

# Wild Vet

## Wild Ops

By Anne Groebner

It all started in the year 2010 down in Mexico. Some jaguars that had been illegally caught and held in captivity weren't doing so well. They had broken all their teeth. The Mexican Government, some Mexican veterinarians and biologists wanted to give these cats a new lease on life. So, Ole Alcumbrac organized a dental party and traveled down to Mexico to join his friends, had the dentists do restorative work on the cats' mouths, collared them and then sent them back into the wild — then they told their story and won an Emmy. “It was fun to tell the story,” says Ole Alcumbrac, local White Mountain veterinarian. Since then, he has been approached by several producers trying to pitch a potential television show to a network. They never made it to the networks — until now. This fall, every Monday night at 6:30 p.m., switch your TV to the Outdoor Channel to see Alcumbrac and his team demonstrate the excitement, exhilaration and challenges that this team of veterinarians, biologists, outdoor guides and other team members face when capturing a variety of wildlife —and the show is called “Wild Ops.”

Originally, it was going to be a reality TV show where they would risk their lives but Alcumbrac said “No!” He told them that, if they wanted to do a program that's conservation based and highlights the species and the management efforts that go behind them, he'd do it...and that's how it's designed. The capture portion of the show is exciting and there is risk involved. Some of the captures are done by helicopter and, as a pilot himself, Ole knows the risk in any type of aircraft but that's not what he's thinking when he's up in the air. “You're focused on the job,” says Alcumbrac.

As an under-grad in college, Alcumbrac double majored in pre-vet and wildlife biology. Once he was accepted into Veterinary school, he realized his options were limited and that most vets with his degrees became game wardens but he questioned whether he could work for a government agency. Although he loved everything he learned in school, he didn't see himself sitting in a small office in the city. So, he started out as a zoo veterinarian and went to work for the Denver Zoo. “Some days I would work on two animals. One would be a toad and the other would be a giraffe,” he remembered. The variety was great but it still seemed to him to be a little artificial. One day, his professor told him they were doing a lung worm study on big horn sheep in Estes Park (CO), capturing them with a drop net, and wanted to know if he wanted to get involved. “He hooked me,” says Alcumbrac. “That was my very first capture experience, right out of school.”

Later, while working for the Arizona Game and Fish Department as their veterinarian, his boss, Jim deVoss, said “Do you think you could dart about 60 sheep out of the helicopter for me?” and he was like “Yeah!” and he cut his teeth on 68 sheep. Then the collars that they put on them failed and had to be replaced and he ended up capturing the same 68 sheep again. “Now,”

Alcumbrac says, "I've caught everything from big horn sheep, deer, elk, bison, mountain lions and one jaguar."

Alcumbrac has had his challenges with releases after capture. He was capturing bison of the North Rim of the Grand Canyon and they were darting them from a helicopter. After he reversed one particular cow, he was afraid, being drug hazed, she was going to run off the edge of the canyon and that wouldn't have been good. So, he got between her and the canyon. "She woke up and looked toward the trees where she should have gone but then turned and looked back at me," says Alcumbrac. She charged him and all he had between them was a small juniper tree. "So, we ran around that tree. Finally, she made the right choice and ran off into the trees and I didn't have to go off the cliff with her. They don't always appreciate why we are there, and rightly so," Alcumbrac says. "We cause them stress but it is necessary because they represent the whole species that we are trying to understand and do a better job with."

One day, Ole told John Herbert, with the Arizona Game and Fish Department, that he wanted to feel what it's like to get shot with a dart. So, they broke off the pointy needle and he put a black stock rubber feeder over his butt. Then Herbert shot him from a distance of about 20 yards. "It took me to my knees and brought tears to my eyes — and that was without a needle, just the impact of the dart," he says. Now Alcumbrac practices pain management on every animal that he darts. "I had to take one for the whole national home team." If you watched the first episode of Wild Ops, you witnessed the care they take with every animal that they capture.

Many of the residents of the White Mountains just know Ole as their local vet. He has operated the White Mountain Animal Hospital since 1994. At one time, he had seven veterinarians and 33 employees. Now he is down to the original mother ship and works solo. "And I like it that way," he says. Personally, I have used him as my vet for over 20 years. I have also gone into his office when he had an injured, recently reintroduced Mexican wolf in the barn behind his office. Alcumbrac has always done rehabilitative services for injured, orphaned wildlife in his clinic as a community service, for free. He states that, "Under the Board of American Management Model, the animals belong to the people. Everyone has a piece and say in every animal in the United States, unlike the European Model that states that the king owns the animals. I think we should be very passionate about wildlife," says Alcumbrac, "because we all have something invested in every species."

Alcumbrac has done a lot for the local community. During the Rodeo-Chediski Fire, he told me that they were the only veterinary office that was open. "We were helping animals get out of the way of the fire — domestic animals and wild animals and they have done this for many other wildfires in the area. As a journalist, I accompanied and documented several of Alcumbrac's vets to Mexico to spay and neuter hundreds of stray dogs and cats."

"You can't live in a small town and be all business," says Alcumbrac, "I was told early on that, if you want to be invisible and work a 9-5 job, get a city practice and work in the big cities. But, when you live in a small town, everyone knows you and you need to posture yourself

accordingly.” He told me, “I don’t think anyone goes into veterinary medicine thinking they are going to be a millionaire. I think they are passionate people about animals.”

“Wild Ops” is a dream come true for Alcumbrac. It was natural for him to find himself filming over the last several years. And it started with jaguars and a cold call that came one day by a production company and they said, “Would you do a Skype interview with us? We want to tell you what we are doing.” Alcumbrac told them that if they did a “Mutual of Omaha’s Wild Kingdom” type program, he would be willing to do that. “That is truly what inspired me and probably every other vet who ever watched Marlin Perkins,” Alcumbrac commented. “I never missed an episode. He completely influenced me and my career and if I can attain even 50% of what he did for us, I would be happy.

Remember -- ”Wild Ops” at 6:30 p.m. Mondays on the Outdoor Channel!