

**NEVER SAY  
WOLF?**

**WEST COAST  
STORM CHASERS**

**GHAN INTO  
THE OUTBACK**

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# Wolves at Their Door

When the howling starts in the woods outside Golden, they don't reach for the rifle at the Black house – but for the dog chow **story and photography by Liz Bryan**

*“Hey, look at that!”* I hurry to catch up. My 12-year-old niece, skiing on ahead, has fallen in the deep snow. As she struggles to get up, the great grey wolf trots close and stands over her; the two merge in silhouette. My heart begins to thump. But then Raleigh giggles. The wolf is licking her as if she is a cub; when I reach her, she is wiping “wolf slobber” from her face. “He’s kissing me,” she laughs, “But boy, his breath is bad.”

How many people, I wonder, have ever – or will ever – have their faces washed by a wolf?

It is incredibly cold. Ice crystals flutter around the scrawny firs at the river’s edge, but the sunlight is bright, the sky a brilliant blue swirled with mare’s tails. Husband Howard, myself and Raleigh are exploring on cross-country skis with Shelley and Casey Black and three of their grey wolves. Unleashed, the animals circle eagerly around the meadow. Aspen, Tuk and Wiley are leading us to the frozen Blaeberry River, which we’ll follow up to an old trapper’s cabin in the mountains of Golden, B.C. The snow glitters. We glide through semi-cleared benchland above the Columbia River, between two mammoth mountain ranges: the Rockies to the east, the Purcells to the west. We are at the brink of one of the last refuges of the wild wolf in Western Canada.

Aspen, Tuk and Wiley, however, are not wild. Born and raised in captivity, they live in a relaxed interface between domesticity and freedom at the Northern Lights Wildlife Wolf Centre, where the Blacks, as owners, have their home and headquarters. The animals run easily through the deep snow, eagerly sniffing, nose down, just like our dogs back home. Two of them are light grey and they stay close. Tuk, who is lean and almost black, lurks in the distance. Is he the wild one?

“He’s not wild, but as a pup he never imprinted on humans,” explains Shelley as she skis alongside. “We got him and Maya [who has stayed back at the compound this morning] some six weeks after they were born, and they were very shy. Wiley came to us when he was just nine days old and I had to bottle-feed him. He lived with us in the house

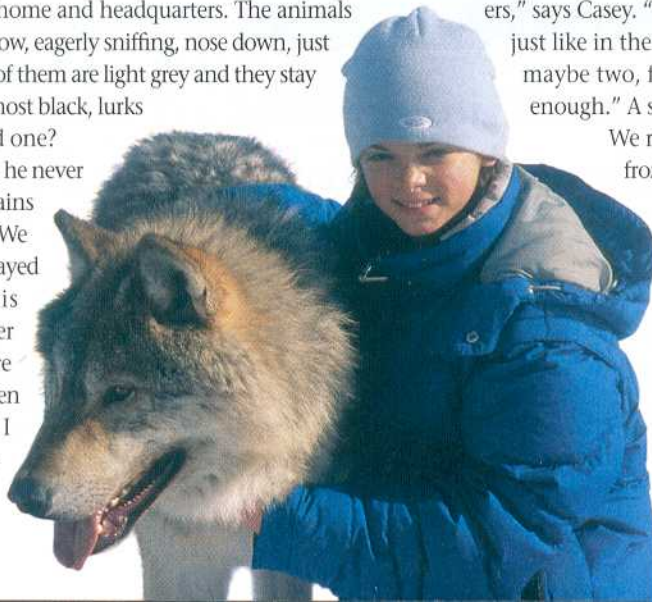


Shelley and Casey Black with their *Canis lupus*, Aspen and “Big” Wiley; (below) wolf centre visitor Raleigh Mckay with her fave face licker.

and played with the cat until he grew too big. But he’s still my baby.”

Wiley is big. “Empty, he weighs probably around 55 kilograms,” says Casey. “But I’ve seen him eat about 14 kg of deer meat at one time. That would make him heavier.” He’s a typical *Canis lupus*, with a thick, grizzled grey coat, bushy tail and clever amber eyes. Aspen is smaller, paler, the first wolf the Blacks took in and a hybrid, 25 per cent husky-malamute. The others are purebred: all wolf. “The four wolves and us are a pack, with Shelley and I the alpha pair, the leaders,” says Casey. “We provide the food and they obey us, just like in the wild. In May we’re getting a new cub, maybe two, from a zoo in Alberta. We think six is enough.” A six-pack, I think, smiling.

We reach the banks of the river, its surface frozen and lightly buckled. The wolves run across, only a little skittish as the ice crackles underfoot. We’re following a pair of snowmobile tracks; if the ice could hold its weight, it will surely hold ours. Casey points east. “Alberta is just up there. Explorer David Thompson came this way over Howse Pass and down the Blaeberry to the Columbia. It’s still pretty wild country.” I stop to look about. The Columbia Valley,



Wolves in the wild have only a two per cent chance of surviving to the end of their 11-year average lifespan; (below) meet the Black's newest pack member, Moab.



under the cold shoulder of the Rockies, is rimmed with mountain peaks – silvery white spires against a sky now the colour of hyacinths.

East of this point, the terrain is monitored by the Central Rockies Wolf Project, whose researchers are studying 11 wolf packs. Some 70 wolves range freely over the project's 50,000 square kilometres of mountainous national park and Crown land in Alberta and B.C. "Are there wild wolves in this valley too?" I ask. Casey nods. "But we hardly ever see or hear them: only about three times in the last five years."

Shelley calls the wolves close and hands them a few munchies before we head up a logging road rutted with snowmobile tracks. The forest shade provides respite from the glare of sun on icy snow. Apart from the clatter of skis and conversation, it's utterly, peacefully quiet. It's also uphill now. We need our breath. The wolves lope effortlessly along. Wiley comes

close to sniff at my coat (can he smell our dogs?), and I reach down to ruffle his fur. We turn off the road and follow the trapper's trail up into the forest. Suddenly my skis stick in the tracks and I almost overbalance. But it's just Wiley, pushing from behind, treading on my skis. Tuk and Aspen are off in the trees. There are fresh scents to check out.

Wolves have had notoriously bad press over the years. I consider the many fairytales featuring the Big Bad Wolf and the hundreds of werewolf stories and films; how in Europe, the wolf was exterminated centuries ago. Closer to home, in the U.S., some two million wolves were shot or poisoned, hunted for bounty or trapped for their furs in the last half of the 19th century, reducing the population to virtually zero. Canada's wolf populations have been similarly reduced though not exterminated. Remarkably, in some areas of the country their numbers are relatively stable.

Biologists now know that the removal of predators like the wolf from even a single ecosystem destroys the ecological

balance, that the survival of these animals is, in fact, pivotal to the preservation of wilderness. Since the 1990s, this new understanding has led to dozens of Canadian wolves being successfully introduced in the U.S. – in areas such as Yellowstone National Park, where the last wild wolf was killed in 1925. Since the introduction of 31 wolves into Yellowstone Park in 1995 and 1996, their numbers have increased to 220.

In Canada, as in the U.S., wolf conservation efforts are ongoing. Northern Lights Wildlife is just one such initiative, promoting wolf conservation through education. Since May 2002, it has introduced more than 10,000 visitors to these much-maligned creatures at its centre north of Golden, where the curious can take interpretive tours and observe wolves at close quarters by watching as they're fed (raw game meat, often road-kill), listening to them howl and, like us, travelling with them into the hills. In winter, there are ski or snowshoe excursions; in summer, guided hikes beside the river or to the Mummery Glacier or alpine meadows of Redfern Mountain; and when the moon is full, nocturnal excursions to listen to wild wolves howling. Nowhere else in Canada can humans and wolves interact so freely. When the new wolf puppies arrive, they will also be imprinted on humans right from the start, as Wiley was. The Blacks will then take them down to the schools in Golden, for the children to see and touch. "The wilder the wolves are, the more they're afraid of people, and being in captivity is stressful enough," says Casey.

So that's why Tuk keeps his distance, I realize. He's afraid of us.

As yet, I haven't heard the wolves howl. "Oh they howl all the time," grins Casey. "We hear them every morning at 7:30 when the kids up the road go down to the school bus and when Shelley or I walk out into the yard."

At the trapper's log cabin, we stop for a "family portrait," but the wolves don't cooperate. There are packrat smells inside, and not even munchies will keep them posed. It is time for a breather, time to contemplate how lucky we are to be here, with wolves, in this almost pristine mountain landscape. Rileigh sprawls in the snow – hoping for another face-lick perhaps. The sunshine feels like a blessing. We may not have heard the wolves howl, I think, but we've had an unforgettable experience: a magical day in the mountains, skiing with wolves. ■



## puppy love

**Returning to the Northern Lights** wolf centre in June, I see the new puppy (from Three Hills, Alberta) – 40 days old and full of energetic curiosity. (In the end, the centre only got one cub.) Moab licks my toes and tugs at my sandal straps, investigates every flower, every bush. Then he races to the wolf pen. Wiley and Aspen are out on a walk, but Maya, the shy grey wolf, comes up to the fence, lifts her head and howls, a sharp, shivery sound that touches something elemental in my heart. The pup looks at her, sticks his stubby little

snout into the air and begins to howl back. It comes quiet and wavery, with a bit of a squeak, but he's learning. **Getting there:** The Northern Lights Wildlife Wolf Centre lies five kilometres east of the Trans-Canada Highway, 10 km north of Golden (take Blaeberry Bench Road). A new interpretive centre beside the highway is scheduled to open in summer 2005. For more info, check out [www.northernlightswildlife.com](http://www.northernlightswildlife.com), e-mail the Blacks at [blackwolf@redshift.bc.ca](mailto:blackwolf@redshift.bc.ca) or call 1-877-377-9653. □ -L.B.