

SEVEN

WILDLIFE

THE WOLF WHISPERER

Meet the British man taming China's beasts

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Taming the untamable

One of Britain's foremost animal trainers recently relocated to Beijing for his toughest job yet: raising a pack of wolves to star in an epic Chinese film. But getting the animals to snarl on cue is the least of his problems. By Tessa Thorniley



Ten pairs of dark eyes stare out from behind a 14ft-high chain link fence on the northern outskirts of Beijing. It is a sweltering afternoon, the dust hangs above the arid plain, and the wolves behind the fence have dug shallow pits in the dirt to cool themselves in the moist soil underneath.

The pack looks relaxed, until they hear the sound of the car and the distant bark of a dog. At once, their ears prick up, their noses tilted forward, towards the noise. "They never really sleep while the sun is up," says Andrew Simpson, one bushy eyebrow arched.

Simpson, a 45-year-old Scot with a shaggy mane of dark hair, has spent his life training wolves, and is now in China for his greatest challenge yet. In order to make a film of one of China's most famous novels, the multimillion bestseller, *Wolf Totem*, he has 18 months to raise a pack of Mongolian grassland wolves to sit, snarl and fight on cue.

As the narrator of *Wolf Totem* warns: "You can tame a bear, a lion or an elephant, but you cannot tame a Mongolian wolf." Simpson is inclined to agree. "They are the hardest animals to train," he says in his soft Scottish brogue. "It is not possible to get a wolf to do something he or she does not want to do. If they do not enjoy it, they will not work."

This is the longest and riskiest project of Simpson's 20-year career; he will be working with an 18-strong wolf pack, larger than any he has attempted in the past. Plans for a film of *Wolf Totem* have been afoot since 2004, and at one point Peter Jackson was rumoured to be interested in directing it with all-digital wolves. But when Jean-Jacques Annaud – director of *The Bear* and the Brad Pitt film *Seven Years in Tibet* – was brought on board, he insisted that the animals in the movie should be a genuine pack. China's dwindling wolf population means they're not allowed to leave the country; their trainer, then, would have to come to them. "When we first started talking about *Wolf Totem*, I didn't realise I might have to commit two or three years of my life to it," says Simpson, who has moved here from his ranch in rural Canada.

Simpson slides the outer fence open, and calls for an inner electric fence to be turned off. We slip into the compound, a football-pitch-size pen dotted with trees, a tin bath and a climbing platform. The wolves begin to pace. They are thin, their tawny, sparse summer coats showing every sinew, every bone, every hard edge in their angular frames.

Simpson calls out to the alpha male of the pack, a large one year-old called Cloudy. The wolf pads over, and I freeze. "Let the wolves see you here with me for a moment. Stay close to me and they will not mind you," says Simpson.

The author of *Wolf Totem*, Lu Jiamin, who writes under the pseudonym Jiang Rong, arrived in Ujimchin Banner in Inner Mongolia in 1969 and spent more than a decade as a shepherd before returning to Beijing and penning the semi-autobiographical work. In his eyes, the wolves are an analogue for the Mongolian nomads: ferocious, almost supernaturally shrewd, loyal to their pack and respectful of the delicate ecosystem around them. By contrast, the Chinese colonisers are described as sheep; small-minded, weak and relentless consumers of the grasslands.

"A fear of wolves is in your Chinese bones," admonishes one Mongolian elder in the book, after the narrator comes face to face with "a pack of golden-hued, murderous-looking Mongolian wolves [...] their gazes boring into him like needles".

The novel is gory, and full of frenzied wolf attacks. At one point, the pack outflanks a group of Mongolian warhorses, sending them careering onto the thin ice of a frozen lake, to their doom. Writes Lu: "Desperate cries rose from the herd as the wolves tore into one horse after another, sides and chests spurted blood..."

Photography by
Adam Dean

The director admits they'll be lucky to get 20 seconds of usable footage each day



CRY WOLF Animal trainer Andrew Simpson and his partner, Sally Jo Sousa, are in China for 18 months training a wolf pack for 'Wolf Totem'

When Cloudy approaches, there is not much sign of a blood thirst. He immediately flips over onto his back and presents his tummy for a rub. "Tickle him," urges Simpson. "It's part of the process." The wolf's fur is bristly, and his body is tight and strong. It turns out that he is on a reconnaissance mission. After covering himself in our scent, he gets up and saunters back to the rest of the pack. One by one, they have a sniff, deciding whether to accept us into the fold or not.

The other nine adults are Parker, Silver, Forest, Frenzy, Hank, Yo-Yo, Bibi, Johnny and Peanut. Then there are a further four cubs: Sam, Rocky, Fred and Mickey. They all respond to their names.

Chinese, or Eurasian, wolves – *Canis lupus lupus* – are more slender than their American or Indian cousins, with longer ears, narrower heads and their fur is coarser and more yellow. The wolves that live on the grasslands also tend to be lighter than mountain wolves. They are built for speed. But despite their veneration in *Wolf Totem*, they are "pretty terrible hunters", according to Simpson. "Nine out of 10 times, a wolf will fail to catch his prey in the wild."

In captivity, though, it's a different story. At one point, Simpson breaks off several leafy branches from a nearby tree and stacks them to form a den. Within moments, the pack is circling. Simpson begins to wave one branch under the nose of Parker, until the wolf clamps its jaws tightly around it. A tug of war follows until the wolf manages to grab the branch and retreats victoriously. The rest of the pack is now running wildly, hoping to join the game. "Wolf at your back!" Sally Jo Sousa, Simpson's partner and fellow trainer, calls out whenever one of the pack strays out of his line of vision. Although wolf attacks on humans are very rare, they tend to go for the head and neck. As Sally Jo puts it, "If one of them leapt on your back, you'd be in trouble."

Simpson was born near Inverness, and grew up on a 47,000-acre estate in the Highlands. On a trip to Australia in his twenties, he landed a job on the set of *A Cry in the Dark*, the Meryl Streep film about Azaria Chamberlain, the baby whose mother said she was killed by a dingo. After spending time with the dingo trainer, he was hooked.

He moved to Vancouver, after a friend of his began working as a nanny for a couple who trained animals for film. He soon took a job as their assistant. One of the first animals he worked with there was a wolf/dog crossbreed. He was told the dog had been a problem on set, but after a few weeks he was walking with the dog off the leash. "I guess back then I didn't know any better," he says. "I just did what I could and it worked." Since 1994, however, he has lived in Calgary, Canada, where he and Sally Jo, 46, now share a ranch. It was during this move that Simpson decided to change tack. "At the time, no one was focused solely on wolves. They were considered the hardest animals to work with. It was a gamble, but it was what I wanted to do," he says. Together Simpson and Sally Jo run Instinct for Film, a company which trains birds, bears, leopards and small animals for films and advertisements. Their credits include *Elf*, *Final Destination* and *Borat*. According to Annaud, Simpson is the "finest wolf trainer in the world".

Today, Simpson is having trouble getting his wolves to stand still. Each day, the pack is put through its training for at least an hour. A row of rocks is half-buried in the dust. These are their marks. It takes about a month to persuade a wolf to get "on your mark", a command that is accompanied with a wave of the hand and, if successful, a hunk of meat. ▶

Simpson says most of his training revolves around giving the wolves food. Their normal diet is dried dog food and chopped chicken, but for the training, they get ruby red cubes of fresh meat. "If you overfeed a wolf, you have had it. They will wander off and not train for days. That can be a bit tricky with a movie's schedule."

Getting a wolf to snarl on cue is also time-consuming. A large bone is first gently, then more aggressively, taken away from a hungry wolf until he bares his fangs.

And although Simpson and his six-man team, brought in from Calgary, have been working with the pack from when they were just a few weeks old, only three of the wolves, Cloudy, Silver and Parker, will allow human contact.

"Ideally, you want to get a wolf cub from before they open their eyes, to imprint yourself onto them," says Simpson. "Once wolves have your scent, they rarely forget it."

Annaud, who persuaded Simpson to leave his 160-acre ranch to live in China, understands the difficulty of working with animals. He has admitted that each day they may only get 20 seconds of usable footage with the wolves.

"That is the real crux of the challenge," says Simpson, adding that in any pack there may be several wolves who do not respond well to being filmed.

"I am used to working with wolves whose parents, grandparents and even great-grandparents were born in captivity. For *Wolf Totem*, this was not possible, so I took cubs from zoos in northern China, whose parents were often wild. I would have loved to ship my already-trained wolves from Canada, but they were not right for this project," he adds.

For several of the film's most bloodthirsty scenes, Simpson expects Annaud to use a split screen filming technique where two animals, a horse and a wolf for example, appear to be running alongside each other but have in fact been spliced together.

When that isn't an option, Simpson must ensure that at least one of his wolves will perform the stunt with a real horse. It's a painstaking process. "We pick the most sensible wolf. The training is done over weeks by taking the smell of the horse to the wolf so that he is not overwhelmed by it during the filming."

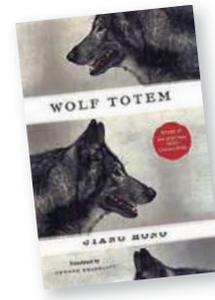
While making the 2009 film *Loup*, he ran six wolves with a reindeer, but they belonged to Simpson: "I had worked with them for many years." At the end of each day, Simpson and Sally Jo take their four cubs home, to a rented apartment in the centre of town. They are too young to stay in the main enclosure. "They would be eaten alive," Simpson says, flatly. The apartment is a mess of towels, discarded boxes, magazines, hair scrunchies and baby toys, including a well-chewed teething ring. One evening earlier this month, when I visited, Simpson was sprawled on the sofa watching television, while Sally Jo leaned on the kitchen counter, obviously exhausted.

A small figure started to squirm in the nook of his arm and the couple exchanged a knowing, parental glance. The pointy ears were the first clue that it wasn't a baby. Then there was a swish of a stubby tail and a wide-mouthed yawn, fangs exposed.

The bundle was Mickey, a six-week-old male and younger brother of Cloudy. With a quick blink at the strangers in the room, he bounced onto the floor, his pot belly poking out from between his oversized paws.

In *Wolf Totem*, the narrator, Chen Zhen, steals a wolf cub and raises it, against the wishes of the Mongolian nomad community he lives with. Over the course of the book, as he bonds with the cub, he watches helplessly as it becomes more and more uncontrollable, its nature impossible to tame. Lu Jiamin visited the training camp earlier this year and was fascinated by Simpson's methods.

Neighbours do a double-take when Simpson walks past with the wolves on a leash



KEEPING THE WOLF FROM THE DOOR From top: Andrew Simpson with his 'brood' in their Beijing apartment; a Chinese wolf in the wild; 'Wolf Totem' director Jean-Jacques Annaud; and the novel that inspired the film

"Andrew is like the wolves' father. He is the king of the wolves. When they saw him, some of them fell down on their backs, with their legs pointing upwards, to let him touch their bellies," Lu commented afterwards.

"With the cubs at this age," Simpson says, "it is all about the touching and the human contact. If they have that from birth, you have a chance to get them to trust you." Initially, a Chinese vet bottle-fed the cubs until they were five weeks old and strong enough to travel overland from Harbin Zoo to Beijing. Now they are on a five-hour feeding schedule that leaves the couple with little time for sleep. It was Sally Jo's turn on the sofa last night.

"I am usually up at four o'clock, that's when the cubs wake up. Last night I opened my eyes to find them all sitting on me. They get in my hair, pull at my nightie, they poo and pee everywhere of course. It is a mess," she grins.

Other residents in the block have had to double-take as Simpson or Sally Jo walk past, a wolf cub on a leash. "If you look at them, they look a bit like dogs, but the way they move is different," says

Simpson.

It's hard to reconcile the pups with the adult wolves in the training camp. At one point during my visit Mickey began a clumsy dash across the tiled floor of the living room. Half way across, he ran out of energy, skidded to a halt, and fell asleep. "You cannot do much with them at the start," chuckled their "father".

Simpson admits the unique bond with the wolves he trains stems from a near-parental commitment to their wellbeing. "You must give yourself completely to raising wolves and building a bond with them. Most people try to raise wolves by spending a few hours a week with them. This approach never works. You need to understand how their pack structure works and then slot yourself into their lives.

"If you have their trust you have everything.

If that means sleepless nights when you raise baby wolves or sitting outside in a thunderstorm with them because they are afraid, or travelling in the belly of a 747 aircraft so they can hear the sound of your voice to give them comfort, that's what you have to do," he says.

Sally Jo adds that she understood from the start that working with Simpson would be both hugely rewarding and demanding. "When we first got together, I made a promise to him that I would follow him wherever he had to go - it's the only way we could be together. But let's just say that working in China has tested that promise," she deadpans.

The couple's gruelling training schedule leaves them with little time to explore China; after a year in the country, they don't speak any Mandarin and the only time Sally Jo left the house alone she promptly got lost.

Production on the film begins in September, and will wrap in 2013, if everything goes to plan. By then the wolves, who can live to be up to 17 years old (the equivalent of 85 in wolf years), will still be young. Simpson hopes to take some of them back to his ranch in Canada, but the others may become part of an attraction at Beijing Zoo.

"What I really hope is that the movie will change people's perceptions of wolves," he says. "They are really wonderful creatures. Challenging, but clever and capable."

And with that, he leads the pack in a howl. As he throws his head back, the wolves around him begin to yelp, and then one or two muster a more full-throated cry. It is not yet the blood-curdling call of the wild that runs through *Wolf Totem*, but they'll get there.