

DIARY APRIL / MAY / JUNE 2005

## ARCTIC

My apologies for not updating this section sooner. I've been so busy between the High Arctic and presenting the live series Springwatch that finding time to write my diary has been tricky. Thanks so much to all of you who have been visiting to find out what's new and welcome to all of you who have visited for the first time.



In early April I made my way via various flights to end of the most northerly road in Canada's North West



Territories. Once in Inuvik, a very small town at the end of a very long road, we made our final hop by chartered aircraft to Bank's Island. A small Inuit community lives on the south of the Island but our destination was further north still, to the Bernard River, where we were to meet with our guide, an Inuit trapper / hunter called John Lucas.

Few people come to this part of the world each year, even fewer during the early spring, when winter conditions persist and the weather is wholly unpredictable. But that was precisely why we were here now. These were the conditions in which we were hoping to record Musk Oxen, Ptarmigan, Foxes and other Arctic wildlife scraping a living from this stark and stunning land. But above all we were hoping to see Arctic Wolves and we knew it was going to be tough.



I am working on a long-term project to habituate and follow a wolf family over a two-year period. I had intended to start in the summer of 2006, but an assignment to film Arctic Wildlife for the series Planet Earth, compelled me to consider an earlier start. It made perfect sense to combine resources of the two projects if we stood a good chance of seeing wolves, but truly, no one could be sure of that. Arctic Wolves are rare; perhaps no more than 10,000 still live in the whole Arctic region, possibly a great deal fewer. The best chance we would have of following a pack from day to day would be in the summer when they were denning with pups, and so returning to a predictable spot. In the winter and early spring, they range over vast areas, searching for a meal, with nothing whatever to tie them down to a predictable spot. On the plus side, to see them in these conditions, in their element as it were, was a chance too good to miss.

The scale of the task became apparent when we started looking for the Musk Oxen. These are large, dark, herding herbivores in a land of white. They show up for miles. But such is the scarcity of resources that they too exist in low numbers in a very big landscape. Our first scouting trip took us across 40 miles of territory, during which we spotted one herd of 15 Musk Oxen. It was not going to be easy.



Home was a camp provided by John and his son Trevor. Double skin wall tents are the traditional field lodgings for the Inuit today, and stand up well to the conditions. They are rugged and easy to pitch in a hurry. They are also small, and basic. I'm used to living rough, and just as well. Temperatures ranged from  $-25^{\circ}\text{C}$  during the day to  $-35^{\circ}\text{C}$  at night. At these temperatures many things that one takes for granted in more temperate conditions present a problem. Every drop of water that one uses must be melted from snow and ice. Oil for cooking freezes. Every element of living is a challenge, and that's before you get the cameras out. The gear suffers in such conditions. Batteries stop working, electronics pack up, and simply trying to focus a lens is fraught with the problems of condensation in the eyepiece and fingers sticking to bare metal.



But for all the challenges the trip was wonderful. I eventually managed to work my way in close to a few Musk Oxen herds witnessing the birth of calves in to the snow (what a start to life!) and arctic foxes scavenging for the afterbirth. Ptarmigan and Arctic Hares would follow the herds of Oxen to feed in the areas of broken snow they left behind. But what of the wolves? In 23 days we encountered wolves on 4 days only. But of those encounters one was an unforgettable contact with a pack of 4, 2 pure white adults and 2 greayer animals, yearlings I think. The curiosity of the younger animals brought them to within 30 metres of me, and then they relaxed, and went about hunting lemmings which were scurrying about under the snow. When you have gazed into the yellow eyes of a wild wolf, there's no going back. I'm hooked and looking forward to cementing a bond with these charismatic animals in the next couple of years.

## Springwatch

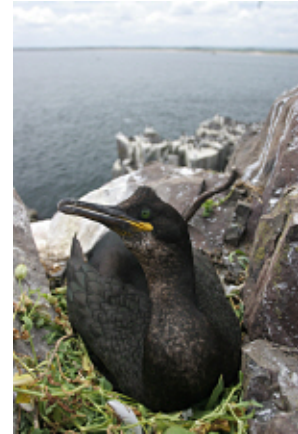
From the Arctic I leapt straight into the Springwatch project. From the Isle of Mull and Sea Eagles to the London Wetland Centre and the Farne Islans in Cumbria, I have had a ball. I'm so, so lucky to visit these places and have the chance to share them with others through the TV. For those of you who didn't catch the series, Springwatch



was a live event, running across three weeks and celebrating the beauty and diversity of British Wildlife. Bill Oddie and Kate Humble host the show from the Devon headquarters, but I get the lovely task of hosting the Outside Broadcast elements of the series from all over the British Isles. It's quite challenging technically and certainly absorbs my time



fully during the 3 weeks, but is also tremendous fun. Now and again the task of getting live images back from the more remote places makes for interesting challenges. One transmission from the Farne Islands almost lost all the camera feeds, but seconds before going on air, the technicians fixed a fault and there we were, trying hard to appear unruffled!!! The unpredictable nature of these shows is very much part of their appeal for me. And having time to enjoy British Wildlife is always such a treat.



In July I'm in South Africa, trying to film Great White Sharks catching fur seals. I'll let you know how it goes.

Bye for now