# Wolves of Labrador

**FINAL**

June 22, 2005

## Act I

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| | Love them or hate them, few can deny the power of the wolf.<br><br>As symbols of wilderness we adore them.<br><br>But like shadows, wolves also invade our nightmares as man-eaters and reckless killers.<br><br>Somewhere between the fear and the romance lies the truth of the wolf, creatures surviving the only way they can—one kill at a time. |
| | On Canada's East Coast, wolves hunt one of the largest herds of caribou in the world.<br><br>Because they're secretive and elusive, the challenge to biologists and camera crew alike is to find and study these caribou hunters in an immense and deadly landscape. All to uncover the truth about the wolves of Labrador. |
| | **The Wolves of Labrador** |
| | *Canis lupus:* the gray wolf.<br><br>Once the most widespread carnivore in the world, habitat loss and relentless predator controls pushed wolves to a fraction of their former range, deep into wilderness areas.<br><br>The wolf is gone from Japan, severely reduced in the Middle East, nearly exterminated in Western Europe.<br><br>Today, half of the world's remaining wolves are found in North America.<br><br>But even here, in Mexico and the U. S., they have lost 95% of their range, as well as unique subspecies.<br><br>The Mexican wolf clings to existence, while Alaska's Kenai Peninsula wolf, one of the world's largest, disappeared. As did the buffalo hunters, the wolves of the Great Plains. The Newfoundland wolf also went down the path to extinction.<br><br>A large white animal, the Newfoundland wolf existed only on the island of Newfoundland. Its ancestors most likely came from nearby Labrador, following caribou to the island of Newfoundland. |

For thousands of years it survived, hunting caribou. But by 1930, when the island's caribou numbers dwindled, the Newfoundland wolf disappeared.

While Newfoundland's caribou population faltered in the early 1900s, Labrador's has grown.

Today, close to a million caribou wander throughout the region of Labrador, including the massive George River herd.

And wherever these caribou roam, you'll find the caribou hunters: the Labrador wolf.

These wolves are one of the few intact populations of gray wolves left in the world—an important storehouse of unique wolf genes.

Almost every corner of this vast territory is wolf country. From the boreal forest in the south…to the endless barren lands in the north.

While Labrador's isolation and inhospitable terrain helped preserve these wolves, they still encounter humans.

Hunting and trapping wolves is legal in Labrador and throughout Canada, with Labrador's wolves in demand for their colour and quality.

**Ron Webb, local trapper, Webb's Bay, Labrador***: "Well locally we sell them. For a big one you get 200-250 dollars. For an average one you get a hundred dollars. But there's a lot of work to a wolf, so a lot of cleaning. One season we had close to 50 animals between three brothers. So it's different now because now we can go to different areas really fast using snowmobiles. Years ago it was dog teams, so even though you saw a wolf in the distance, you just gotta look at it I guess."*

The snowmobile has become a way of life in the north, replacing the dog team.

In the last twenty years, the number of snowmobiles in Canada has doubled. It makes it easier for more people to get out onto the land, where they can encounter wolves.

**Michael Montague and Barry Blake, Local residents***: We seen a wolf on the ice. And just being along side an animal like that and you know he can just grab you and tear you apart is pretty amazing.*

Caribou outnumber humans here 30 to 1, as only 30,000 people call Labrador home. Every community lies within prime wolf habitat.

Though humans and carnivores exist here side by side, the age-old story of the 'big bad wolf' plays out in modern times.

As Labrador's most northern community, Nain has a long history with wolves.

In the year 2000, a series of wolf attacks on the town's dogs spread panic throughout the community.

**Michael Montague and Barry Blake, Local residents*: "****And not long after a wolf popped out of the woods and started chasing him away."*

**Bernard Obed, Local resident:** *"A wolf came out and went to the dog and bit it right on the neck and just walked away again, never killed the dog."*

Numerous wolf sightings forced the town to close the school, as parents feared for their children.

**Jessica Lyall, Grade 6 student, Jens Haven Elementary School, Nain:** "*My brother, he was just riding around and he seen it and he rushed home. It was just little but common, it just stayed there until he got his gun, and he went back and he shot it."*

**Michael Montague and Barry Blake, Local residents*:*** *" and then once I heard that gunshot it was just a big sigh of relief. The boys were that close to getting attacked by a wolf.*

In the end, a single rabid wolf was found responsible for the attacks.

Occasional outbreaks of rabies are usually to blame for problem wolves. Still, wolf attacks are incredibly rare. In fact, no one has been killed by a wild wolf in North America. Yet for some in Labrador, the myth of the man-eating wolf endures.

*(Musical moment)*

Labrador's wolves are among the least studied wolves in the world.

Nobody really knows the number of wolves in Labrador, much less their full impact on the environment around them.

***Rob Otto:*** *"I've got one wolf here."*

To fill the research gap, Labrador's biologists set out to collar several wolves.

By learning about the interactions between predator and prey, it's hoped the harsh lesson of the Newfoundland wolf won't repeat itself here.

**Act II**

To learn more about Labrador's wolves, biologists have begun a study to measure the wolves' effects on caribou.

**Robert Otto, Senior wildlife biologist, Newfoundland and Labrador: "***To initiate the project was a little bit difficult. We had to use helicopters and actually go out into some of these areas where we knew there were wolves present. Of course we didn't know where they would be on any particular day."*

***Rob in helicopter:****"There's his track, there he is, there he is."*

*"Pick days when the conditions were pretty good, with recent snow and good lighting conditions, we can actually pick up their tracks and follow the tracks until we came upon to the animal themselves."*

***Rob:*** *"You're right, this is a bigger wolf."*

***Pilot:*** *"It looks pregnant."*

***Rob:*** *"I'm ready when you are."*

***Pilot:*** *"You ready?"*

***Rob:*** *"Yep."*

***Pilot:*** *"Let him get running first. Alright."*

***Rob:*** *" Get me over top of him.*

*Ahh, Shit! I missed."*

***Pilot:*** *"Hold on…"*

***Rob:*** *"I'm amazed at how fast he can go through that snow."*

***Pilot:*** *"OK, here we go, this one is going to do it."*

***Rob:*** *"Where is she?"*

***Pilot:*** *"Right here."*

*"Jesus!"*

***Rob:*** *"I think the dart is in!"*

***Pilot:*** *"Good shot!"*

***Rob:*** *"Right in the arse!"*

**Rob Otto:** *"Right hind foot…"*

Biologists Rob Otto and Rebecca Jeffrey gather information that reveals the condition of the animal.

**Rob Otto: "…***29…all these wolves are almost exactly the same size, I think they've all been 29."*

**Rebecca Jeffery, Project biologist, Wildlife Division, Labrador*: "Holy hairy feet!"***

**Rob: "***Look at the feet!"*

**Rebecca: "***It's like the grinch!"*

**Rob:** *"Wow. You can see how the toes are able to spread a considerable distance, and that's how they're able to get around so effectively in the deep snow that we have here.*

**Rebecca:** *"look at the pair hey.*

**Rob:** *Wow, look at the massive…*

**Rebecca:** *"Look at how blunt…"*

**Rob:** *"…teeth…"*

**Rebecca:** *"…bone crushers. They're quite worn really Rob, look."*

**Rob:** *"Oh yes, yep."*

**Rebecca:** *"This one's loose actually; it looks like she's missing the one next to it."*

**Rob:** *"Ready? Not very big…thirty-four. This is a VHF radio collar beacon. And we can follow this animal from an aircraft with a radio receiver on board. Certainly we are able to estimate the total range of the packs that these animals are associated with. And depending on the types of radios that are deployed, you're sometimes able to estimate predation rates.*

*She's very, extremely healthy it appears. By the looks of things may be pregnant. If that's the case then we assume we have the alpha female of the pack, which is great, because if so we may be able to find a den site and get some really interesting information from the animal."*

**Rebecca:** *"Well one of the reasons why we're studying wolves right is because we're trying to get a more complete idea of predator-prey relationships in this area. There hasn't been a lot of research done recently on the wolves in Labrador, so it affords us an opportunity to really look at them in some detail. Hopefully we'll have the opportunity to put some more collars out on other members of the pack, so we can continue keeping tabs on it and figuring out what part of the of land they're using. One of the problems with doing telemetry from helicopters, that, if they do happen to be in heavily wooded areas we're not really able to get a good look, we're not often able to get a lot of information about them that way."*

Telemetry from the air reveals an animal's location, but not the natural behaviour of wolves.

While the biologists continue their research from the air, our camera crew begins their own search for wolves on the ground.

To gain a better understanding of the predator-prey dynamics, our crew will embark on a three-year journey, tracking wolves throughout Labrador.

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| | And there's only one sure way to find them—follow the caribou.<br><br>In winter, the massive George River herd spends up to six months wandering the boreal forest and the edge of the treeline.<br><br>Chances are, wherever there are caribou, there will be wolves.<br><br>But following caribou won't be an easy task.<br><br>Labrador's long, harsh winters take a certain kind of knowledge to survive—one earned through experience. |
| | This is a harsh land, but there are those who have Labrador in their soul.<br><br>There's few better than guide Levi Nochasak to take our crew in search of wolves through the wilds of Labrador.<br><br>This is his backyard. He knows the land, and its creatures.<br><br>**Levi Nochasak, Inuit guide, Hebron, Labrador:** *"Well animals are smarter, they have more sensitive smell, hearing, than humans. But in my case, I've been deaf most of my life, so I can see distance rather than hear. But my father teach me how much he knows, he's also deaf, but he is highly skilled and that's what I learned from him."*<br><br>Born and raised in Hebron, an abandoned missionary town, it's out here where Levi feels most at home.<br><br>*(Musical interlude)*<br><br>Levi's exceptional observational skills and knowledge of the land will guide our crew in search of wolves into what can be one of the meanest places on earth. |

**Act III**

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| | The search for wolves begins from Nain, Labrador's most northern community. From here, Levi's route will take the crew 200 kilometers north along the coast.<br><br>With only their snow machines and Levi's experience to rely on, our crew will spend 10 weeks searching the coastline for wolves at the edge of the frozen sea.<br><br>***Levi:*** *Most of the time I travel from Nain to Hebron, we just bump into polar bear. Nothing but polar bear place, it's access to the open edge water, edge of the sea ice.*<br><br>Levi takes the crew to a familiar area where he's seen wolves before. |

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| | Hundreds of tiny islands lie scattered along the coast of Labrador.<br><br>In winter, they are linked together by the ice. Here, they find tracks leading out onto the frozen sea.<br><br>As wolves can easily travel 50 kilometers in a single day; the challenge now is keeping up with them. |
| | The tracks eventually lead to a fresh kill, cleaned out and abandoned by the wolves.<br><br>***Levi:*** *It was an easy kill. There's quite a little bit leftover there yet.*<br><br>The success of the pack lies clear, with new kills found almost daily.<br><br>Their smaller cousins, the red fox and the arctic fox, rely on old wolf kills to get them through the winter.<br><br>The foxes compete among themselves for food.<br><br>While they rely on the scraps wolves leave behind, it's still dangerous to be a fox in wolf territory.<br><br>A wise fox keeps its distance from Labrador's top dog. |
| | Levi is the first to spot a pack of wolves. He's seen them here before.<br><br>***Levi:*** *This is a good spot. Every year, they know this, they come back next year, and come back again next year, and they recognize the trail. It's a shortcut on the sea ice.*<br><br>A subordinate wolf picks over the carcass, as they're usually the last to feed. |
| | Wolves are drawn to the coast, making most of their kills out in the open on the sea ice.<br><br>Even the occasional seal falls prey to wolves.<br><br>Still, it's difficult for wolves to hunt seals, as they're wary of any movement.<br><br>While polar bears and seals thrive on the frozen sea, caribou use the ice as a bridge to nearby islands they can't reach in summer.<br><br>Wolves patrol the edge of the sea ice, as they know caribou and seals are vulnerable out in the open. |

When the spring thaw slowly breaks winter's hold on the land, caribou lose their bridge to the islands.

The growing light and warming days stir the caribou to renew their annual journey.

Leaving the wintering grounds behind them, they head north, towards the great expanse of the barren-lands.

From wintering grounds in the south to the calving grounds in the north, the George River herd's range spans 700,000 square kilometers, an area twice the size of Germany, and some of the most demanding terrain Labrador has to offer.

Eventually, they will cross paths with wolves.

In such a meager landscape, these wolves need to cover a large territory just to survive.

Barren-ground wolves have home ranges greater than a 1,000 square kilometers—10 times larger than gray wolves living in forests.

These wolves are in their prime out here in the barrens, where they're camouflaged to blend into their surroundings…virtually invisible until they move.

No matter where they go, the George River herd's constant companion trails behind them—a dark shadow threatening to strike.

To follow the wolves and caribou over such an incredible expanse, our film crew will have to change their tactics.

Fiords can stretch one-hundred kilometers inland, forcing caribou to use a single pass.

Here, the crew will set up camp.

For generations, caribou have used this crossing. And it's been used by wolves for just as long.

With the entire herd passing through, it's only a matter of time before the wolves will make their move.

**Act IV**

At the migration's peak, they will cross non-stop, day and night.

Throughout the caribou's migration, they will encounter many packs of wolves.

This is the only safe place to cross for kilometers around.

When they take to water, the wolf is in no position to follow.

Like a funnel, the break in the canyon wall channels the entire herd through the valley.

The bottleneck this crossing creates for the herd makes it easier for the wolves.

As long as caribou file past, the wolves will always get another chance.

Here, wolves have the advantage, hiding in the rocky terrain where they can ambush the caribou.

The water brings safety to the caribou; they are as swift in water as they are on land.

Hollow hairs keep them afloat while their wide hooves act as paddles, making them strong swimmers. Even the calves take to it easily.

In its first month of life, a calf may have already traveled 200 kilometers following its mother.

The long journey proves too much for some. Exhausted, this calf can't take another step.

Desperately, the cow urges the calf on…but it needs to rest.

If these calves can't find their mothers, they'll either starve…or come face to face with wolves.

The drive to stay with the herd is strong, and forces most cows to abandon the weakened calves to their fate.

A calf's misfortune is a wolf's gain.

Leaving the lost and weakened calves behind, the herd presses on.

Throughout time, the strategy for the hunt remains the same—use any means to get as close as possible before launching the attack.

It seems the wolves don't need to hunt in packs here, as they're bound to find a victim they can take down on their own.

Despite the success of these wolves, it's believed they don't have much of an effect on the George River caribou—the herd's numbers are simply too great.

It will take weeks for tens of thousands of animals to move through the valley.

Our film crew witnessed one of the most spectacular migrations in the natural world.

**Act V**

Three months have passed since biologist Rob Otto collared the wolves in Labrador and the pregnant alpha female.

He's now following her radio signal hoping to find a den.

The signal grows stronger over an old burn site, where a forest fire raged twenty years ago.

***Pilot:*** *"Oh, here's one."*

***Rob:*** *"You got one? Where?"*

***Pilot:*** *"Right off of my side here. It's hiding in the tree there."*

***Rob:*** *"She looks, oh ya, she's been walking around there for a bit I'd say with this helicopter over top of her. She looks fine."*

***Pilot:*** *"Oh ya, she looks great."*

***Rob:*** *"Yep."*

The alpha female is reluctant to leave the area.

Rob suspects she has a den nearby and leaves the camera crew behind.

This would be a good place for a den. The patchwork forest of new and old growth attracts a variety of prey, and the open areas are ideal for hunting.

Wolves instinctively know where to den. This hillside of dry, sandy soil has good drainage, and a perfect view of the forest, still recovering from the fire.
At two months old, these pups can be left on their own much of the time now. Usually, at least one member of the pack watches over them.

When they're this young, the pack is tied to the den.

The hierarchy these pups establish now will remain with them for much of their life.

The wolves have denned close to Labrador's military base, where fighter jets practice low level flying.

***Rebecca:*** *Through collaring the animals in this pack, we're able to find out that they're using an area around 6 or 700 square kilometres, which we didn't know before.*

*This spring, the alpha female had 6 pups, which is a really healthy size litter, which is probably indicative of the good conditions in the area.*

*When the pups are really young, the parents will go out and they will do the hunting, and they gorge themselves and they'll bring the food back for the pups where they regurgitate it for them. And as the pups get older and are able to venture farther from the den, honing their own hunting techniques through playing with each other and just exploring their habitat.*

Every few days, the alpha female leads her pups away from the den towards water or a nearby carcass. They're in training for when they'll abandon the den for good, freeing the pack to wander once again.

***Rebecca:*** *By the time the study's over, we'd like to have a better understanding of the predator-prey relationship and how each population is affecting the other within the area. We haven't collected as much data as we'd like yet, so we'll probably keep these collars on for several years, so we're hoping to look at not only the wolves and the caribou, but also the moose in the area and to see how they're all affecting each another and how they're all living together.*

Rebecca and Rob's research also includes Labrador's endangered woodland caribou.

Unlike the George River herd, which migrates widely, small herds of woodland caribou live in the forest year-round. Some herds have decreased to less than 150 members.

In the last several decades, increasing numbers of forest fires have altered their habitat, opening up large areas of the forest—perfect conditions for moose.

**Rob:** *Yah, she's a big moose.*

Rob is finding that moose may be affecting the lives of woodland caribou.

**Rob:** *There's another one.*

It's only in the last 50 years moose began colonizing Labrador.

They now offer wolves in this region an additional source of food.

While full-grown moose are formidable opponents for wolves, woodland caribou may be more susceptible, allowing already low numbers to drop further.

Their presence adds a new dimension to the predator-prey relationship he and Rebecca are trying to study.

The information gathered from collaring moose, leads them to suspect moose in southern Labrador have a detrimental affect on the endangered woodland caribou.

***Rob:*** *We wanted to determine whether or not the wolves in this area were having a large impact on some of the woodland caribou that we have in the region. And there is some degree of concern that there's more wolves in the area, and moose allowing them to remain in the area has an affect on the threatened woodland caribou populations.*

*These wolves are able to exist in higher densities than they would be able to otherwise, and as a result, just more frequently come into contact with caribou. And often times it appears they approach the group of caribou until they get very close to animals, probably near the tail end of the group. It's not very long after you start to see those track patterns where often times you'll see the kill..*

*Usually they just tear the carcass open and eat in right through the hide.*

*The teeth on the wolves are actually amazing, of course their canine teeth are exactly miniature steak knives, very efficient at tearing meat and other tissues.*

*At times you'll find the carcasses totally disarticulated, all the bone pieces separated from one another. The adults will actually just gorge massive amounts of meat and carry it back to the pups, in fact in their stomach.*

Wolves simply do what's in their nature.

The numbers of woodland caribou in Labrador declined mainly due to human over hunting. But wolves may now be keeping their numbers down, not allowing them to recover.

But now, the survival of one species hangs in the balance, as some of Labrador's woodland caribou herds face extinction.

**Act VI**

Biologist Rob Otto and his team continue tracking the animals radio-collared in Labrador.

**Rob:** *"There's one wolf here. Keep a visual if you can. He's just standing there, looking at us. There he goes again. Let's do one strip down here through the burn, see if we got any trail."*

They've just picked up a mortality signal from one of the collared wolves, meaning the collar hasn't moved in days.
Rebecca Jeffrey finds the young female near Goose Bay's landfill site.

***Rebecca:*** *It became obvious as we were tracking her from the air that she was at the dump. Well, it looks like this is the female that we collared two years ago. She appears to have a snare around one of her feet. And this end here, it looks to me like it wasn't set on a large enough tree to secure her, and I think she pulled out and the snare remained on her foot and she's had it there ever since. She's really quite skinny and thin. I would suspect that she's had the snare on for some time and has just been feeding at the dump because she may have been unable to hunt.*

*You know, I'm upset that she's died in this way, because she may have been uncomfortable and hungry if she hadn't been able to hunt properly. But, it is absolutely legal to trap wolves here in Labrador, and the furs sell quite well I believe internationally, and it's not uncommon*

*at all, and this one just went wrong.*

Even though wolves are still hunted and trapped in Labrador, Rob Otto doesn't fear for the wolves.

***Rob:*** *The future for wolves in Labrador I think is very secure, Labrador is a very isolated piece of country. There's lots of prey for wolves. I don't think there's any danger of wolves in Labrador becoming reduced in numbers. I don't think it's possible just because of the remoteness of the land.*

Attitudes towards wolves are also slowly changing in Labrador.

**Ron Webb:** *I think we need them, we need them around to keep our caribou herds healthy. As we go along we learn they're not as dangerous as they're made out to be.*

The wolves of Labrador are one of the few intact populations of gray wolves left on earth.

Their survival may help protect the future of their species by maintaining the genetic diversity of wolves.

Over time, studies such as the one taking place in Labrador will help us understand these unique predators and their effects on the wilderness around them.

As long as caribou remain here, there will always be the caribou hunters: the wolves of Labrador.