

Filming Wolves:

Andrew Manske's Experiences



By **Brittany Verbeek**, *AWA Conservation Specialist*

There was a full house at the AWA Hillhurst Cottage School on the evening of Tuesday, May 2, 2014. The star of the night was Andrew Manske, a renowned Canadian and Emmy Award Winning natural history filmmaker, who travelled from Grande Prairie to speak about his experiences filming wolves all across Canada. Beer in one hand, snack in the other – the audience sat back for an evening of entertainment and learning about this iconic carnivore.

Manske has been chasing wolves for over 20 years. Growing up in southern Ontario Andrew never really experienced true wilderness so he began honing his skills as a wildlife cinematographer once he moved to Alberta and got a job at Chateau Lake Louise. He spent his days off in the backcountry viewing a wide cast of wildlife through the lens of his small video camera. Andrew's first large mammals experiences hooked him – he's lived in Alberta ever since. After graduating from film school he met Albert Karvonen, a naturalist and award-winning filmmaker from Edmonton who has been making natural history films since 1975. Eighty-four years young Albert currently is making a film about grouse. Karvonen quickly became Manske's mentor, friend, and professional collaborator. He worked with Karvonen until 2008 and a year later Andrew established his own production company, Compass Media Inc.

Most of us thoroughly enjoy the final products of videographers like Manske and Karvonen. Seldom though do we get the chance to hear the story behind the camera. Andrew recalled the first time he filmed a wolf in

1995. The wolf's mystique and intense golden-eyed stare caused a huge adrenaline rush in Manske that resulted in two dramatic consequences: shaky, unusable footage and an experience that changed his life. He had found his calling.

Through the amazing wolf footage he has collected over the years, Manske took us on a virtual trip across Canada from the estuaries of the west coast to the mountains of Labrador. One of his earlier films was shot in Northwest Territories' Mackenzie Bison Sanctuary. He wanted to capture the intricate and fascinating relationship between the

largest wolves in the world and the largest land mammal found in North America – the wood bison. He showed us clips from two documentaries, Discovery Channel's *Wolves and Bison* and National Geographic's *Killer Quest Wolf Hunt*. The evolution of filming technology as well as documentary style was very evident from comparing these two films. Building tower structures and shooting from a distance on the ground, which was once what videographers relied on, is no longer the industry-standard. Now, using Cinalflex camera systems Manske can get clear, stable, and close up video of the animals from he-



PHOTO: © C. OLSON

icopters or drones as they move across the landscape. The style was very different as well. Many of the big producers have moved towards more dramatic wildlife documentaries with adrenaline-pumping music and narration using phrases like “it’s show time” and “get ready for the take down.” The goal is to target younger audiences with shorter attention spans and a thirst for action.

The glamour of natural history films begins at the television screen. Everything before that consists of extremely hard work and countless time in the field where you can look forward to being a feast for bugs and to staying perfectly still for hours to get that one perfect shot. Wolves are no different from us in that excitement happens seldom during long bouts of routine and sleep. Good cinematographers must walk a fine line between their relentless drive to get the best shot and painstaking patience. Manske told us about a time he stepped over that line. Before leaving Manske alone on an island to film west coast wolves, his Heiltsuk guide made him promise not to howl at the wolves because it messes with them. But as the days progressed time was running out, and he still didn’t have the shot he wanted. Knowing the wolves were nearby in the forest he disobeyed the guide’s warning. He imitated a pup. Immediately an entire pack came out into the clearing and straight over to his blind – growling and trying to get in. The pack harassed him for two days. They ate his microphone and chewed up his water bottles. Some even took joy rides in his zodiac as other wolves pulled it across the beach. I believe he learnt his lesson.

Andrew has spent ten years going back to the same estuary on that island filming west coast wolves. Manske told us the island wolves are almost a sub-species because of the differences in appearance and behaviour. They are smaller, have shorter hair, and possess more genetic diversity than the average grey wolf which is contrary to what scientists originally hypothesized. They are also less afraid of people and more aggressive than their mainland counterparts. The clip he showed us from CBC’s *Wild Canada*

series showed wolves catching 15-pound salmon, biting their heads off, and leaving the rest of the bodies out on the open beach for the scavengers. A seemingly altruistic act had an underlying purpose for the wolves. The salmon’s body flesh contains parasites that the wolves cannot digest so they let the ravens and eagles eat out the insides of the fish and then the wolves ate the remaining highly nutritious skins.

A great challenge for cinematographers is to be as discreet as possible to ensure the camera is capturing natural behaviour of animals. Another is to also find spots in clearings to film where there are good lines of sight. Filming wolves in the Rockies presents these challenges because the wolves are hard to find and to keep in sight. They are usually well hidden in the dense forests. Man-



PHOTO: A. MANSKE, COMPASS MEDIA INC.

skes most successful effort to film wolves in the Rockies was from a recent trip into Willmore Wilderness Park, north of Jasper National Park. He has also had great success filming wolves in the highest mountains east of the Rockies, the Torngat Mountains of Labrador. Andrew first went there with Albert Karvonen and has subsequently spent a lot of time there. Its remoteness makes access and filming very difficult but Manske has embraced and risen to the challenge. He found a prime spot to film at Fraser Canyon, a narrow canyon along the migration route of what used to be the largest caribou herd in the world – the George River caribou herd

at 750,000 strong in the mid-1990s. Unfortunately, not unlike the dramatic decline of Alberta’s caribou herds, the most recent survey puts the herd size at fewer than 28,000. A variety of reasons are proposed to explain why the herd’s size has plummeted in the last 10 to 15 years. Manske invited us to stay tuned for a future documentary on the rise and fall of the greatest herd on earth.

At Fraser Canyon, the caribou are funneled into a narrow space creating a first class hunting spot for their main predators – wolves and black bears. Spots like this can even the odds for predators because out in the open tundra caribou can reach speeds of 80km/h whereas wolves can do no better than 65km/h for short periods of time. A more appropriate name for the canyon would be graveyard canyon – Andrew told us that caribou skeletal remains are scattered everywhere. The film clip he showed reminded me of the stampede scenes from the Disney classic “The Lion King”. The clip was of a wolf perched on a ledge surveying a stampede of ungulates down below, just waiting for the perfect opportunity to pounce. Unfortunately for the wolf in the clip, it waited too long and its prey passed by safely.

Andrew’s images transfixed the audience all evening: wolves chased bison only to have the bison herd retaliate; a pack of wolves and a grizzly bear with two cubs fought over a bull caribou carcass; wolf pups howled as they emerged from their den for the first time; a wolf pack chased a caribou at full speed. At one point Andrew hesitated to play another film clip because he was concerned about time – the audience cried out in protest. Clearly, no one wanted the night to be over.

Andrew even gave us a sneak preview of his newest project – filming the elusive wolverine. Manske is definitely someone worth keeping in mind if you’re looking for terrific wildlife documentaries. Check out his two websites at www.andrewmanske.com and www.compassmedia.ca to find his most recent productions. 🍌