

Walking with wolves in the wild is a surreal experience

TALES FROM THE ROAD



ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN

The haunting howl of wolves broke through the early morning calm. The sound would send shivers down your spine in the wilderness, but we were in a lightly populated rural area, a bit north of Golden, B.C.

Arriving at the Northern Lights Wolf Centre, we were met by owner Shelley Black, who is passionate about dispelling the myth of the Big Bad Wolf.

The wolf centre started with a different focus. Shelley's husband, Casey, was part of a team that trained animals for Hollywood movies. The Blacks adopted a wolf intending to get into that business. But movie star dreams soon faded and they decided to make the centre a place for visitors.

Getting approval to establish the centre took great deal of paperwork and dealing with government bureaucracy. They adopted more wolves over the years, mostly from zoos and similar facilities. One wolf was rescued from the wild after someone found a sick, abandoned wolf pup in Alberta's Crownest Pass.

The centre's role is not only to teach visitors about wolves and their behaviour through interpretive presentations, but also to foster an understanding of their importance as a keystone species.

Shelley cites the case of Yellowstone National Park, where the elk population exploded after wolves disappeared, leading to overgrazing and decimation of willows and other plants along the rivers. The park reintroduced wolves in the mid-1990s and in a few years the ecosystem became healthier. Wolves kept elk numbers in check and riverside habitats and the species they support started to recover.

The main reason we're here is to take part in the centre's Walk with Wolves program. Shelley led a wolf named Flora into the back of her truck while we hopped in the front seat for the drive to a remote area in the Blaeberry Valley where we'll be going for a walk in the wilderness — with a wolf. We asked Shelley how unusual an experience this is.

"It's the only place in the world where you can do this," she replied.

Flora is a light-coloured Grey Wolf, 11 years old and weighing about 60 pounds. Before letting the wolf out, Shelley went over a few cautions. While Flora is used to people, she is still a wolf with predator instincts. It is OK to touch her but only after she approaches us and gets used to us. It's not a good idea to crouch down close to the wolf since this could be considered an aggressive move. Everything will be done on the wolf's terms. Flora will be taking us for a walk, not the other way around.

As Flora jumped down from the back of the truck, she immediately started exploring the bushes. It was like walking with a dog that gets distracted by birds or other ani-



Flora is one of the residents of the Northern Lights Wolf Centre near Golden, B.C. | ROBIN & ARLENE PHOTOS



Flora cools off during her walk with visitors.

mals. A big difference, explained Shelley, is that wolves will only chase critters that they have a good chance of catching.

Flora led us down an old logging road and then into the broad river valley where she had a drink from a small pool. Shelley was able to control where we went somewhat by pulling out her can of treats to tempt Flora back if she strayed too far. But for the most part, the wolf wandered wherever she saw fit, often running and enjoying being in the open with no restrictions. It was a surreal experience being in the wild with a wolf so close at hand.

Some visitors are so taken with this experience that they come back several times. Flora is the wolf that most often goes on these walks, but occasionally they will take two wolves. Shelley takes a maximum of six people, and the excursions are usually booked well in advance. The walks run year-round, with many people preferring winter when the wolves look their best in thick luxurious coats.

Flora mostly ignored us for much of our walk, but that was soon to change. We came to a large uprooted tree where Flora likes to jump on top. Shelley suggested



Shelley Black, owner of the Northern Lights Wolf Centre, works with Flora during a walk.

that this was a great spot to pose for a close-up photo with the wolf. Arlene stood in front while Flora climbed to the top of the tree root and leaned over. Without warning, Flora stuck out her long tongue and gave Arlene a juicy lick on the side of her face.

Just seeing a wolf can be exciting while getting close to one is thrilling. Being kissed by a wolf is in a class by itself.

Arlene and Robin Karpan are well-travelled writers based in Saskatoon. Contact: travel@producer.com.