

Scot turns wolf pack into stars of epic film

By **Paula Murray**

IT is the toughest assignment of his life, but animal trainer Andrew Simpson is adamant he can turn a pack of 18 wolves into film stars.

Having already worked on big Hollywood productions including *Braveheart*, he is now involved in turning best-selling Chinese novel *Wolf Totem* into a box office hit.

The 45-year-old Scot has spent a year sourcing suitable carnivores to breed pups, and for the past 13 months he has hand-reared the beasts to respect him as the alpha male and obey his orders.

But the challenge of working on the film has taken over his life.

Mr Simpson, originally from Glenshero, Speyside, moved to China to work with French director Jean-Jacques Annaud on the film.

He shares his home in the capital of Beijing with his Canadian partner Sally Jo Sousa, 46, and a number of pups who are still too young to be left behind on the specially designed training ground in the heart of the city.

With filming due to start in September, he admitted he has his work cut out as he teaches the canines to sit, snarl and fight on cue. The pack will also have to learn to perform alongside horses for realistic attack scenes.

Mr Simpson said: "Until the pups are 12 months old they're too young and inexperienced to film with. These just turned a year in April.

"I am not scared of wolves, I respect them. As long as you know what you are doing from the start, understand the limitations and that you can't force a wolf to do anything

he or she doesn't want to you should be OK. There are wild animals you can tame like a bear or a lion, but you cannot tame a Mongolian wolf."

Last year Mr Simpson released a documentary about the mammals having spent five months in a remote camp in Siberia with 20 animals and temperatures of -60C.

The result, *Wolves Unleashed*, went on to win multiple awards around the world but is yet to be screened north of the Border.

Despite the tough experiences of Russia, which left him with permanent frostbites, Mr Simpson still regards his Chinese assignment as far more demanding.

He said: "It is a huge undertaking because it wasn't like, 'OK, give me

some wolves and we make a movie in a normal schedule of 12 to 16 weeks and then we go home again'.

"So far I've spent 13 months in China and I have at least another year and a bit to go."

Wolf Totem, the novel by Lu Jiamin under the pseudonym of Jian Rong, was first published in 2004 and became a bestseller despite being seen as thinly veiled criticism of Communist rule.

It was rumoured *Lord Of The Rings* director Peter Jackson had bought the film rights, but three years ago Beijing Forbidden City Film Company announced Annaud was on board for the adaptation.

The film is expected to hit the screens in 2014.

