



# Animal Instincts

When she's not training guide dogs, **Isabella Rossellini** turns her lens on a wild world starring non-humans



**Isabella Rossellini** has played a nightclub singer (*Blue Velvet*), a legless beer baroness (*The Saddest Music in the World*), and even a cuttlefish (in her *Seduce Me* shorts for the Sundance Channel). But what she'd really like to do is get inside the head of animals, which is precisely what happens in *Animals Distract Me*, a film that premiered at the 2011 Sundance Film Festival and will air on April 22, Earth Day, on the Discovery Channel's Planet Green.

Rossellini, 59, is the director, star, and writer of her newest project, which follows her and a pooch named Sweetie through a day in Manhattan. While Rossellini discusses a fashion exhibit with *Vogue* editor André Leon Talley, attends a shoot with star photographer Fabrizio Ferri, and lunches with chef Mario Batali, she becomes preoccupied by the animals around her.

"Even though I'm in an urban environment, I keep on going to animals, whether it's a dog or crickets or pigeons or cockroaches, and with each animal [I notice] there is a little vignette," Rossellini says. The movie shows scenes first through the eyes of a human and then from the point of view of an animal, such as her former guide dog, Sweetie. She even introduces puppet characters, including one based on Charles Darwin (actually played by Rossellini with a voiceover by Campbell Scott) to help educate the audience about animal behavior.

Exploring the world with a camera is natural for the legendary actress and model, who grew up in the spotlight. She is perhaps best known for her famous lineage, as the daughter of actress Ingrid Bergman and Italian director Roberto Rossellini, and for being the face of Lancôme for

nearly 15 years. In addition to directing, Rossellini maintains a full acting schedule. She recently shot *Late Bloomers*, a romantic comedy with William Hurt, and *Chicken With Plums*, a new film by Marjane Satrapi, the Iranian director of *Persepolis*. Her *Seduce Me* shorts about animal courtship were released last year, following on the heels of her award-winning 2008 *Green Porno* series, about the mating life of animals.

Rounding out her busy schedule is a role she's taken in recent years, away from the limelight: training Labrador puppies for the Guide Dog Foundation for the Blind (guidedog.org).

Rossellini and her friend, actress Linda Larkin (best known as the voice of Princess



Rossellini dresses up as Charles Darwin in *Animals Distract Me* to explain how over time, wolves became our household pets.

Jasmine in *Aladdin*), live with and train one pup per year. They split custody between their Manhattan apartments and Rossellini's Long Island home. This exposes the dogs to noise and traffic in the city (where they encounter crosswalks and taxis) and wildlife in the country (where they learn not to chase birds and fight with cats). To date, they have raised eight guide dogs. Bau, a 6-month-old black Lab, is Rossellini's newest puppy in training, since Sweetie finished her schooling last year.

Rossellini has had dogs all her life, and nearly every dog she's encountered has a fascinating story. "My mama gave me my first dog, a white Maltese called Yupee," Rossellini says. "She ran off and came back pregnant. We gave away the puppies, and she was so desperate that night, searching for her babies. The night after, we found a little black cat meowing for its mother in the street. We rescued the cat. The dog nursed the cat and was convinced it was her baby. She was so proud her baby could climb trees and do things other dogs couldn't do."

Rossellini's next dog was a dachshund named Nando who was with her for nearly 20 years. After meeting the Jack Russell terrier of director (and one-time boyfriend) David Lynch while filming *Blue Velvet*, she got her own Jack Russell named Macaroni, who died a few years ago. "After that, I thought, I can't go through another death," she says. But now, she says, working with guide dogs connects her to the entire life cycle—including helping whelp puppies every summer. "It is the drama of life," she says. "It's inevitable that they die, but it's so painful."

But if she can help it, drama-free is how Rossellini likes to keep her daily activities, including playtime with the pups. "I don't think life is as fun without a dog," she says. "I cannot say that they cure my flu or my headaches, but for sure they give me a great sense of companionship, and they're entertaining. [When they're not there] you miss the little circus they always bring." ●

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