



CHERYL ALEXANDER, WOLF LADY

Offshore sailor. Wildlife photographer. Environmentalist. World traveller. Teacher. University lecturer. And for nearly a decade, the biographer of a lone wolf who, due to her persistent chronicling of his life, has become a worldwide phenomenon

As Cheryl Alexander writes on her website, “Knowing a wolf as an individual and not just a statistic changes the conversation.”

When Cheryl heard rumours of a wolf living on the Discovery Island and Chatham Island archipelago off the coast of Victoria—part federal land, part park and part Songhees First Nation’s territory—she took to her kayak and paddled around the

bays to verify his existence. The islands weren’t new to her—they had long been a favourite place for her family to hang out, using such transportation as canoes, kayaks and small powerboats.

After finding sizeable tracks on the beach, Cheryl was convinced the rumours were true: it was indeed a wolf. Her husband, Dave Green, a scientist and serial entrepreneur, disputed her certainty claiming the footprints were made by “a big dog.” One day, however, in 2014, while drifting among the islands

in their Hourston, MV *Rover*, she spotted the wolf who'd just swum across the channel. He loped into the woods and then let loose a traditional wolf howl.

Proof!

The eery sound changed her life, and her family's. Although familiar with wildlife through camping and having grown "more excited about gathering and collecting memories of the wild through [her] lens," Cheryl knew little about wolves, who tend to shy away from humans. She began studying their behaviour through books and interviewing wolf experts, discovering quickly that a grown male wolf living a solitary life is an anomaly. Wolves live and hunt in packs and are highly family-oriented with an intense social life. Mature wolves often leave the pack to search for a mate—then form families of their own.

Intrigued by this lone wild animal, she began photographing and filming him, switching from the kayak—too small to carry camera gear—to a small fishboat and eventually, a small seaworthy RIB. Usually arriving at the islands alone, she used an Anchor Buddy to ensure her boat remained accessible in tidal waters. She also obtained permission from the Songhees to wander through their territory, and named the wolf "Takaya," the Coast Salish term for wolf.

CHERYL'S SALTY INTERESTS are bred in the bone. Her great-uncle, Josiah Gosse, was the last keeper at Esquimalt Harbour's Fisgard Light, the first lighthouse on Canada's Pacific Coast. Every evening, he paddled from shore to operate the lights. Her great-grandfather, also named Josiah Gosse, was BC's first licensed coastal pilot, and in 1914 he piloted Bob Bartlett and Canadian anthropologist Vilhjalmur Stefansson on the *Kartuk*, which sank after being trapped in ice. Her grandfather, Homer Alexander, was also a great mariner and built models of vintage coastal steamers.

Cheryl spent much time in nature growing up in the Vancouver area. She took to photography, and with

a friend, learned to develop film in a dark room. She's a self-taught photographer, although she has taken lessons to perfect her craft—as is evident from her extensive collection of outstanding images. She studied outdoor and environmental education during her university years and served as a leader with the Metchosin

Wilderness Camp Outward Bound. "I took groups of young female offenders out in navy whalers," she told me. "They had to learn new skills on the water. These were hard for most of them, but eventually, they learned, developed confidence and the barriers broke down."

After Cheryl and Dave became ▶

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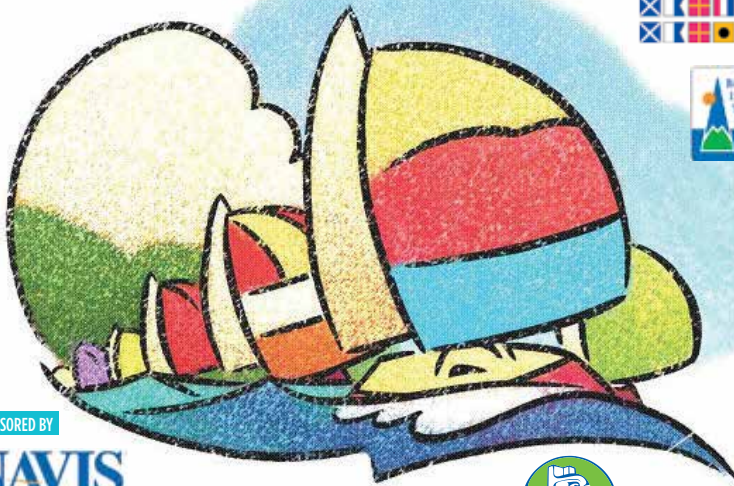
parents to three daughters—Maia, Lara and Alexa—they sailed the South Pacific in *Niska IV*, a Fraser 42, and lived and worked in Fiji for three years. Later, the daughters grown, the couple sailed the Caribbean during the winter months in their next sailboat, *Aries*, a Liberty 46. They worked remotely many years before the pandemic made distanced work necessary. They sailed around Cuba exploring small harbours and bays. Later, after visiting Colombia and transiting the Panama Canal, Mexico's Baja was included in their itineraries. During other extensive travel in Central America, China, Africa and Yellowstone Park, Cheryl continued to build her photographic portfolio.

DURING THE LAST decade, however, Cheryl concentrated on learning about Takaya. She grew ever



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more aware of the many myths and dark folklore around wolves (the Big Bad Wolf of Red Riding Hood's fame, werewolves and the survival of Roman Empire founders Romulus and Remus after being suckled by a wolf). She was careful not to intrude on Takaya's territory directly. Yet, they became used to each other and the wolf trusted her to observe him. Cheryl is convinced she and this wild animal developed a spiritual connection. Her frequent presence may have even allowed Takaya to feel less lonely and thus able to stay on the archipelago lacking other wolf companionship.

After installing stationary cameras, Cheryl learned about Takaya's treks around the isles and his favourite places to sleep and nap. She discovered he covered the whole territory—1.9 square kilometres—and swam easily among the islands and rocks. He learned where seals hung out and brought their pups. Questions lingered, however. What did Takaya eat? How did he find drinking water?

To slake his thirst, Takaya drank from wetland pools, but when these dried in summer, he'd scratch the dirt deep enough to fill with water. For food, he, like other coastal wolves, learned to catch marine mammals—such as seals and otters. Coastal wolves have different DNA from mainland grey wolves; the Haida call apex predators like Takaya the "sea wolf." Walking the beaches, Cheryl found seal carcasses—amazingly, Takaya had bitten off their heads, then turned the animal inside out, stripping the tough, hairy pelt away. He also fed on Canada goose eggs, always leaving some eggs behind so the goose would lay some more.

AFTER CHERYL'S YEARS of studying and chronicling Takaya so

intently, CBC's "The Nature of Things" came knocking and together, they made a haunting documentary about this solitary wolf (you can stream it in Canada). Cheryl also put together a beautifully illustrated and informative book, *Takaya, Lone Wolf*, which was BC's number one bestseller in 2020 (one indie bookseller said, "Takaya saved us during this Covid year!"), and continues to rank in the top five. People wrote to Cheryl that the book inspired them during COVID-19 lockdowns: "If Takaya can survive alone, so can I."

AFTER NEARLY EIGHT years of residence, Takaya left his home and swam back to Vancouver Island in the winter of 2020. He was observed by a variety of people; BC conservation staff eventually relocated him to less populated areas. Then, on March 24, 2020, a hunter legally shot him on a logging road. Outcries were heard from around the world.

Cheryl was heartbroken, but has continued to build on the wolf's legacy. Two new books, *Good Morning Takaya* (co-written with Alex Van Tol) for children three-to-five-years of age, and *Takaya's Journey* (co-written with Jenaya Copithorne) for elementary school children, were published in March. A further tome on Takaya's legacy, including the efforts to save wolves from heartless hunting, is forthcoming.

So, what's next for Cheryl? "Dave and I are going to spend a good bit of time on our sailboat, *Aries*, this summer," she says. "To calm, to depressurize and to directly reconnect with our natural habitat." ▶

More information:

wildawake.com
pacificwild.org/celebrating-the-life-of-takaya
takayaslegacy.com



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