

Game of Thrones? In Calgary? Producers spent 10 days at new film centre for season 6 scenes



... and for those wondering, yes, Alberta's own Quigley reprises his role as Ghost the direwolf

It's not the first time Andrew Simpson has had to keep mum about the secrets of Westeros.

Ever since it became known that the animal trainer's nine-year-old Arctic wolf Quigley will return to play Ghost in the popular HBO series **Game of Thrones**, he has received calls from friends hoping for some intel about what to expect in the show's hotly anticipated sixth season.

To be clear, you'll get nothing from Simpson.

What we know is that for 10 days in late January a handful of producers from the series were in Calgary overseeing production of scenes at the new film centre. That facility, of course, has yet to officially open for business but "they opened their doors for **Game of Thrones**, who wouldn't?" Simpson says.

"It's a terribly long time to try to keep a secret," he says, in an interview from his rural home north of Calgary. "It doesn't start showing until April 24, which is a month away. Everybody calls me and everybody asks me: 'What happened to Jon Snow?'"

What happened to Ghost? What's going on? "I can't tell you anything."

Still, observant viewers of the cryptic trailers that HBO have released will notice that Ghost does make a "blink-or-you'll-miss-him" appearance, which may be reassuring but doesn't really offer any significant clues to the fate of his owner Jon Snow, who was seemingly butchered in a shocking act of betrayal in Season 5's season finale. Ghost was "the runt of the litter" among the six direwolves found by the children of the House of Stark in the early days of the series. He was adopted by Snow (played by Kit Harington), the bastard son of Lord Eddard Stark of Winterfell and a popular character whose death last year caused widespread grief, and sparked numerous conspiracy theories, among **GOT's** devoted fan base.

Ghost's appearance in the trailer, and the fact that producers were willing to come all the way to Calgary to shoot scenes, is proof enough that the wolf will somehow play into Season 6. And that's about all you'll get from Simpson.



Andrew Simpson and a Eurasian wolf on the set of *Wolf Totem* in Inner Mongolia. Courtesy, Animal Instinct for Film INSTINCT ANIMALS FOR FILM

“For now ... Ghost is still there,” Simpson says.

Quigley, who his trainer jokingly describes as “the world-famous wolf,” has played the part before. A small crew came to the Calgary area in 2015 for a shorter shoot.

It was the topper to a busy year for Simpson, who does not disclose the exact whereabouts of his ranch nor the number of wolves he has. The Scottish-born trainer, who operates Instinct Animals for Film, has a long history in the film industry, starting with his gig as an assistant dingo trainer for the 1988 Meryl Streep film *A Cry in the Dark*. Since then he has wrangled creatures great and small for films and TV — from insects to grizzly bears to raccoons — and worked on everything from low-budget indie dramas at TV commercials to films such as *Borat* and the sprawling Chinese epic, *Wolf Totem*.

This year, he worked on the Alberta-shot sci-fi series *Wynonna Earp*, where he oversaw a “wolf-attack.”

He also worked on *The Revenant*, Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu’s Alberta-shot, Oscar-winning adventure about frontiersman Hugh Glass’ (Leonardo DiCaprio) harrowing fight for survival in the wilderness.

The brief scene that shows bison being attacked by wolves was Simpson’s handiwork. But there was a much longer sequence, starring a silver-and-black wolf affectionately named 2-Toes, that ended up on the cutting-room floor. Originally, poor Leo had to contend with a vicious wolf attack after that vicious bear attack and numerous other vicious mishaps.

“When they edited the whole movie together, the rumour was that there was just too much stuff this character had to survive,” says Simpson. “The consensus was to take a couple things out and one of them was the wolf attack. They took the scene out. Maybe it will make the DVD, who knows.”

Wolf attacks are often part of the work Simpson is asked to do. He admits to being a bit torn about it. Negative stereotypes about the nature of wolves and Hollywood films often reinforce them. In reality, wolves are extremely intelligent, which has pros and cons when it comes to training, and are not prone to attacking humans.

“It’s always hard,” Simpson said. “But, at the same time, like everyone you have bills to pay and mouths to feed. I think we do enough positive stuff that the odd negative (scene) doesn’t impact that much.”

In fact, Simpson’s 2011 documentary *Wolves Unleashed* offered an insightful and heartwarming look at his work training wolves. He directed, produced and narrated the film, which focused on his experiences on the frigid Siberian set of the 2009 French film *Loup*.

He is now working on a followup documentary based on his time in China and Inner Mongolia shooting *Wolf Totem*. It was one of the most expensive films, and biggest hits, ever produced in China. But for Simpson, it went beyond filmmaking. It took three years, most of which he spent in Beijing. He worked with zoos to find appropriate parentage for the 16 Eurasian wolf pups used in the film. He raised them and, when shooting stopped, took them home to Alberta.



Quigley, a wolf raised and trained by Alberta’s Andrew Simpson, in character as Ghost in *Game of Thrones*. INSTINCT ANIMALS FOR FILM

Simpson is in the process making a trailer for the documentary and will launch a Kickstarter campaign in the summer.

“We have over a thousand hours of footage to put together, which is a daunting task,” Simpson says. “My experience with *Wolves Unleashed* was that the easy part was shooting it. It’s post-production, sifting through it and making a story (that is hard). A you can imagine, lots of stuff that happens over three years in a foreign country.”