



Photograph by Marie Schneider

**Master hands:** 'What I learned from Andrew is that we can get performance from an animal softly, never with hard orders or behaviour.'

# The trainer who keeps wolves at the door

*Andrew Simpson's Alberta ranch is home to little-known stars of the lupine kind*

As a car crunched up the dirt driveway to Andrew Simpson's isolated ranch in the cattle country north of Calgary, his alarm systems went off. All 22 of them. It was a chorus of mournful howls that raised hairs on the neck.

There could hardly be better rural sentries than the wolves Simpson, 44, keeps on his ranch behind tall fences. "Don't worry," reassured Simpson as he opened the gate and his lupine sirens went up a few decibels. "They're just saying hello."

There are Arctic wolves and Canadian timber wolves with golden-eyed gazes and names such as Cooper, Tyka and Sweet Pea. A few lope gracefully across the grass to nuzzle Simpson, but it's rare these days that the animal trainer gets to spend time with his pack. His company, Instinct, is in big demand for commercials, television and film. Though he trains other animals, including bears and big cats, wolves are 80 per cent of his business.

For the next two years much of Simpson's time will be spent in China with a dozen assistants, raising and training a batch of wolf pups for their roles in a lavish Chinese production called *Wolf Totem*. Because his own wolves don't resemble the smaller, redder breed found in the Chinese region of Inner Mongolia where the film is set, Simpson had a Chinese zoo breed some animals so he could imprint himself on the offspring—he had to get them before they opened their eyes at 21 days.

"You have to bond with them and get that intimacy and friendship with them," says

Simpson, who started 12 months of training last fall. "If they don't trust you, there's no way they will do anything for you."

With more than 150 films under his belt and numerous television shows, *Wolf Totem* is Simpson's biggest project yet. Directed by Jean-Jacques Annaud (*Enemy at the Gates*), the \$30-million film, tentatively scheduled for release in 2014, is one of the largest-budget Chinese-produced movies ever made. Based on a Chinese bestselling book, *Wolf Totem* follows a university student's government assignment during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s. The young man, appalled by his job imposing agricultural collectives on Inner Mongolia's shepherders, encounters a pack of wolves and is enamoured by the harmonic way they and the herders live in nature.

Simpson grew up on an isolated 19,000-hectare estate in the Scottish Highlands owned by aluminum-maker Alcan, where his parents worked. He loved the country life, and was often found with a frog or a mouse in his pocket, but as a teenager he dreamed of being a film stuntman. One sleety day when he was 20, his brother, after seeing Mel Gibson's *Mad Max*, quipped that Andrew could, being single, skip off to Australia if he wanted to. Days later he did. There he found work as an extra on *A Cry in the Dark*, the Meryl Streep drama about the mom who claimed her baby was snatched by a dingo. Simpson worked with the dingo trainer for three weeks and found stints as

an extra or animal training assistant before moving to Canada. A few years later he started his own agency.

Filming is not easy on man or beast, and can strain the bond of trust. In the 2009 French film *Loup*, the script called for an actor and a wolf to fall through thin ice on a river. When Simpson's wolf Digger scrambled out of the freezing water with confusion in his eyes, the trainer towelled him off and took

him to a warm truck. Then the scene had to be reshot. Digger spent the next three nights curled up on Simpson's bed.

Olivier Horlait, a French filmmaker who worked on *Loup*, hired the Alberta trainer for his own film, *Nicostratos le pélican*, released last year in Europe. Filmed on a Greek island, Simpson trained eight pelicans for the story about a boy and a bird.

"Andrew was amazing," says Horlait, adding that finding a similar calibre of trainer in Europe is difficult. "He thinks like a director. And what I learned from Andrew is that we can get performance from an animal softly. Never with hard orders or behaviour."

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