas. "Wolves Unleashed" was shot while Simpson was in Siberia working on the French drama, "Loup," released in 2009. "Loup" follows a 16-year-old Evenk reindeer herder who befriends a wolf and her pups. Rather than see the wolves killed by other members of his tribe, he leads them over the mountains to safety.

"Wolves Unleashed" shows how Simpson and other handlers work with the film's 13 wolves, such as Digger, 2-Toes and Sweat Pea.

Simpson said the hardest thing about working with wolves is that humans treat them like dogs, due to their apparent similarity. While a dog or big cat would ignore a set change like moved furniture, the smarter and more suspicious wolf would not. Likewise, while a dog could perform a stunt shot multiple times, like falling through ice on a frozen lake, a wolf can only do it once because it would be suspicious of the ice afterward.

Part of the film's goal is to show viewers that wolves are not fearsome beasts, but smart, graceful and caring.

Simpson's latest project is "Wolf Totem," based on the Chinese novel written by Jiang Rong. In the story, the narrator goes to Mongolia during the 1967 Cultural Revolution. There, he learns about the equestrian Mongolians' deep connection to wild wolves, who revere them as one-third of a sacred triangle also including god and man. Rather than bury their dead, Mongolians leave bodies for wolves to consume and by doing so, return the deceased's spirit to heaven.

The narrator learns how wolves' predatory instincts also weed out weak Mongolian horses and keep bloodlines strong. The narrator then tries and fails to domesticate a wolf pup.

Simpson works with Chinese wolves in the film, which are smaller and differently colored than North American wolves. He expects the 2½-year project to screen in Chinese theatres in 2013 or 2014 and hopes that it will lead to more use of wolves in future Chinese films.

Getting one wolf to act on cue isn't easy.

Getting a pack to act in the frozen tundra of Siberia can be even harder.

Andrew Simpson demonstrates his deft skill working with wolf actors in the documentary film "Wolves Unleashed," screening at 9 a.m., Friday, Feb. 24, at the Sedona Rouge Theater during the Sedona International Film Festival.

"Animal training ... is not something you can teach someone. It's something that you already have inside you," he said.

Although he now lives in Canada, Simpson was born in Fort William, in the highlands of Scotland. As a boy, he was always playing with small animals he found. Excluding foxes and badgers, there are no large predators in Scotland, he said.

At age 20, Simpson left Scotland to explore the world and found himself in Australia. He always had an attraction for movies and got a role as an extra in Tom Selleck's "Quigley Down Under." During one of the breaks, Simpson got to talking with the animal handler who said she was a little shorthanded wrangling the films' kangaroos — which are led around by holding the tail — and Australian wild dogs, known as dingoes.

"A few of days of walking dingoes around and holding kangaroos by the tail, I was kind

of hooked on the whole thing," Simpson said. "When I discovered the whole animal side of filming, I discovered you could combine movie making with animals and it was kind a natural blend for me."

In the early 1990s, Simpson went to visit a friend in Vancouver, British Columbia, which is the heart of Canada's film industry.

He found a job with a company training animals for films and television shows like "Highlander," "The X-Files," "Sliders" and "Homeward Bound 2: Lost in San Francisco."

After a few years, he left the company to start his own and has since worked in television shows from "Smallville," "Monk" and "Supernatural" to films like "I, Robot," "Snow Dogs" and "Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan." He has now worked on more than 100 productions.

When bidding for a film, he receives a copy of the script, blocks the animal action sequences with what the animals will have to do, then submits a bid to the film company. While Hollywood, Calif., can have upwards of 40 to 45 animal training companies, Vancouver has about 15, but they are more concentrated. The market can be one of feast or famine with all those companies competing when a new film or television production comes to Vancouver. However, once a company like Simpson's makes a name for itself, work comes much easier.

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