

# A Word With... Wolf Trainer Andrew Simpson

**On trust, instinct and the thrill of seeing one of your pack play Jon Snow's direwolf on Game of Thrones.**



Trainer Andrew Simpson with wolf pup Mr. Blue

PHOTO COURTESY OF INSTINCT ANIMALS FOR FILM

Andrew Simpson grew up in remote, rural Scotland. At the age of 20, he set out to see the world, ending up, as many that age do, in Australia, where he scored a job on a film set working with a dingo trainer. The dingo gig would be Simpson's entry point to the world of training animals for film and television. It led to a job in Vancouver, where he succeeded in training a particularly temperamental wolf and, ultimately, to him starting his own Alberta-based operation, Instinct Animals for Film. Simpson can't say much about Instinct's headquarters, other than it's located "north of Calgary." But the need for secrecy is understandable, considering Instinct's lupine roster is like the A-list of wolf actors. Instinct wolves can be seen in the Oscar-winning film *The Revenant*, while charismatic Quigley is perhaps the most famous wolf in the world right now, having scored the plum role of Jon Snow's direwolf Ghost, in seasons five and six of *Game of Thrones*. Since Quigley must abide by GOT's notoriously strict non-disclosure agreement, we decided to have a talk with Simpson instead.

## **What's the most important thing to keep in mind when working with wolves?**

"A lot of people who work with dogs are all about obedience — you have the Cesar Millan approach or, growing up in Scotland, the Barbara Woodhouse approach. The difference with wolves is you have to understand they are wild animals and they have instinct. Everybody wants to have the dog that looks like a wolf but acts like a dog, they want the golden retriever temperament in something that looks like a wolf. But what I'm dealing with is far more intelligent than your average dog, plus, it still has the instinct that Mother Nature put into it. You have to find a way to connect with that animal but not rob it of its instinct, just show it how to channel its instinct so it can still work with you."

## **How do you get them to do what you say?**

"My mantra is you have to raise them before you can train them. You have to have trust before you can have control. It's all about spending time and having a relationship... From the moment I get them, whether they're two months old or nine days old, every

day is spent with them, as long as I can — if you can do that for six months, if you can do it for a year, then that's what you do. From my experience, whatever a wolf experiences in the first six months, that's what they take to be normal in their world. For me it's all about spending that time just to create that bond. If you don't have the bond and they don't have the trust in you, you're never going to get anything for film.

"For a film like *The Revenant*, a \$200 million movie, they'll call me up saying 'we want to do a sequence with Leonardo DiCaprio,' so you have to be confident in your animal to go out there in front of 200 people and get him to perform when he has to perform! The only way you can get that is by having a relationship with that animal. With all the craziness [of the film set], the wolf has to feel secure, like 'well, he's here, I trust him and nothing bad ever happened before so I doubt it's going to happen now.' They're super intelligent, the smartest animal going, so the hard part is dealing with their instinct, because in the wild, if they see something they don't trust, they just walk away."

## Can you describe a specific situation where you were blown away by a wolf's intelligence?

"It's not a very happy ending, but I had one wolf early on and I was raising it alongside a little dog — it's something you can do because the dog will bridge the gap between human communication and animal communication. One day, these two were out in the dog run, which had a three-inch gap where the gate didn't quite meet the post. There was a squirrel running back and forth in front of the fence, teasing the dog and the wolf. The dog was running back and forth barking and the wolf just sat there at the gate... just looking at this squirrel running back and forth... He timed it perfectly. When the squirrel came by he stuck his paw between the space pulled the squirrel right in and bit its head off."

Well you could say that squirrel had it coming.

"That's the intelligence. The dog is like 'I'm chasing you! I'm chasing you! But I'll never get you!' And the wolf just sat there like 'here we go... here we go... I got you.'"

With the human star of *The Revenant* winning the Oscar this year, it makes you think there should be an award for best animal actor as well.

"The two biggest things that people have been fighting for the longest are awards for stunt [professionals] and, maybe not an Oscar, but some sort of recognition for animals. Over the years there have been a lot of amazing animals — from Bart the Bear to the Black Beauty horse to the Lassie dogs. But I don't see it happening now because with the advancements in CGI the use of animals is getting less and less in movies. It's something that just fell under the table."

## Obviously, you can't give away any plot spoilers, but outside of that, what's it been like to work on *Game Of Thrones*?

"I was a fan of *Game of Thrones* before I started working on the series. I think you either like that fantasy-sword-and-sorcery-epic-style or you don't. They contacted me from the start to work on the show but I was always out of the country and we could never make it work. Then finally, for season five, they said, we're just going to come to you. And then they came back for season six. I'm not just saying this for brownie points, but the two producers I work with, Bernie and Annick, are absolutely fabulous and they have a true passion and love for animals. When you go to work with them they understand they're dealing with a wolf, it's not like a dog or a horse or anything else on the show.



"It's the biggest TV show in the world, so who wouldn't want to work on it? It's a shame there are only 10 episodes per season! Last season, with the Jon Snow episodes and what was happening to him, to be involved in that part of it, to have my wolf, Quigley be Jon Snow's wolf Ghost, it's an honour."

## Did you get Quigley as a pup?

"I've had him since he was 10 days old. He grew up in my house, sleeping on my bed. He's traveled a lot. He's been to Russia twice. I named him after the first movie I worked on with the dingoes, *Quigley Down Under*."

## How old is Quigley now?

"He's nine."

## How long do wolves usually work?

"My oldest here is 17 and he's pretty much retired. But it depends on what they're doing — if you're looking for a wolf to do running, jumping, attacking, probably eight to 10 years old is the limit. They're like us, as they get older they tire out. Another wolf I have, Digger, he's 10, so he's pretty much retired, but he still does what we call 'hero stuff.' Standing on his mark, looking pretty..."

The classic thousand-yard stare, fur-blowing-in-the-wind shot...

"Yeah. He knows he can't do what he used to do but he still likes going to the film set and getting all the attention."

**To see Simpson and his wolves working on a film in Russia check out the documentary film *Wolves Unleashed*. A second documentary about Instinct wolves making a movie in China is currently in the works. [wolvesunleashed.com](http://wolvesunleashed.com).**