

Seven days with the pack

The coastal wolves live in the coastal area of British Columbia. Although as the crow flies they are not far, they are isolated from the internal wolves and have not crossed them. They feed up to 70% with the food that comes from the ocean and can swim for miles and move from one island to the other. You can define them real sea wolves, unique predators of the Canadian coast, nourished by the same sea that brought them there. These wolves, living in areas that humans have never colonized, have saved themselves from the extermination and decimation that the wolves of North America and other parts of the world have suffered. The coast of British Columbia is the only place where the evolutionary journey of the wolves has not undergone significant changes by man.

Day 1

After the latest purchases and the preparations needed in order to meet the coastal wolves, the meeting is in the morning at Prince Rupert's pier to start a new adventure, a new experience, to visit a new wonderful place. The weather forecasts for the next few days do not look promising, with rain almost continuously, but I always like to think that things will improve and I will get whatever is coming as usual, I will try to adapt and to enjoy the situations. After picking up the necessary food and supplies we leave with three boats. One is for the transfer and the other two for service, on which we'll set up the tents for the next seven days to sleep, eat and recharge the batteries of our equipment. Our destination is Banks Island and in these places everything is wonderful and every transfer is always a new experience. We leave from the port of Prince Rupert with harbor seals and sea otters greeting us, along the way we meet the puffs of a pair of whales and on the coast even a mother of black bears with her two puppies looking for salmon whereby the river flows into the ocean. After three hours of sailing we arrive at Banks Island, we enter in a bay formed at river mouth and we stop there with the boats anchored next to each other to create a single platform. It immediately floats, but not for long since we entered just before the low tide arrived and immediately we are leaning against the bottom of the boats on the sand of a huge beach. The place is magnificent for those like me who is in love with these scenarios and it becomes a heaven when we go down to the ground to stretch our legs and we find wolves footprints around the boat, past right here just before the tide rose. The thrill and excitement increase and in a moment we are ready with all the equipment to go in search of coastal wolves. We walk along the beach between mussels, shells and rocks just discovered after the tide retreating and many other wolves footprints. After half an hour of walking, we lie in wait at the beginning of a wonderful valley, with a river flowing in the middle and all around green and thick woods. The needs of wolves in choosing a den coincide indeed with those of us humans. The search for beauty, but above all to have basic needs such as food and water. In the distance we see now a gray shape into the tall grass, unmistakable for those like me who love and follow the wolves. It is a young wolf of a few months, shortly after other wolves appear and they look at us intrigued from a distance continuing to play together. Our arrival has not passed unnoticed by the other wolves and here comes out of the wood the adult sentinel of the pack, coming slowly and calmly in our direction, never taking his eyes off us, putting itself between us and the puppies to around thirty meters of distance. It 'a beautiful gray wolf lying down on a rock to control us while the puppies, continuing to play, have also came close to us. We live these emotions and situations for a few hours, without realizing the time passing and it's time to go back to the base. The puppies have gone away now, but the sentinel is still there pretending to sleep, but it's checking us. For me leaving with a wolf in the area is not easy at all, but we must go back to the boats before it gets dark to organizing and arranging our base for the first night and for the next days. We start down, always following the beach without realizing that the adult sentinel has risen and is following us. We stay here and slowly turn to it. The wolf approaches to us slowly, it stops at over thirty yards from us and looks at us straight. It is following us, studying and controlling, with its wild and proud look, with its amber eyes that - in contrast to his gray mantle – look like bright stars in the night. I'm in a dream with the heart beating at a thousand. I'm a few yards from a coastal wolves and I'm crossing its eyes. The connection is powerful, the emotions are strong. An ancient belief of the Heiltsuks says that wolves do not show up unless they are trying to tell you

something. In these areas, the ancestors of these wolves lived together and often had close and social contact with the ancestors of the Heiltsuk people. It occurs to me that this wolf, with this look, this close connection, wants to rediscover this and remind us all these ancient and powerful ties. It turns around us watching and studying at us, then it moves on and without taking its eyes off us, places itself between us and the boat, on a big rock, in an elevated position from where it can monitor the entire beach. It follows us with its eyes until we get into the boat, and it's up on the rock until we can see it, and then comes the dark. He performed its sentry work perfectly and wanted to see who we are, where we are, what we are doing. I'm inside the sleeping bag full of joy and excitement and then I fall into a deep sleep, tomorrow is coming in a few hours and the wolf amber eyes are impressed in my heart and in my mind.

Day 2

We wake up in the morning with the emotions and the adrenaline of the previous evening and after a quick breakfast, we head to the wolf observation area. The weather is rainy, but I do not notice anything because the desire and the enthusiasm that I have for being there is greater. As I walk, I just look in any direction and my heart is filled with joy and emotions, the place is so wonderful. We arrive in the valley and there are several wolves, but today's sentinel is less permissive. As soon as it sees us in the distance, it immediately launches a howl of alarm and both puppies and adults move away. There are only a couple of young wolves standing there at a distance looking at us. They stand there for a while and then they go away too. Even the wolves of this area, like most animals, do all the activity in the morning and in the evening and as the rain continues, we also decide to return to the base for a few hours of rest and then return after. When we come back in the late afternoon, we see some puppies playing with each other, six in total, four blacks and two grays and all of them were born this year, from the pack of five adult wolves. These wolves can be considered privileged as, living in areas that man has never totally colonized, they have avoided the extermination and decimation that the wolves of North America and other parts of the world have suffered. The coast of British Columbia is the only place where the evolutionary journey of the wolves has not undergone variations by the man. The puppies chase and bite each other, and – from their behaviours and attitudes in games – it's possible to understand their effort, from an early age, to find their own role in the highly hierarchical and socialized world of their species. Some of them seem destined to rule as little as puppies. Even though they are far away, seeing and watching them play and interact with each other make time go quickly and beautifully. Then suddenly all the puppies interrupt their activities as soon as a black adult wolf walks past us quickly from the other side of the river, giving us just a quick glance, clearly with a precise intention, so focused and direct. The puppies freak out, they rush to him festively and it gives to each one their portion of food just hunted or better, just caught. Being a spectator of these scenes, games first and then nutrition, ordinary and everyday scenes for wolves but so extraordinary and rare to see for a human being, makes me feel completely lost and immersed in the moment, in the scene and partly in the pack. Once finished its main task to feed the puppies, the adult decides to pay attention to us. It looks at us from afar and slowly comes toward us, with puppies following it trotting. Even this adult wolf wants to see who we are, it wants to understand, it wants to study and it comes up to us. Only twenty yards of river separate us, but the wolf decides to cross it to get even closer to us. It enters the river while the puppies stop on the shore looking, it reaches a few feet and stands there. It looks at us, smells and studies us for a few minutes and when he decides that we are not a danger it turns, crosses the river again, and goes away into the woods with the puppies jumping around joyful. Another close encounter, again amber eyes of a wolf crossing mine, very intense emotions. Looking so closely the amber eyes of a wolf makes me feel connected to it. They are the eyes of an animal that has never been beaten, of a hunter who has never been hunted. In those eyes there is all the unspoiled nature, all the mysteries of the woods, all the infinite spaces of the great mountains, all the power of life and struggle. Looking at those eyes makes me realize every time something more not only about wolves, but on the whole wild world they represent. We go back to the base when it's dark and while we are settling a powerful howl makes all our activities stop. We look out of the boat and even if it's dark we see in the distance the black wolf's silhouette from before howling in the middle of the beach. From the woods we hear the answer of the puppies who followed it on its expedition. Then the silence and the silhouette of the wolf disappears in the dark. Until the last minute of the day there are plenty of encounters and incredible situations. Unique and unforgettable emotions.

Day 3

Today, we decide to move before and we arrive on the currently deserted place at the early morning light. After a while, an adult wolf comes out of the grass and it sits looking in our direction. Is it its turn today to control us? It looks at us for a while and then slowly comes in our direction. It's a gray wolf, but it's not the same of first day, the sentinel. This wolf is different both physically and in the behaviour. It is approaching us, but it doesn't look or study at us, it just goes straight without even turning its head, like it did not want to be noticed. Every component of the pack is unique, has its own character and behaviour, is different from the other in the attitude and it is not possible to make generalizations about wolf behaviours. And I also believe in every other animals. If we knew everything about Nature would be a mortal sadness, if everything was known and predictable, we would not have that fascination of the grandiose, that taste of the unknown and the admiration of the unique moments that give us emotions. The gray wolf goes away and the other wolves disappear too. We wait a couple of hours and then we decide to return to the base for a while and wait for the most active hours of the evening. We get in the boat and while we are doing our things we spot on the beach a gray wolf moving forward into the direction of the boat, the same one of the first day that followed and studied us, the sentinel of the pack, and even today it does its job checking what we are doing. Even today shows its strong character, not aggressive, but also fearless and it's proud to control us. The tide is high and it can't get too close to the boat, but it puts itself on a big stone, hundred feet from us, and while looking at us makes a powerful howl, which puts us in a state of silent emotion and admiration. In a moment those powerful connections between people and wolves, always existed in these lands, are alive again and that wolf wants to discover them once again. It stays for a few minutes on the rock, making again few howls and then - as it slowly arrived - it moves along the beach, coming back to its pack. It takes us a minute to recover from emotion, to find the word again and go back to our activities bringing in the ears and in the heart that magical and unforgettable howl. It comes the afternoon and we go back to the river to go to the valley, at our usual observation point. In order to give to the wolves less stress and get them used to our presence we stay every day in the exact same place to observe them. In this way they see us, they control us, classify us and so they can continue without problems in their activities. We arrive in the area and as soon as we lurk, we see in front of us, behind the big rock, two amber eyes and two black ears appearing from the grass, it's an adult black wolf coming out followed by two other adult wolves, one black and one gray. They were sleeping, our arrival woke them up and after stretching, they put themselves in front of us across the river. They look at us for a few minutes and then slowly go along the bank of the river, towards the beach. A little later, the puppies come out to play with each other, controlled today by an adult gray wolf, who immediately sits down looking at us and, although far away, it does not take our eyes off us. Then suddenly it leaves and comes toward us, it stands in front of us, looking at us with curiosity for a few minutes and then decides to return to the puppies area. Each wolf that comes close to us, as mentioned, has different behaviours, has its own character, its own attitude and creates its own connection. These behavioural variety are what make the observation of the wolves so interesting and magical: each pack always offers a group of very different characters, which give different behaviours and connections. It comes the dark and we return to the boat. I take off the wet clothes and I put myself into the sleeping bag, on hard and uncomfortable floorboards. The situation is certainly not the most favourable, we return wet and live together with other persons in a little space without any washing facilities, but everything that's around us is so wonderfully powerful and full of positive energy that I fall asleep happy, in a magical deep sleep, as if I were in the best hotel in the world.

Day 4

Busy morning. It rains heavily since awakening, but of course we go anyway to the observation point in the valley. Immediately we get wet, this is a real challenge for the physic and especially for the equipment and the rain protection. We stand under the strong and continuous rain for a few hours, and perhaps even the wolves does not like it. In fact, today they are not very active. We can observe, alongside the distant area, some puppies and a couple of adults in their usual alternation of activity and rest. Wolves and all animals have a much quieter life than what television documentaries would

have us believe. The percentage of time spent in strenuous activities, such as hunting, running or fighting, is minimal for animals. Most of the time for them is rest, quiet life, games and contemplation, with our senses always active but serene, and ready to take dangers and opportunities. Animals spend hours doing nothing and thinking more and I think that they do it exclusively for the simple and wonderful enjoyment of existence. The rain does not stop falling, both the physic and the equipment are on the verge and so we decide to return. With this constant and strong rain everything is complicated even in simple and logistic situations, and also at the base the day becomes really complicated and long. I was looking for the coastal wolves, but I was also looking for something new inside me, something that led me beyond my physical and mental limits, beyond the experiences that I've made so far. However, difficult moments always correspond to high-growth moments, and in fact, despite the complicated situation, I feel good, and I am as strong and serene as ever. After five hours of rain and wind spent inside the tent, as if by magic, suddenly it stops raining, the clouds go away and a sun appears in the sky warming our clothes but also the body and the soul and we are really euphoric. We go straight towards the valley direction to see if the wolves have decided to celebrate these hours of sunshine and we find all the six little puppies playing together. The distance is considerable and it's really hard to take some photos, but even just watching them is a unique wonder. Shortly after two adults join the puppies, one black and one gray playing together with them. We enjoy this amazing scene and moments for over two hours with our binoculars. Unique moments to watch, to enjoy, to live. Unforgettable moments..

Day 5

This morning at the alarm clock, the panorama and the light are spectacular. The sun is rising in the bay and with the low tide it creates fantastic color shades. When a day starts or finishes there are moments where everything seems to stop, where Nature also seems to slow down its existence. It almost seems that all the existing forces are aware of the moment and move slowly so as to avoid noises and not to disturb and admire the show. Last night when I fell asleep the sky was clear and I woke up in the night because I wanted to see the situation. With great effort I left the sleeping bag and when I came out of the tent I looked up and I was totally surrounded by a sky with thousands of stars that I've never seen before. The weariness and cold make me quickly go again into the tent and the sleeping bag, but that sky, those bright stars, that moment, will be impossible for me to forget. Accompanied by an unusual sun we arrive in the valley that is always different. It's extraordinary, alive and can never be the same. Just a cloud, a ray of sunshine, the rain, a wisp of fog and everything turns different, in a continuous, perfect change. Immediately we spot the puppies in the same distant meadow. The usual playing scenes already seen are repeated, but for me the emotions are always new and strong. We don't see adults in the area so we decide to wait their arrival. Hours go by, the puppies fall asleep and sometimes they wake up. They look around waiting for parents to return with food, but there's no sign of adult wolves. It's the first day without rain and therefore we decide not to return to the base and to stay in the valley all day long, waiting with the puppies for the return of the adults. But the only things that come back are the rain and the high tide that surprises us and forces us to rapidly go up to a higher point of the wood. After a few hours, the tide is out and we can go down again in our usual spot, re-emerged now from the water. Even the meadow of the puppies had been partially submerged under the water and they returned to the woods too. When the tide went out, even the strong rain finally ends, the puppies return to their daily routine made of games, exploration and food searching. They cross a piece of river and go on a small island that luckily is closer to us. When we arrive on the islet they stop playing and they start eating small molluscs and small plants attached to the rocks that the low tide has exposed. Everything for them is a new discovery; these are the first foods that baby coastal wolves can find on their own and serve to supplement the prey that the adults bring to them. Suddenly the puppies stop, lift their heads and look all together in the same direction. From the grass, the head of the mother appears, which, with a short howl, calls them allowing us to attend another unique and unforgettable moment. As good children they obey, cross the piece of river that separate them running and reach her in a moment, with an indescribable joy and happiness. Immediately the mother check them one by one, then she bring them towards the wood and all go into the lair in a single file. A wonderful scene to see and I feel a strong sense of respect and amazement, as if I were in front of a unique show, which happens only once in life. A scene that also explains very well the roles, rules and discipline that exist in a pack of wolves. Finally, after more than

twelve hours spent into the woods living beside the pack we go back to our lair too. The day was hard and challenging. Physically I'm very tired, but my heart is so full of emotions and positive energies that make me go beyond any fatigue and tiredness so I can fall asleep with a smile and the desire to wake up early on the following morning to see what other wonderful things can happen.

Day 6

After another night full of stars we wake up in the morning with an amazing sky. The day looks good, at least for today it should not rain. This morning the wolves area is a paradise, the sun shining and warming the valley, the river flowing and shining in the middle and in the meadow in front of the big tree where the puppies are, a wisp of fog created by the humidity rises from the yellow grass that the low sun turns golden. This morning, for a few minutes, this place looks like a paradise, even if the fog disappears, the light changes and the valley takes other shapes. Just like a sunrise, a sunset or a rainbow, this moment wouldn't be so beautiful and valuable if it hadn't lasted a few moments. The charm and the beauty of the ephemeral. In the Valley there are signs that confirm that here there was a human settlement. Remaining wooden poles planted in the ground, stones dams created to block the fishes when the tide retreated. Where men once lived, the wolves now live. Besides, men and wolves are at the top of the ecosystem and have very similar needs, such as having a shelter from the cold, fresh water and food such as the salmon available. Consider the ancient connections between men and wolves in this area, I also think that these wolves are waiting to share these areas again with man and recreate those ancient collaborations, probably never forgotten. In the golden area again this morning there are the puppies alone and we spend a few hours to observe them in their everyday lives. They play, sleep and occasionally look around, always waiting for the return of some adults. We are there to watch them even while they sleep for hours and this gives me peace of mind and happiness. I believe that if a wolf sleeps in your presence the confidence and acceptance test is passed, and watching them sleeping makes me feel accepted and connected to them. Suddenly they all wake up, get up, and look in one direction. Clearly someone is coming. In fact, shortly after three adults arrive within a few minutes each other, the same ones that a couple of days ago we saw going away together. Wolves do not stock, they can only rely on their latest prey, and they are probably coming back now from the hunting expedition, with the food for the puppies in the stomach. Adult wolves feed themselves eating larger amount of food that they hold in the stomach and then they offer the food to the puppies regurgitating it. The adults, methodically, regurgitate the food in different areas to allow all the puppies have their own rations. As always we enjoy the scene, the moment and the show. In a moment the high tide comes and all the wolves decide to leave, both adults and puppies, in the usual area behind the big tree. The scenario changes in a short time, the water quickly fills the valley and it looks like a large lake. After a few hours the water goes down, the river slowly reappears and the valley has its former appearance once again. We wait until sunset, but no signal of the wolves. Probably they all have a full belly and are sleeping. The light goes down and we prepare to go back to the base when suddenly we see an adult emerging from the big tree area. And then it comes a puppy, another puppy and then another adult; in just a few minutes, there are ten wolves, all the members of the pack except for a black adult and they decide to come in our direction. Actually, their direction is the beach looking for food, but on the way, across the river, we are there. All together they go to the beach looking for molluscs and other things that the tide leaves when it goes down. The 70% of food that the coastal wolves eat comes from the sea and although the distance in miles is not so different from the inland wolves they have never crossed them. They are real sea wolves, nourished by the same sea that brought them this far. The usual gray wolf sentinel crosses the river and comes just a few feet from us, to control us, then it lets the others to pass. They walk in front of us one by one, someone stops for a moment to look at us, others go straight without even look at us. We let them go a little forward and then, having to go to the beach, we go too in their direction. We arrive at the beach and all the wolves are there. Before we go on our boat we enjoy the wonder of the moment and the scene. Ten coastal wolves walking on the beach looking for food. The distance is far away, the light begins to be weak, but the scene is unique and magical. These are the scenes for which a whole trip is worth, that make you forget all the rain taken, the physical fatigue and all the inconveniences. These are the scenes that settle everything, filling and warming the heart. These scenes are impossible to forget, forever.

Day 7

It returns the pouring rain to greet us for our last morning in this haven. We leave the boat and walk toward the valley, but we stop immediately because in the distance we see the unmistakable silhouette of a wolf. It's going down to the beach alone and it is the black wolf that was missing last night. It is clearly looking for them as it stops often and howls to call them, but without any response from them. After howling in some different positions, it goes away continuing his research. We arrive in the usual observation point and we immediately notice that today the valley is deserted. The whole pack left the night before in the direction of the beach is not returned yet. They have probably continued their excursion on other areas where they teach to the puppies to get their food. Group hunting is the activity that makes wolves so united. It goes beyond the simple goal of obtaining food and I think that for wolves it has a much deeper meaning, impossible to understand for us humans. Hunting for wolves is not a casual activity, but a practice to be performed at a certain time and it requires mental preparation and dedication. Also, through hunting and other activities, adult wolves transmit to puppies those things that can not be taught but can only be transmitted as affective behaviour, passions, values. We wait for a couple of hours under the water and we can't see nothing. For us it's time to return to the base to prepare ourselves, waiting for the high tide in the afternoon that will allow us to get out of the bay, unfortunately leaving this enchanted and powerful place. We move towards the boat but emotions are not over. Across the river we see coming to the valley the previous black wolf, also like us, still in search of the pack. It walks around quickly with the agitated attitude of someone who is looking for someone and does not find it. It walks in front of us, looks at us for a moment and continues to the valley. Then it stops, starts looking in different directions, notices that there is no trace of his pack and starts howling again searching for answers from its companions. It's the last scene that I can watch offered to me by this magical place and it is also the last photos I take. I think within myself that this wolf with its howl wants to gratify and greet me, on behalf of the whole pack, and it wants, once again, to recreate those connections between people and wolves that have always existed and will always exist. I wave at it and at all the coastal wolves of this pack. And infinitely thank them for accepting me, for the encounters done and the tight connections, for giving me unique scenes, for allowing me to attend of everyday life moments, unforgettable and unique. I infinitely thank them for giving me emotions and powerful energies that entered inside me, and that will not go away ever again.

These days have been challenging for the body and for equipment, coming back at the base completely wet during rainy days, nights spent on wooden boards in a sleeping bag and using the wood as a bathroom. Really hard days, but the warmth of the emotions turned them simple and wonderful. Of course now I dream of a hot shower and a clean bed, but I know that tonight I will miss this place terribly, these energies, these connections, this pack, these wolves.

These wolves, all the wolves of any part of the world, are absolutely indispensable for us. If the wolves disappeared, it would also leave that part of wild nature they represent and from which we depend for our spiritual and physical nourishment. This species, which once seemed to threaten us, I think it can now tell us how to live an ecologically correct life. We need to protect, preserve, observe, admire and especially love them to be better persons.