

HOLIDAY RECIPE TREATS FOR YOU

# Our Canada

Our Country, Our Stories

Spot  
the Loonie  
**WIN  
CASH!**

Check  
Out Our  
**2008  
TO-DO LIST**

Your **Classic**  
**Christmas**  
Stories

You Could  
Win **VIP** Tickets  
to See **Anne  
Murray**

Running  
**With Wolves**  
in British Columbia

December/January 2008  
ourcanada.ca

# HUNGRY, Like the WOLF

Take a walk on the wild side with Jim Brompton

**H**ave you ever been so excited you could hardly breathe, or wanted something so badly you could almost taste it? I have. As an outdoor enthusiast and wildlife photographer for the past 30 years, I have admired wolf photos in books and magazines and have always wanted to take photos as good as those I have seen. But it's not that easy. The grey wolf is a cunning, quiet and seldom-seen animal in the wild. I researched other wildlife photographers to find out how they have come to acquire such beautiful images, and I discovered that the majority of stunning, close-up photographs we see are taken at wildlife photography ranges, mostly in the United States. I began searching to see if I could find such a facility in Canada, and to my surprise and delight I came across the Northern Lights Wildlife Wolf Centre in Golden, B.C., only a day's drive from my home in Saskatoon.

The centre, started in 1998 by Casey and Shelley Black, opened its doors to the public in 2002 and promotes wolf conservation throughout Canada. Here, you can learn all about wolves through interpretive talks and by seeing these beautiful animals up close. The pack in Golden numbers four—three pure wolves that were adopted from

## Behind the Lens

Jim Brompton lives in Saskatoon with his wife, Cindy. An insurance adjuster by profession, Jim's also co-owner of a wildlife photography company. Their son, Chris, is following in Dad's footsteps, too—he's opened a photography business in Langley, B.C.

Jim's interest in photography dates back to 1978 when he bought his first professional 35-millimetre camera. Soon, Jim was embarking on regular photo excursions and marketing his images. Being in the wild and enjoying the peace and tranquility away from his busy day job are the main attractions behind Jim's love of wildlife photography. Ever the perfectionist, he enjoys the challenge of getting each shot just right and pushes himself until he's satisfied with the images he shoots.

Now that wolves are off his to-do list, Jim intends to visit Alaska and photograph grizzly and brown bears as they feed on salmon in the rivers and streams there.



small zoos, and one wolf-dog—a cross between a domestic dog and a wild wolf. Wolf-dogs are quite common in North America because the breeding and selling of pets is not particularly well regulated. And unfortunately most of these wolf-dogs are euthanized because they do not make for good pets—unlike the domestic dog, the wolf-dog retains its natural wariness of humans.

The wolves in Golden live in enclosures, the largest of which measures half a hectare. But when they are exercised in the bush, which is regularly, they are free of leashes and fences. They could vanish into the forest but, as pack animals, the wolves choose to stay with their alpha pair—centre owners Casey and Shelley. For photographers like me who are looking to capture wolves in their natural habitat, it's a dream come true to be able to hike into the bush among them, albeit with an experienced handler nearby.

I booked my session at the centre for November, because I specifically wanted to photograph a dark wolf against a contrasting background of snow. I also wanted to photograph a wolf near running water, so there was a lot of back and forth via email between me and the centre as I waited to hear that the conditions were just right. Finally I heard that snow had arrived and on November 15, I packed my camera equipment and made the drive to Golden, staying at the Ramada Inn in town for the night before my session.

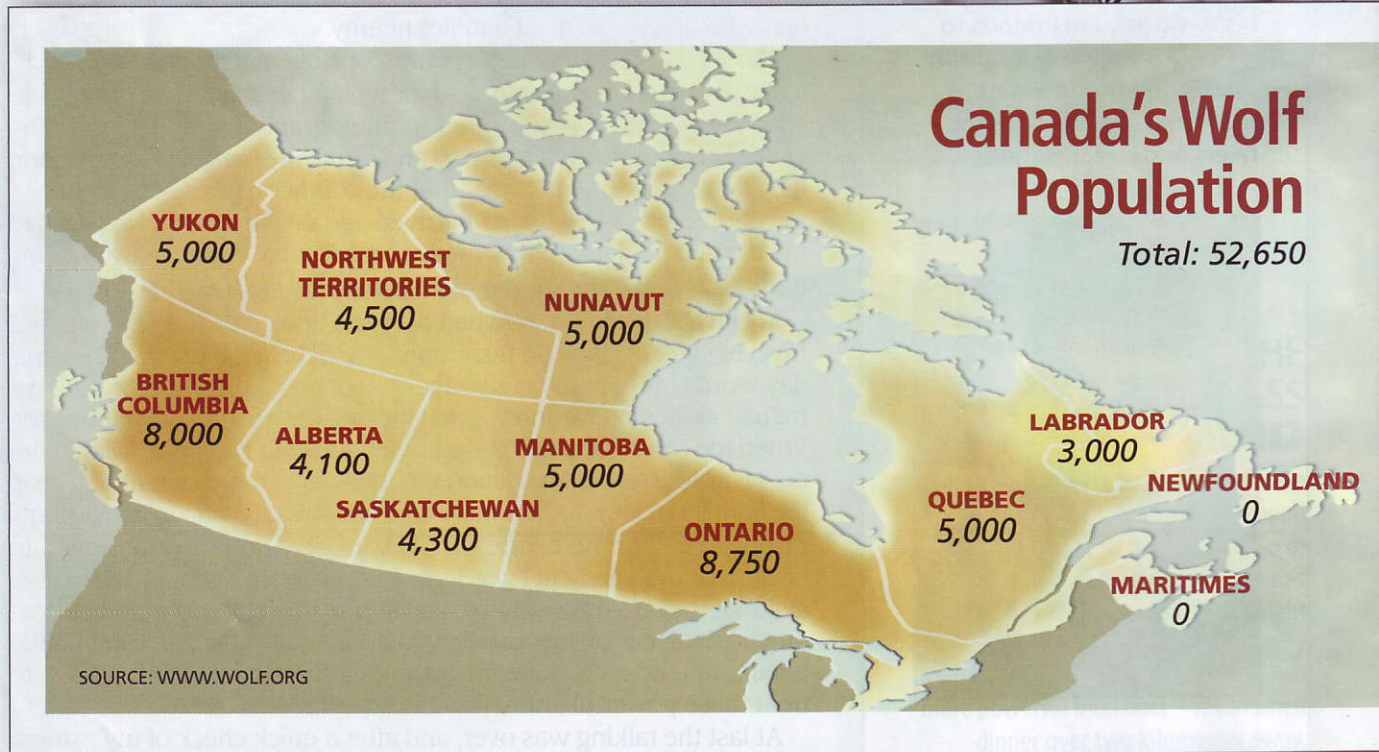
My day at the centre dawned overcast and cold, and with another fresh blanket of snow on the ground—perfect. I had no idea what this day would bring but was so eager to get going, I arrived at the centre half an hour early and was left kicking my heels in the parking lot. When the centre opened, I was briefed on what I could and could not do: I was told not to wander off into the bush on my own and to keep the handler in view at all times. I also had to sign a paper, waiving any responsibility to the centre for my welfare, and this only served to heighten the excitement I was feeling. Remember, although the wolves at the centre choose to stay in captivity, they are still wild animals. Documented attacks on humans by wolves in the wild are few and far between, and often include mitigating circumstances—but it pays to treat these powerful animals with respect.

At last the talking was over, and after a quick check of my camera

equipment we were off into the bush, trudging through the snow. The wolves had been released, and they immediately disappeared into the dense mountain forest. For the first while, I caught only glimpses of them as they moved parallel to me about 30 metres away or crossed the trail in front of me. During those moments I recalled being in the bush in northern Saskatchewan, where I grew up. I'd occasionally glimpse wolves there, too, but it would always be a fleeting moment and then the wolf was gone.

The further we hiked into the bush, the more natural the wolves appeared. And as we continued our trek, photo opportunities became more and more frequent. The wolves had not been fed for a couple of days as the centre believes this more accurately mimics the animals' natural lifestyle, so the wolves were busy hunting and looking for anything they could put a chase to. Although they appeared to be paying little attention to me, they never let their guard down or took their eyes from me for long, and I could almost feel their power. I wanted to get down and photograph a wolf as it ran towards me, knowing the benefit such an angle would have on an image. But I also remembered being told that getting down to their level could be interpreted by the wolves as a sign of aggression. But in the end I couldn't resist, and I plucked up the courage and lay down—what a rush! All I could see through the viewfinder was a 100-pound wolf tearing down the trail towards me. I wondered, *What am I doing here?* but I urged myself to stay with the shot. The wolf came to within six feet of me before veering abruptly from the trail and off into the bush!

It took about an hour to reach the open water I was looking for, a stream that ran below the trail we were walking on. I positioned myself on one bank and waited for the wolves to come to drink. Within a few minutes there they were, walking in the water. My pulse quick-





Canada has more wolves than any other country in the world. Furthermore, wolves can be found in over 80 percent of their original range. Currently estimated at a little over 50,000 animals, Canada's wolf population is generally considered stable, though there are exceptions.

A combination of habitat alteration and hunting led to the extirpation of wolves across the Maritimes. These same factors, together with a sharp decline in the caribou population during the early 20th century, resulted in the demise of wolves in Newfoundland by the '30s.

## CLIMATE CONTROL

Short fur, close to the skin, keeps the wolf warm, while the longer fur on the exterior acts as a barrier to the elements, enabling the wolf to comfortably withstand all that a Canadian winter can throw at it.

ened and my breath shortened. Traditionally I have always held my breath when photographing, because it helps me keep the camera steady. But this time I soon realized this wasn't such a good idea—there were so many wonderful images to capture, but I had to keep taking breaks to breathe!

A snapshot will always be just a snapshot, but a photograph is composed. Often it's the background setting that makes the shot, and here I was in a most beautiful setting, with fresh snow and good light. My time with the wolves was almost up. The walk out had been nice, but it was nothing compared to what I was about to leave behind me. I had realized my dream. Finally I had photographs of my own, just like the ones in books and magazines that I have admired for so long. ■

*Next issue, we'll visit Cape Breton Island.*