

BILF: Andrew Simpson Talks Wolves

by Laura Fitch



Photo: David Gilchrist

Andrew Simpson is a wolf whisperer. A film industry veteran, Simpson brings 20 years of experience working with animal actors to the set of the film adaptation of Jiang Rong's *Wolf Totem*. Working with each wolf's natural instincts and unique personality, Simpson achieves the behaviours needed in a unique and humane way that makes both filmmaker and animal happy. Don't miss this chance to hear him speak at the Bookworm today at 3pm

You're currently in Beijing working with wolves on the set of the movie *Wolf Totem*, based on Jiang Rong's book of the same name. How did this come about?

When it was decided the book would be made into a film the first task was to find a director. The local Chinese production company in Beijing, FCC, contacted the famous French director

Jean-Jacques Annaud. Once this was done the next task was finding a trainer to work with the wolves. My company, Instinct (www.instinctforfilm.com) is based in Canada but we work all across the world and we specialize in wolves. I was contacted by Jean-Jacques Annaud about working with him on this film and once I read the book, visited China, and spoke with FCC we all decided to work together.

You have a pack of wolves at home in Canada. Did you bring some of your own pack over? If not, where did you source them? It would have been great to bring

my wolves from Canada because they are trained and have worked in many films. But unfortunately North American wolves do not look like Chinese wolves. The wolves in China are a little smaller and a different color. So we had to come to China many months in advance to breed Chinese wolves at a zoo and raise them to become filming wolves.



Do you name them? Yes they all have names. We always give them fun names like: YoYo, Frenzy, Jonny D., Peanut, Hank, Cloudy, B.B.

The two main animal characters in the book are wolf pups. Since pups don't stay the same size

forever, and film shoots are often quite long, what does that mean in terms of the shooting schedule? Our shooting schedule is spread out over many months. We will film as much as possible with the wolf pups when they are really small, then film the sequences needed as the pups grow. In a nutshell the growing rate of the wolf will determine when the scenes involving them are filmed.

You're one of the only wolf trainers around. What are the unique challenges of training wolves that make it such a specialty?

You have to be willing to dedicate a lot of time to the animals. You cannot just work with them when you feel like it, they don't work like that. If you commit time to them they will in return commit to you. You cannot earn trust and create a bond with wolves unless you are willing to put in the time with them. For me every day in China is spent with the wolves. Wolves are very cautious animals, they are suspicious of everything around them, so it's only by spending the time with them that you can fully understand them. Many people look for a quick solution to working with animals, which is why there are very few people who train wolves. There are no shortcuts!

Wolves get a bad rap as dangerous animals. Is this a myth?

Much of the perception about wolves comes from legend, folklore and movies! In reality they are not the dangerous, crazy, wild animal waiting around the corner to attack you in the forest. In their natural setting they will avoid contact and interaction with humans at all costs. That is their nature and how they survive. But for some reason in countries all around the world the wolf is one of the most hated and misunderstood animals of our time. As humans we fear what we cannot fully understand, and that seems to be our nature. It's very sad.

How did you first start training wolves?

Quick answer, I started working with an animal company and I was given a wolf to train. It was so much smarter than a dog, it made me think and I was hooked on wolves.

I hear you have a documentary circulating the film festival circuit at the moment. Could you talk a bit about that?

We were hired to make a film in Siberia with wolves a few years ago. Because it was such a unique experience we decided to film everything we did with the wolves. Once I discovered how much footage we had I decided to turn it into a documentary to show the world how we work with wolves. And also to show a side of wolves that is not normally seen, the film will make you question everything you thought you knew about wolves. Its called 'Wolves Unleashed' and please check it out at www.wolvesunleashed.com

And a book coming out later this year?

Yes there is a book of the film 'Wolves Unleashed' which comes out later this year. It's a photo and personal/candid diary style book which will let people follow us on the journey we did. So please buy it when it comes out!



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