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Spanish Mowgli shows how to make friends with the wolves

By Graham Keeley in Barcelona
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He is the Spanish Mowgli, a boy who grew up alongside a pack of wolves.

Like Rudyard Kipling's Jungle Book character, Fernando Peralta learnt about life from inside the lair of some of the world's fiercest animals. He was reared with seven wolves and two lions in a wild animal reserve near Madrid. "When I was born, my mother had nine cubs in the house," he says. "Seven were wolves, two were lions. I was the tenth."

Now the 27-year-old is the only human who can come close to Richi, an Iberian wolf which Fernando calls his best friend. He feeds Richi by hand, and often behaves like the other wolves, defending himself from any threats by growling and baring his teeth. Since Richi was born 18 months ago and the first thing he saw was Fernando's face, a bond has grown between man and wolf. But in rare moments of aggression from the 30kg animal, Fernando responds by biting back to keep his charge in check. "At the first sign, I have to respond. Wolves always try to establish their superiority," he says.

He takes Richi to summer courses at Madrid's Complutense University to show people how to deal with wild animals. Escorted around the campus on a thick leash, Richi has become the centre of attention among wary students.

Fernando, whose lupine features make him look uncannily like his charge, insists on feeding Richi himself, on dried meat. "If I stopped doing that and put the meat on a plate, he'd soon start marking his territory and wouldn't let me get near him," says Fernando.

He lives at the Fauna y Accion centre in Los Santos de la Humosa near Madrid, where 400 animals, including wolves, jaguars, panthers, snakes and falcons, are bred for use in nature documentaries.

Already, Fernando's unique relationship with Richi and the other wolves has been the subject of two natural history documentaries about Iberian wildlife.

Fernando's late father was an expert falconer who ran the Madrid Safari Park and took part in a series of wildlife documentaries. He died when Fernando was 13, and the boy left school to care for the animals with his brother. "I don't regret leaving school. If I had spent all this time studying biology, I wouldn't know as much as I do about animals," he says. "One thing is theory. The other is venturing into the wolf's lair."

Though the Iberian wolf had been threatened almost to the point of extinction up to the 1970s, a pioneering series of documentaries by a Spanish filmmaker, Felix Rodriguez de la Fuente, helped to change attitudes.

Spain is now one of the last refuges in Europe outside Russia for the wild wolf which has been hunted out of Britain and many other parts of Europe.



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