



The art and science of wolf howling in Algonquin Provincial Park

By Yvonne Stiver-Macleod

Wolf howling is a uniquely amazing experience. The first time you hear wolves howl in reply, the hairs on the back of your neck stand on end and the blankets of stars above in the night sky seem brighter. It's a spine-tingling moment when you realize a wild creature has heard your imitation and answered back. Nowhere is this incredible encounter more celebrated or sought after than in Algonquin Provincial Park.

Algonquin Park is known for many things – pristine waterways, scenic landscapes, protected wildlife – one special attraction being its resident wolves and their inclination to howl. For years, public wolf howling has been a key part of the interpretive program in the park. As magical as a wolf howl is, however, public howls don't happen magically.

Extensive effort, planning and understanding of wolf behaviour goes into organizing a public howl. Like an elaborate stage performance, what happens in the background makes the event a singular success. There is an art to the science of wolf howling.

HISTORY OF WOLF HOWLING IN ALGONQUIN PARK

Public wolf howls started quite by chance. Algonquin's Chief Park Naturalist Rick Stronks notes, "Human howling was used primarily as a research technique." Between 1958-1965, Dr. Doug Pimlott and his research team, based at Algonquin's Wildlife Research Station, were studying wolves in the park. Originally, the researchers needed to find a way to track the elusive creatures in the summer. One possible option they considered was howling. To locate the resident packs, researchers made recordings of wolves howling and used a playback system to see if the wolves would respond. The idea worked. Curious to see if the wolves would respond to human imitation, researchers were pleased to discover that worked just as well as playback equipment. Wolf howling had begun. So when it came time to track wolves in the summer, researchers didn't need equipment, just human vocals.

By 1963, naturalists from the research station wondered if the general public would be interested in hearing wolves. Public

sentiment was harsh in those days. Wolves were considered vermin. "The wolf was a misunderstood predator," as Stronks explains. "It was an atmosphere of anti-wolf." Despite the prevailing negative attitudes at that time, the naturalists decided to try. A note was placed in *The Raven*, the park's newsletter, inviting visitors to attend a public wolf howl. Naturalists were curious to see if anyone was interested. The first public wolf howl took place in August 1963. Public fascination did not disappoint that night – the response was overwhelming. Approximately 600 people attended in over 150 vehicles. To make the evening complete, the wolves responded.

This unexpected breakthrough opened a whole new arena for Algonquin Park staff. Giving visitors the chance to hear wild wolves became part of the park's interpretive program. Since 1963, over 110,000 park visitors have come out in hopes of hearing wolves. The public howl is one of the park's most popular events. According to Ron Tozer, retired Park Naturalist, "We often hear that the wolf howl is the most exciting thing visitors have ever experienced in Algonquin

Park. Wolf howls are the most popular interpretive event presented in the Park, and appeal to a broader array of people and interests than anything else we do."

BEHIND THE SCENES OF A PUBLIC WOLF HOWL

Public wolf howls are held on Thursdays between August and September (before Labour Day), but only if the weather and wolves cooperate. A lot of work and planning goes into the Thursday night public wolf howls; it takes organization, some late nights and a suitable pack.

"Naturalists out searching for wolves on Tuesday and Wednesday nights have to wait for traffic to die down after 11:00 pm before they can even start searching and howling for wolves," comments Tozer. Increased traffic along the highway means naturalists have a couple of long nights.

Based on responses from the two evenings, a decision is made as to whether or not to hold the public howl. Stronks notes that only when a suitable pack location is found and car safety is ensured, does park staff announce a public howl. The event is publicized on the Thursday morning – posted on the park bulletin boards and website.

THURSDAY NIGHT

On the night of the howl, public turn out is overwhelming. The chance to hear wild wolves draws a huge crowd. People gather at the Pog Lake Outdoor Theatre (tip – it's a good idea to get there early). Organizing a public howl is no small feat for park staff. Coordinating such a large number of people and cars takes careful planning and preparation. The evening starts with an educational slide presentation about Algonquin's wolves as well as preparing everyone for the night's howl. Under the guidance of over 20 park staff, as many as 500 cars (usually totaling over

1000 people) drive to the location along Highway 60 where naturalists received responses from the previous nights. Everyone shuts off their cars, stands in the darkness and waits. Once everything is quiet, designated park staff let out their best imitation howl. As you close your eyes and strain to listen between the peepers, crickets and loons, take a second to appreciate the effort that goes into organizing a public howl. If all goes well, as about 80% of the evenings do, the wolf pups will grow excited by the imitation call, and start to yip and yap, cajoling the entire pack to join them in a haunting primeval concert that leaves you in awe.

GIVE WOLVES A PROPER VOICE

The positive impact of the public wolf howl on Algonquin's protected wolf population is immeasurable. As Stronks notes, the wolf has gone from misunderstood pest to being recognized as a top predator. It's an important and vital role. Events like public

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wolf howls go a long way to help educate people and dismiss some of the myths that surround wolves. Stronks dispels two particular myths about wolves – one, wolves do not howl when they are hunting or when it's a full moon, and second, you can howl for wolves any time of the day, not just at night. He explains the public howls are held in the evenings to give the public a better chance of hearing the pack.

WILD EXPERIENCE

Algonquin Park staff who organize the

public wolf howls have had some unforgettable moments. Retired Park Naturalist, Ron Tozer, has participated in Algonquin Park wolf howls since 1964. He feels it is always memorable and exciting any time wolves howl back to his imitation. "As far as particular wolf howl memories are concerned, one of the most memorable was when we howled at the wolves and got responses from wolves on both sides of the highway and very close to people standing by their vehicles. Some people were so startled by this that they got back into their cars. That was a thrilling wolf howl!" Tozer affirms, "It was a tremendous privilege and opportunity to be involved with this event over the years."

TRY HOWLING YOURSELF

When visiting Algonquin Park and you want to try howling, the best time is late August to October. Wolves are less likely to respond between winter and spring. Howling is simple. There is no special technique or talent required. Take a deep breath and let out a long continuous howl. It helps if you are in a clear, quiet area where it is easier for you to hear (tip – cup your ears as you listen). Don't worry about being heard, wolves have excellent hearing. And if they do happen to hear you, they just might let you know.

For more information on wolves and public howls in Algonquin, visit the Algonquin Park Visitor's Centre as well as the website www.algonquinpark.on.ca. The publication Wolf Howling in Algonquin Provincial Park by Dan Strickland is produced by The Friends of Algonquin Park. Research on Algonquin's Eastern Wolf population can be found at the Science Behind Algonquin's Animals website, www.sbaa.ca.

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