



# THE WOLF COAST

STORY & PHOTOS BY ISABELLE GROC

AS SEA WOLVES RE-ESTABLISH THEMSELVES NEAR BRITISH  
COLUMBIA'S COASTAL COMMUNITIES,  
RESIDENTS ARE LEARNING HOW TO SAFELY COEXIST

# About 10 years ago,

Sabina Leader Mense, a biologist living on a small island in the northern Strait of Georgia, was conducting a field survey with her son's dog in the evening. While she was sampling vegetation in an open area, she suddenly heard the dog bark. She looked up and realized the dog had wandered off to the edge of the forest. As she went to look, two wolves walked toward her from the forest and a third stood on a bluff.

"They gave me a clear message not to go any further," Leader Mense remembers. She never saw the dog again.

**LEADER MENSE WAS** not the only one experiencing encounters with wolves. "Between 2009 and 2011, almost everyone who lived on the island had the opportunity to see a wild wolf rather than just hearing them or seeing their tracks," she says. "Wolves made themselves more visible to people, crossing roads and backyards, killing chickens and dogs that were not adequately protected. We came to understand that the

wolves came to renegotiate boundaries with people."

In this small community, as well as near others on Vancouver Island, grey wolves are now slowly expanding their territory. During the early 20th century, many populations had declined due to a series of government-sponsored eradication campaigns. On Vancouver Island, wolves were considered to be extirpated between 1950 and 1970. The animals were also wiped out in California, Oregon and Washington.

It wasn't until the 1970s when a handful of wolves that swam from the mainland started re-establishing on Vancouver

Island. Their expansion coincided with more hunting opportunities. At that time the deer population had increased following the clear-cut of old-growth forests, which created suitable habitat for them.

People hardly saw wolves then, but in the late 1990s wolves suddenly became more present on the west coast of Vancouver Island, where Pacific Rim National Park Reserve is located. Tofino and Ucluelet residents, as well as visitors, reported sightings in town, campgrounds, beaches and trails. Attacks on off-leash dogs increased and since then interactions between humans and wolves have steadily continued.

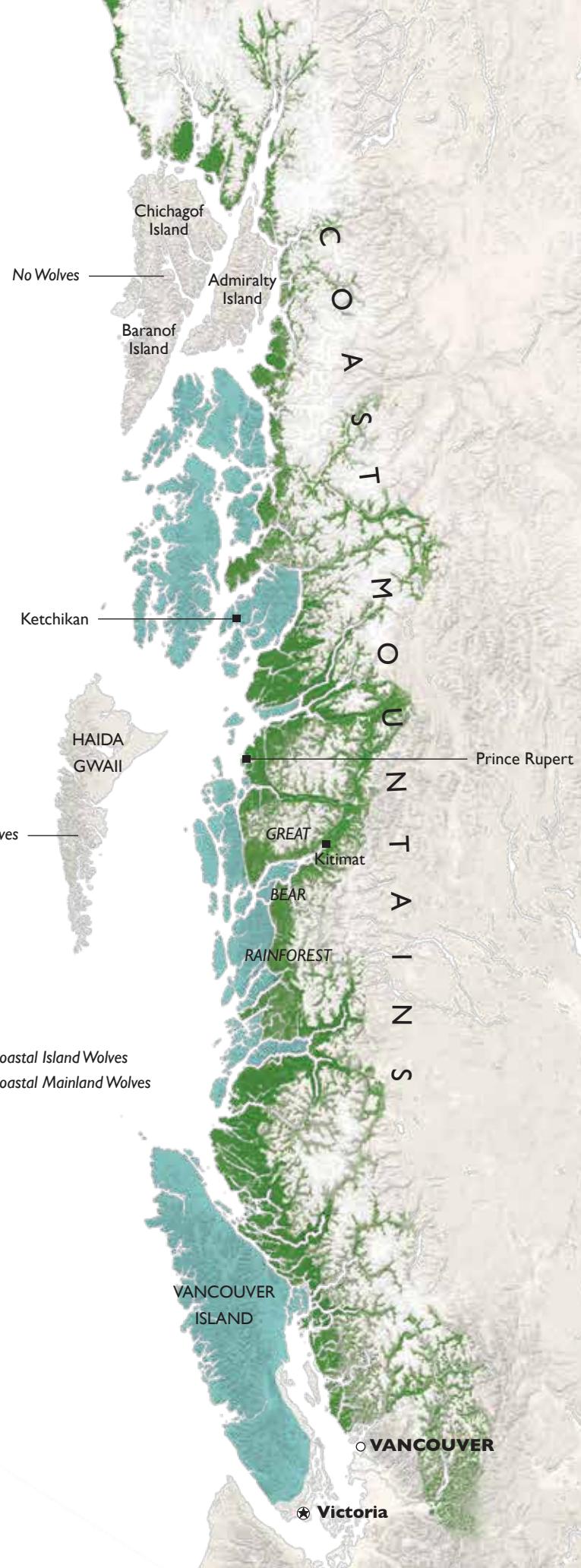
"It was almost like turning on a switch, how quickly things changed when we started seeing wolves," says Todd Windle, Wild about Wolves project manager for the Pacific Rim National Park Reserve.

While wolves were becoming a more visible part of the landscape, researchers— informed by the traditional knowledge of First Nations—learned that the animals living on the coast were genetically distinct from their cousins in the interior regions of British Columbia. Although the mainland areas and the islands are separated by short distances, the climate and the ecology are strikingly different, which in turn influence the lifestyles of the wolves.

Mainland wolves mostly hunt terrestrial species such as deer, mountain goats and moose through forests and fields. On the other hand, coastal wolves spend much of their time on beaches, swimming between islands in search of food. In fact, 75 percent of their diet comes from the ocean: spawning salmon, clams, barnacles and marine mammals such as harbour seals, sea otters or whale carcasses.

"This is remarkable to have this terrestrial predator that makes most of its living from the ocean," says Chris Darimont, science director at the Raincoast Conservation Foundation and a professor at the University of Victoria who has led studies on the wolves' genetic differences, mainly from hair and scat samples. Coastal wolves are 20 percent smaller in size than interior wolves, a difference likely due to a milder climate ▶

After near extirpation in the early 1900s, wolves have been slowly re-establishing themselves on Vancouver Island since the 1970s.



and smaller prey, according to Darimont. Their coats also tend to have more reddish tones than interior wolves.

**THESE UNIQUE “SEA WOLVES,”** which are also found in Southeast Alaska, are contributing to the genetic makeup of the wolves that are now re-establishing in Washington State. A recent study showed that these animals are the product of interior wolves coming from Montana and Idaho and coastal wolves from BC. The researchers who made this discovery believe this mixed ancestry ultimately may help the Washington wolves better adapt to a changing climate and increasing human pressures on the habitat.

“They are more likely to be more resistant to habitat changes because of their greater genetic diversity,” says Sarah Hendricks, one of the study authors and a conservation geneticist at the University of Idaho.

The return of the wolves on the west coast of Vancouver Island was a positive development for the Nuu-chah-nulth peoples who hold wolves in high regard. Dennis Hetu, administrator of lands, public works and resources for the Toquaht Nation, has noticed how adaptable coastal wolves are. A member of the Wolf Clan who grew up in Ucluelet, Hetu has conducted his own personal observations of wolves for the last 25 years in his traditional territory in Barkley Sound. In recent years he noticed more evidence of wolves hunting black bears, a behaviour he assumes may be related to declines in other food sources. “They have a wide range of food, which shows how resilient they are,” he says. “It teaches you about being resilient, living through the hard times and being grateful for that.”

**IN THE LAST** seven years, the coastal wolves’ unique abilities have been symbolized by the presence of a lone wolf that is living in the Chatham-Discovery Arcipela-go, a small group of inhabited islands near the city of Victoria. The wolf, named *Stageya* by the Songhees Nation, became a local celebrity and attracted the attention of researchers who were curious about the animal’s unusual ability to survive in a small area of 1.9 square-kilometres, which also lacks a year-round water source. It turned out that the wolf surprisingly survived on a healthy diet of harbour seals, river otters, ▶

Due to changes in coastal forests, these wolves have had to adapt to new hunting grounds and diets.



mink and goose eggs. The wolf even dug wells throughout vernal wetlands that fill with rainwater in an attempt to obtain water, a behaviour that had not been documented in wolves before.

"I have immense empathy for him living his life out there, his intelligence and his ability to survive," says local photographer and naturalist Cheryl Alexander, who has documented the wolf's way of life for five years.

Given his proximity to a major urban centre, the wolf's persistence on the island will ultimately depend on the ability of people to give him the space he needs to survive. "It is a test of societal tolerance," says Darimont.

As they recolonize Vancouver Island, wolves are finding themselves in a significantly changed environment, with diminishing wilderness areas and shifting food availability. The cleared areas of forest that initially offered good forage for deer now have older trees, becoming "ungulate barrens," places that are no longer suitable for deer. As a result, deer have moved to shorelines, roadsides and around the edges of the town of Ucluelet where they are attracted to newly built subdivisions. The wolves have followed, travelling along beaches to hunt both marine prey and deer. But to fully utilize their hunting habitat, they have to navigate around the people that live and recreate near the edge of the ocean. Pacific Rim National Park Preserve receives more than one million visitors per year.

"The wolves have learned how to effectively use a small geographical area that has a high level of human activity," says Bob Hansen, Pacific Rim's former human-wildlife co-existence specialist and currently WildSafeBC's Pacific Rim coordinator.

**AS HUMANS AND** wolves are getting closer to each other, the potential for human-wildlife conflict increases. But to Hansen, it is more challenging for humans to learn how to coexist with wolves, rather than the opposite.

"With all this human activity, wolves do an amazing job of staying out of the human eye and not interacting with us," says Hansen. "They have studied us and have adapted to the realities of this landscape. It is up to us to figure out how to

live in such a way that we are not drawing them into conflict."

Over the years, Hansen and others have become concerned about human behaviours that place wolves at risk. "People forgot what it was like to coexist with wolves and others never knew so they had to learn from the beginning," says Windle.

Attitudes toward the charismatic canines have also changed, and more people seek out the opportunity for a close encounter with a wolf, the ultimate symbol of the wild. Parks Canada staff have been concerned that some wolves have been given food by visitors. When that happens, wolves lose their natural wariness of people and become food conditioned, which can result in the destruction of the animal.

"When we take every opportunity to approach a wolf, while those behaviours are all coming from a place of being awed by this incredible animal, we may actually be acting in a way that compromises the safety of that wolf," Hansen says. Having a close interaction with a wolf can be a once in a lifetime experience for people, but wolves are encountering humans all the time.

"Every time they learn to get closer and closer to people until it becomes a public safety risk," warns Windle. Getting people to accept that they should love wolves from a distance and frighten them away—"Scare, do not stare" advises Park Canada's website—for their own good



## SIMPLE STEPS TO KEEP WOLVES SAFE & WILD

- Never feed wolves or leave food accessible to them. Keep a clean campsite.
- Create and maintain distance from all wildlife. Be dominant if you encounter a wolf. If the wolf does not turn or run away, and instead approaches you, wave your arms to make yourself look bigger and make noise to help reinforce wolves' healthy wariness of humans. Do not run.
- Avoid hiking alone at dawn, dusk and after nightfall. Keep your children close.
- Read tips to respect wildlife and stay safe: [pc.gc.ca/en/voyage-travel/conseils-tips/faune-wildlife](http://pc.gc.ca/en/voyage-travel/conseils-tips/faune-wildlife).

can be a difficult message to deliver.

Domestic dogs, particularly when off-leash, also contribute to conflict. Dogs tend to attract wolves who perceive them as prey or as an invading canine from another territory. An easy fix is to keep dogs on-leash in wolf country, which dramatically reduces the risk of conflicts between the canines.

To address these challenges and to promote better coexistence between humans and wolves, Parks Canada has launched a five-year project, Wild about Wolves, that aims to carry research about the wolf population and habitat and to

change people's attitudes toward the animals, in collaboration with First Nations elders. "I am tired of seeing other communities have wolf encounters and the only ones that have to pay are the wolves when it is not their fault," says Hetu, who is involved in the project.

**AFTER HER DOG** was taken by a wolf, Leader Mense became a champion for coexistence between people and wolves in her own community, developing simple guidelines to educate others on ways to reduce conflict with predators and bringing residents and experts together

in community workshops. "We didn't know how to live with those animals. We were irresponsible with our chickens, livestock and dogs. I don't want anybody to repeat the mistakes I made," she says.

Today, she believes community attitudes have shifted toward more responsible behaviours, a model that Hetu already follows in his own community. "We encounter wolves a lot but we do not give them a reason to stick around. They go their way, we go ours," says Hetu. "If we learn what wolves have to do to survive and we don't do anything to disturb them, then they have a fighting chance."

No matter how cute or majestic these animals are, people are encouraged to keep their distance and even frighten them away.