

LUPUSFILMS

Summer Report 2000



Submitted for The James Rennie Bequest

I am writing this report in thanks for the £300 award we received toward our expedition travel expenses. You have helped us to achieve far more than we ever thought possible and it has been an unforgettable experience. I hope you enjoy reading this report.

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The Birth of the Project....

I have been involved in wildlife filmmaking for about 3 years now. I am inspired by the idea of bringing tales of the great outdoors back to those who otherwise don't see it. I have worked as a researcher and an editor before but this trip was at last a chance to get behind the camera myself.

I wanted to tell a story that would be educational and relevant to my course. With that I felt I could give something back to the university that could be used in teaching even when I have moved on.

I heard about the wolves of Yellowstone from a fellow student who had worked there. Immediately I saw that it was a fascinating story, combining both scientific fact and social politics. So the research began.

The Story.....

Wolves from Canada were reintroduced to the Yellowstone area in 1996 where they had been persecuted to extinction 70 years earlier. They were subsequently disallowed in a high-profile lawsuit, which was then overruled in a dramatic appeal. The wolves have now spread across the entire states of Idaho, Wyoming and Montana. The reintroduction is highly controversial, we had no idea until we arrived just how much the wolf issue has affected people.

At the same time, it gives a superb example of the complex ecological consequences of such an enormous project. Being a top predator, the wolf influences most other large mammals living within its territory. Being migrators, it is very difficult to contain a pack within the targeted reintroduction site.

There is also a proposed reintroduction to the highlands of Scotland, a move that is currently in hot debate. The environmental and social potential of such a project are discussed at length in the Zoology 4 course, 'Carnivores & Behaviour'. This story is therefore very relevant to us in Scotland, are we prepared to allow wolves to roam free in our own countryside?

Preparing for the Film.....

We contacted the programme coordinators by e-mail and very soon got a feel for how difficult it was going to be to actually find the wolves. They can cover 20 – 60 miles a day and most of their territories lie right in the heart of the Western Wilderness. But we weren't deterred, I wanted much of the story to unfold in interviews with the wolf biologists and trackers – however difficult their jobs turned out to be.

The expedition

We flew to San Francisco for £650 each arriving on July 28. Four days of searching eventually found us a cheap car bought for \$500 (and later sold for \$1000!)

We drove across the Nevada desert to Boise, Idaho where had tentative links with a production company. They were supposedly going to train us and lend us their extremely expensive 16mm film camera in return for footage that they could sell in their stock library.

This company, echofilms, turned out to be our saving grace. They took us in and trained us extensively for 6 days and then sent us on our way with a pat on the back and a camera in the boot.



Ollie learning to man the ARRI S film camera

The next two months was spent driving to every corner of the greater Yellowstone area, moving between the wolf biologists and cattle ranchers that live alongside the wolves. We got the first film footage ever of the wild wolves of Idaho, three professional film companies before us have all failed.

Tracking the wolves was very exciting. We located them with telemetry equipment and small plane and then went in on foot with the biologists. The guys would howl and the wolves would howl back, an incredibly haunting sound. Once caught, we would place radio collars and take various blood samples for DNA testing.



Myself preparing to film from the small aeroplane (with the door removed!)



The biologists discussing lunch over the drugged body of a wild wolf

Everyday we would be up at 5am to catch the main activity of the animals. Filming one wolf pack meant heading out across an open valley to their den site at 2am. More than once we ran into vast herds of rather sleepy and rather astonished bison.

We actually ended up filming moose, elk, bears, bison, otters and beavers as the wolves began to prove just a little too elusive.

Some of these wildlife encounters, however, came a little too close for comfort. On my second day in the park I was crossing a high ridge alone, 2 miles from the road when a friek storm descended. I ran through the torrential rain past various charred and splintered tree trunks – the relicts of previous storms. Eventually I reached a forested ravine I could dive down into but just as I was beginning to feel better I heard a large 'crack' to my left. There, a mere 10 feet away, stood a large and bedraggled grizzly bear. I slowly clambered up the nearest tree and clung on desperately as he circled below. At last he lost interest and I was able to make a bolt for it. Now I can just put it down to the experience of true wildlife filmmaker!

An extremely well known wildlife cameraman, Bob Landis, joined us for some of the time. He later came to see me back home in Bristol where he was on assignment with the BBC.

Once filming was complete, Ollie went home and I took the chance to volunteer at the Jackson Hole Wildlife Film Symposium. It was an unbelievable success and I met many highly influential people. I even taught the godfather of Natural History film in America, Wolfgang Bayer, how to dance a Scottish reel!

Current Status and Future Plans.....

The footage is now ready to be edited. This is an extremely time-consuming process and I hope to get underway as soon as possible.

I have a few more interviews to shoot in Scotland: one with a highland wolf expert and one with a Scottish landowner.

The finished product will be a 15-minute film illustrating the return of wolves to North America and the complexity of designing such a massive reintroduction programme.

We show the various different approaches that have been taken and discuss the suitability of Scotland to once again play host to our ancient enemy, the wild wolf.

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I would like to apologize for the delay in producing this report. I arrived back late this term and have been catching up on missed lecture material.

Thank you again for you're support and I hope you feel that the grant went towards a valuable expedition.



looking for wolves in the wilderness can be fun!