



Raiding Snack Machines with Wolves: A 'Q & A' with Andrew Simpson

by Mengfei Chen

Andrew Simpson is the animal trainer extraordinaire behind Instinct, a company that for the last 20 years has helped filmmakers meet the challenges of filming with non-human actors. If you've seen Snow Dogs, Borat, X-Files or commercials for Honda, Doritos or Bud Light, you've seen Simpson's work.

On March 15, Simpson will be talking about his latest project: training wolves for the film adaptation of Wolf Totem, Jiang Rong's bestselling novel of survival on the Mongolian steppes.

Here Simpson takes a break from the set to answer a few questions for BLF.

Mengfei Chen: Suppose you are at a bar. How do you explain your job to the guy next to you?

Andrew Simpson: I train animals for the film industry. Every time you see a film or TV show with an animal in it, someone like me owns and trains that animal. We get sent scripts that have animals in them and we work out what animal action is required and how much time is needed to train the animals. It can be a one-day job or a 3-year project; you just never know what the next phone call will bring.

MC: How did you end up doing what you do for a living?

AS: This job choice was accidental for me. I always loved animals and the movies but never thought the two could be combined. Then during a trip across Australia I got some work on a film set which had Dingoes working in it. This was when the light bulb went on as they say and the rest is history.

MC: What was your first pet?

AS: Apart from frogs, mice and lizards in my pocket from a very early age, my first real pet was a dog called Scamp. He was my best friend growing up and we spent everyday together doing what kids do.

MC: What's your favourite project that you've ever worked on? Why?

AS: One of my favourite projects was one in Greece called Nicostratos the Pelican. It was [a film] about a boy and his pelican. It was so nice to get a job in the warm sun and swim in the ocean everyday. Normally our jobs are in the snow!

MC: What's the worst thing that has ever gone wrong on a shoot? Any scars?

AS: My worst moment was when I was returning from Siberia and due to bad weather my plane was delayed and I spent 2 days in a warehouse with my wolves eating from the candy

machine (me not the wolves). A couple of scars but they were all my fault! Stupid human stuff...

MC: Where do you get the animals you work with?

AS: I specialize in wolves so I have 22 at home in Canada. But for the pelican project we rented them from a zoo in France. So it just depends on the animal needed as to where it comes from.

MC: Most unusual animal requested?

AS: I think it was a sloth for a telephone commercial or a boxing kangaroo, hard to remember, sorry.

MC: Tell a bit about your latest project, Wolf Totem?

AS: Wolf Totem is the film version of the bestselling novel of the same name. As you can imagine there are lots of wolves in it, but as there are no film-trained wolves in China we came here ahead of the filming schedule to work with the wolves here in China.

MC: What's it like to work with wolves?

AS: Wolves are very smart but also very cautious of everything around them, which can make them harder to work with. But they always get a very negative image as this big, mean, scary, will-eat-you-alive creature, which is just not true.

MC: Who's more difficult: Humans or wolves?

AS: Humans should be easier because you can speak to each other, but some days I wonder!