

This is the story of an extraordinary scientist, and the wild wolves he shared his life with, alone in a remote forest in the Caucasus mountains. His name is Dr Jason Badridze, a renowned wolf biologist, who has spent his entire life living with wolves, hunting with wolves, and learning to understand them, and communicate with them directly.

The very first time I met Jason I felt an instant sense of ease and warmth. I was in Tbilisi, Georgia, the small republic in the Caucasus, writing about the country's efforts to protect its wilderness areas. Jason picked me up from the friend's flat where I always stayed in Tbilisi: bearded, with dark oriental eyes and a beaky nose, his gaze was open and direct behind his glasses, and I saw a vivid sense of humour dancing in their depths.

That evening, we talked for hours over a bottle of the excellent Georgian wine, and Jason told me a story which I found so extraordinary, so unexpected and compelling that it could have come from the pages of a magical story rather than the life of a scientist.

When Jason was young, he had gone alone to a remote forest, in the Georgian Caucasus mountains. He was looking for wolves. He wanted to find a wolf pack that would become accustomed to his presence, so he could approach them closely enough to observe their daily lives.

This was new territory for a wolf biologist at the time. It is very difficult to observe wolves in a forest – their lives are hidden among the trees and dense undergrowth, and revealed through their tracks and droppings and the remains of their kills. Until radio collars and telemetry made it possible for scientists to track wolves from a distance, they learned about forest packs by following their trails on foot or ski and trying to understand the traces that they found. And long persecution has made wolves very wary of humans, and they are skilled at staying hidden and avoiding us.

Jason, though, wanted to do things differently, and he began by trying to understand things from the wolves' point of view.

He said: "At first I had no idea how I could make contact with those wolves or even see them. I knew they were being hunted and killed by forest rangers, so I decided that the first thing these wolves absolutely must understand is that I am not a danger to them.

So I went to the rangers and I told them to keep away. That wasn't easy! I used bad words; I talked very tough to them. Secondly, I decided that these wolves must always know my smell. So the whole time I was living in the forest I wore the same clothes."

Jason found the tracks and droppings left by one particular family of wolves. He learned their territory and began to leave meat for them at certain places. Then, in one sudden, heart-stopping moment, he came close upon the adult male and female, the parents of the family.

His first, instinctive reaction was to try to distract the wolves by tossing them the meat he was carrying.

But the two wolves ignored the meat, and the male stepped closer.

"When the male was only a few yards away from me he stopped. He looked at me and it seemed to me that he was puzzled, that he could not understand what I wanted, why I did not seem to be a danger to him. Then both wolves ran off; they disappeared into the trees and after they were gone I realized how frightened I'd been. I was shaking."

It seemed the wolves were equally curious about this benign, solitary man, whose presence had sent the hunters away. In the months that followed, Jason met the adult pair regularly, along with three others in the family. Finally he left the ranger's hut, which had been his base, and he began to live among the wolves. He ran with them when they hunted and he slept beside them on their rendezvous sites – the places where wolves gather while their pups are still young.

"When these wolves had fully accepted me, I lived with them. I took no tent. I had only the Caucasus shepherd's coat, which is made from felt. I lived alongside the wolves and we often went for 30 or 40 kilometers a day together when they were hunting. I was young then, and I was very

strong.

I lived for two years with these wolves, and never once were they aggressive towards me. After some time, they even let me take deer meat for myself from their kills – once they had eaten themselves, of course.

Those wolves were my teachers. Before I lived with them, I had been trying to analyze animal behavior even though I didn't know enough to understand what the behavior was really about."

I thought often about Jason after I left Tbilisi. He had gone to the forest as a scientist: he wanted to observe for himself how wolves really live in the wild. And this work had taken him beyond the limits of scientific observation of wild animals, and plunged him into the stream of living relationship with them. He had come to know himself more deeply and found a depth of relationship with the wolves that could never have been predicted by the mind.

One image in particular kept recurring in my mind – the figure of Jason, asleep on the ground, alone in the darkness with the animals which have embodied so many of our human fears of the uncontrollable, instinctual, unpredictable wild. Few of us will ever see a wild wolf, but their presence still carries a powerful elemental charge into our dreams and storytelling. That image of Jason, asleep on the ground among wolves, with its dreamlike, fairy-tale quality, spoke powerfully to me of trust and the possibility of renewing our connections with the wild, and dissolving the barriers of fear.

And so I met Jason again, this time in the semi-desert, on the shores of the Caspian Sea. The Caspian water was a clear mineral blue, like lapis lazuli, and we found a sheltered place to sit and talk among the sand dunes.

"A few years ago two wolves suddenly ran out in front of my jeep near here," he recalled, taking a cigarette from his pocket and lighting up.

"The female swerved off to the side, but the male kept running in front

of my jeep. He was trying to draw my attention away from her.”

“He ran straight towards a group of gazelles, and those gazelles just stood and watched him! They knew immediately that he wasn’t hunting them. They knew because animals are always reading each other’s emotions and intentions. They study each other. They watch and learn. You see – animals are the best zoologists!” he concluded, with one of his vivid smiles, tucking the remains of his cigarette in his pocket and heading back to the jeep.

The afternoon darkened as we drove. A cold wind rose. A thick purple band spread across the ridge of the horizon and I heard distant mutters of thunder.

And then I saw a current of movement flowing across the edge of sight.

Jason halted the jeep, grabbed his binoculars and leaped out. The wolf was trotting along the ridge, each foot springing off the ground and meeting it again, with a steady fluent swing through shoulders and spine.

“It’s a male,” Jason said. “Carrying something in his mouth, looks like part of a gazelle shoulder.”

“Ah, he is a very fine guy!” He exclaimed warmly, after watching the wolf in silence for a few minutes. “He is working hard now to feed his family.”

We watch the wolf move away along the ridge, and even after he disappeared, the current of his passing felt electric.

“Maybe I can begin to understand the landscape now,” I told Jason back in the jeep. The words felt clumsy, but he nodded as though he understood.

“Yes. In that wolf’s coat I saw the colors of this place – sand and gray, red and brown. It is always a very emotional experience to see a wild wolf. They live with such intensity! I always hear this intensity in their voices. Even now, after all these years, every time I hear a wolf howl, the feeling is so strong that I almost cannot breathe. Especially in late

winter, which is their time of courtship and love, the wolves howl often and with so much feeling!”

“I don’t like to use the word pack,” he continued “Wolves live in families. There were six adults in that wolf family I lived with. The male and female I first met in the forest were the parents, and their three youngsters, and another male, who was much older. He had arthritis or some old injury, because he was limping, but the family took care of him. He always had food from them.

“I learned to communicate with these wolves using my body.” Jason turned towards me, slowly bending his head to one side, and when I met his gaze, the expression in his eyes was new to me, and very disconcerting.

“But I learned that the most important connection is with the mind,” he added, relaxing into his normal posture.

“What do you mean, Jason?”

“I will try to explain. At first, I was very nervous when the wolves were behind me because I could not see what they were doing. I was always turning around and trying to make sure that I knew exactly where they were. After some time with the wolves, this completely changed. I could sense exactly where they were, without looking around. I cannot explain how this was possible but after that I felt much more relaxed.

The thing that really made our relationship strong was when I helped the wolves to hunt. I closed off a path so that the deer they were chasing could not escape. The wolves were so excited when they saw this! They understood very well what I was doing. Even more importantly – they also understood exactly why I was doing it. After that, our relationship became very close.”

One night, asleep on the ground, wrapped in his felt shepherds’ cloak, Jason woke and thought he heard rain pattering down. Putting his head out, he saw the male wolf was urinating right on top of him.

You smell of us now, the wolf’s gesture said. You belong.

“I have told you that those wolves were my teachers,” Jason continued. “But I also survived because of them. Yes, I think one of those wolves saved my life.”

Jason’s usual vivid expressiveness became still, and I felt him go inward, to deeper levels of memory.

“It was late one evening and I was running back with them from hunting. We had covered so much ground together that day and I was so exhausted that I barely knew where I was going. Suddenly, right in front of me, I saw this bear. The bear stood upright, we were both startled, we were both afraid... and a frightened bear is very dangerous. I must have shouted out loud because the adult male came running, he went straight to the bear and the bear turned away.

Can you imagine this? The bear could easily have killed that wolf with one blow of his paw, yet the wolf didn’t hesitate for a moment. That was the experience that really made me understand how wolves help each other. That was really altruism.”

Jason fell silent, looking into the distance after the wolf, his dark eyes creased and thoughtful. In his battered, bleached-out hat and worn khaki fatigues, he was an unpretentious figure, who gave no external sign of the depth of his experiences or the intensity of his life.

I thought about the extraordinary story he had just told me. That wolf had endangered himself to protect Jason, one of the humans who had killed and tormented so many of his own kind. There was no possible benefit to his family or his species; it was an act of simple allegiance with a fellow living being.