

INSTINCT animalsforfilm



Working with animals can be very challenging – no one knows that more than Andrew Simpson, the man entrusted with the task of turning Mongolia wolves into film stars.

Training animals for the film industry has been his career for over 20 years; he has worked for almost every major Hollywood studio and has travelled around the world making a career out of doing what he loves the most.



Although he works with all kinds of animals, it's wolves he understands and loves. Most filmmakers will tell you to stay away from wolves in film and that is why most people will use dogs in their place.

'...wolves, in my opinion, are the hardest animal to work on film. They are highly intelligent and learn very quickly, but they are also extremely cautious and wary of everything around them. It's how they survive in the wild. If they don't trust a situation, it's their instinct to walk away. You have to admire them for that. It's why I like them – always trust your instinct...'

Simpson believes the key to succeeding in this business is understanding how the whole system works together, not just the animal training side.

'If you just focus on your job without learning even just a little about what every department does, you will get swallowed up. Making a film is a team effort with everyone working towards a common goal of telling a great story.'

Simpson himself has made his own film based on his work with wolves. His film *Wolves Unleashed* appealed to audiences around the world and tallied over 18 film awards.

When the chance to work on *Wolf Totem*, presented itself Simpson jumped at the chance.

'...for me the chance to work with Jean Jacques Annaud was something I had been wanting to do for a long time. He has made films about bears and tigers so I knew it was only a matter of time before he got around to wolves...'

For this film, Jean Jacques Annaud wanted the real thing – real wolves, acting like real wolves. He wanted the audience to have no doubt they were watching authentic wolves on the screen.

'...from my very first meeting with Jean Jacque, I knew what he wanted to see. He wanted the audience to understand wolves, to get inside their heads and feel their intelligence, but also to show the harshness of life for a wolf in the Mongolian grasslands...'



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Photo by Bia Long

Much of what appears in this film will push Simpson to try new things. Jean Jacques has said from the start he wants to use only minimal CGI and animatronic work. He wants 99% of the wolf work to be real.

'...to say this film will make me think outside the box is an understatement. I have had to think in ways I never have before. This will be the first feature film to show the wolves as they really are in the wild. It will show true emotions and true behaviors never captured on screen before. It's a huge challenge for me but that's why I took this job. To push past the normal run of the mill Hollywood wolf films...'

But of course turning wild wolves into film stars does not happen overnight. Simpson and his crew have been in China for over 2 years working on this project. The first step was taken back in 2010 when research began on the wolves and finding a suitable place to keep and train them. Then in 2011, Simpson moved his crew to Beijing to begin what will become the longest project he has ever done.

'...if you say it fast, it doesn't sound like a long time, but we all had to put our normal lives on hold for this project. Every day I have been in China has been spent with the wolves, but I'm ok with that. You have to spend the time to build the bond with the wolf, otherwise you may as well give up. A lot of people who work with wolves only dedicate a few hours a week to being with them – that's not how I work. I have a very simple view on these animals. You have to raise them before you can train them, and you must have their trust before you can have control of them. In other words, without taking the time to build a loving, caring, trusting bond with a wolf, you will never be able to get the performance you need in front of a camera...'

And that bond was recently put to the test while shooting some footage in Mongolia which involved wolves and horses along with wind and snow machines.

'...we shot some sequences in Mongolia. These sequence involved wolves chasing horses which will become one of the main story points in the film. Running one wolf behind or beside a horse is one thing, but running a pack of 10 wolves is something that has never been done before by anyone. Jean Jacques is a brilliant man who knows what he wants to see on screen, and it's my job to give him what he envisions as much as possible.'

'In one of our first meetings together he said if he could not get the shot he wanted humanely and safely for the animals he would find another way of doing it. And in that aspect we think the same, at the end of the day it's a film we are making and there is no reason in this day and age to risk hurting an animal for on screen entertainment...'



Photo by David Gilchrist

The main acting wolf, the alpha wolf, is called Cloudy. He is exceptional in many ways and his on camera presence is remarkable. Another unique thing about him is his admiration for the Director.

'...you cannot make a wolf like anyone. A dog can be tricked into liking someone for a ball or a treat. If a wolf does not like you, it never will like you – end of story, I'm sorry but that's how they are in their world, very honest to a fault.'

'But from the first time Cloudy and Jean Jacques met, Cloudy has had this fascination with him. Whenever he visits the training base, Cloudy will leave the pack and go and welcome him and lick his face and in general make a really big deal that Jean Jacques came to visit. It's the relationship everyone wants with a wolf, but very few ever get. Sometimes we have had to ask Jean Jacques to leave the area so we can continue our work and let Cloudy focus.'