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Red Wolf News

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The First Year

Each year in April and May, wild red wolf puppies are born. At birth, the pups weigh less than a pound, have their eyes closed shut and their ears pressed down. The pups squirm in a pile, safe in their dens. The pups' ears pop up within 10 days and usually a week later, their cobalt blue eyes open.

By about four weeks old, the pups are able to wander out of the den, staying near the den entrance. At six weeks, the pups begin spending more time outside of the den and by 8-9 weeks, the pups are weaned and learning to hunt mice and other small prey. The pups grow rapidly. In the late fall, when the pups are 8-10 months old, they have an adult-sized frame and biologists are able to fit them with radio collars.

For a red wolf puppy, the first year of its life is a critical time for learning, growing, and most of all, surviving. Disease and predators are daily challenges for young red wolves.

On average, only half of all pups born each year in the wild will survive their first year. Those who survive, however, will likely live an average of seven years.

Exciting Year for Red Wolf Pups

Every spring, field biologists with the Red Wolf Recovery Program listen for the squeaky whine of young red wolf pups as they search beneath logs, in the pocosin thickets, and in brush pile burrows for red wolf dens. When biologists locate dens, each pup is counted and tagged and blood samples are collected before it is carefully placed back in its den. This annual census occurs during "puppy season," early-April through late May. This spring, red wolf biologists had a record-breaking puppy season, as the team located 11 dens with 55 pups and added two more puppies to the count via fostering.

Captive-to-wild fostering events are coordinated efforts by the USFWS Red Wolf Recovery Program and the American Zoo & Aquarium Association's Red Wolf Species Survival Plan (RWSSP). Fostering is a new method which allows genetically valuable captive-born red wolf pups to become integrated into the wild red wolf population. The pups develop in the wild, so that they gain survival skills required to mature and reproduce. "This technique is effective," explains Art Beyer, Field Coordinator for the Red Wolf Recovery Program, "when the fostered pups live long enough to contribute their genes to the wild population by producing pups of their own."

This spring, in addition to the two new 2004 arrivals, the USFWS Red Wolf Recovery Program was able to measure the success of a previous 2002 fostering attempt. It was this time two years ago when a bold experiment placed two pups from the North Carolina Zoological Park into a wild den containing two pups of identical age. The male and female pups were successfully adopted by their wild foster mother and raised within the pack. During the following spring of 2003, the two captive-born yearlings remained with their adopted pack and helped raise a new litter of pups. This spring, biologists were hopeful that each of the zoo-born red wolves would produce litters of their own.

One of two female red wolf pups born on Bulls Island at Cape Romain National Wildlife Refuge in South Carolina awaits her transfer to a wild den in northeastern North Carolina.

The male zoo-born wolf, displaced from his adopted pack and forced to establish a range of his own, was successful in securing the alpha position of another established pack, just in time for breeding season. Biologists are celebrating the discovery of a litter of eight puppies that was fathered by the zoo-born male. This rather large litter denotes success for the 2002 fostering attempt. "This event demonstrates that the captive breeding program and the free-ranging population are integral aspects of the Red Wolf Recovery Program. They still depend greatly on each other for the recovery of the species," explains Will Waddell, Coordinator of the RWSSP Captive Breeding Program.

In mid-April, a telemetry intern detected a mortality signal from the zoo-born female's radio tracking collar. A mortality signal is produced when a red wolf does not move for six hours. When the female's body was recovered, all symptoms pointed to complications with pregnancy. "We are saddened at the loss of this zoo-born female and her unborn pups, but are encouraged by her ability to adapt successfully to the wild before dying of natural causes," comments Buddy Fazio, Team Leader of the Red Wolf Recovery Program.

Teacher Workshop Brings the Red Wolf to Classrooms

Does playing games and tracking red wolves sound like fun to you? Well, it was all in a day's work for the sixteen educators from across North Carolina who attended the first-ever Red Wolf Recovery Teacher Workshop at Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge on May 25th. The one-day workshop attracted teachers and park rangers who were hoping to learn more about the recovery of one of America's most endangered mammals and, in the meantime, enhance their curricula and repertoire of environmental education activities. Participants were especially excited about the opportunity to scout for signs of red wolves in the wild and pour plaster casts of their tracks.

The workshop, which can be counted toward the North Carolina Environmental Education Certificate and qualifies as a Continuing Education Unit for school teachers, will be held periodically each year. In exchange for the free workshop, each participant must commit to teach at least one lesson based on the red wolf curriculum. "The workshops are mutually beneficial," explains Outreach Coordinator, Sarah Krueger, "teachers and red wolves alike profit from the experience."

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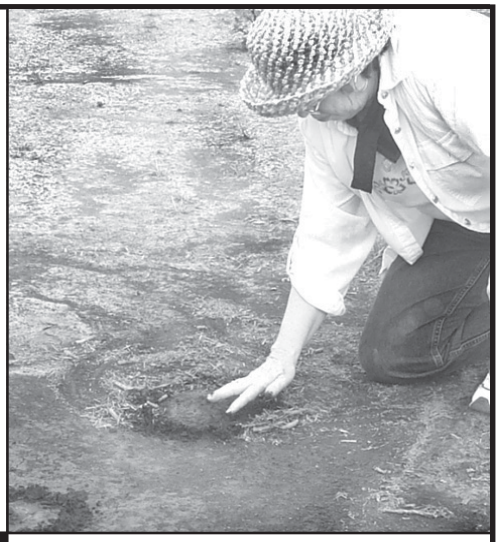

A workshop participant prepares to pour plaster into a wild red wolf track.

Love Connection: Biologists Pair Red Wolves to Form New Packs

Red wolves are extremely social animals that rely on their family groups for survival. The bond between the two breeding wolves of each family group is vital if a pack wants to establish and maintain a territory. However, there comes a time when nearly every red wolf must fend for itself, whether it is a young wolf dispersing from its natal pack or a red wolf that has lost its pack mates.

The lone red wolf is vulnerable to the encroachment of neighboring packs as well as the threat of pairing with a non-wolf mate. A red wolf who cannot locate a suitable red wolf mate may sometimes pair with a coyote or hybrid. If the two animals breed, they can create a litter of hybrid pups who threaten the integrity of the red wolf species. If the non-wolf mate has previously been identified, surgically sterilized and given a radio collar by Recovery Program biologists, there is hope that the red wolf in question may be introduced to a more appropriate mate.

Although the majority of red wolves find suitable mates on their own, the Red Wolf Recovery Program's Adaptive Management Plan to control hybridization calls for the field crew to occasionally create red wolf pairs in areas where non-wolves may infringe on the population. In essence, red wolf biologists sometimes act like match-makers for red wolves, usually lone wolves who occupy the western most territories of the recovery area, as these are most at risk for pairing with a non-wolf.

During the last breeding season, red wolf biologists attempted four pairings, three of which resulted in successful pair bonds. One "love story" involves a three year-old female, 11163F, who was occupying a territory in an isolated area that was not a natural travel corridor for red wolves. Fieldwork suggested that she did not have a mate and there were concerns that a non-wolf might attempt to fill the void. Luckily, biologists picked up two year-old 11188M, who had dispersed from his natal pack and was traveling an area that was already crowded with established wolf packs. It was the ideal opportunity to take a wandering lone male and introduce him to a female who had established territory in an area devoid of other known wolves. 11188M was caught and then immediately released near 11163F. The two wolves soon found each other and telemetry observations indicate that they have bonded and are maintaining a territory.

Of course, the process is not always so simple. Sometimes matchmakers must work a little harder to make a "love connection." Oftentimes, a potential pair will be held during breeding season for six to eight weeks in captivity and then released together. Each match-making attempt is slightly different, depending on the circumstances of the mates-to-be. Biologists can never force wolves to pair, but it is a technique that is worth the effort. "Creating pairs is a unique opportunity to boost red wolf productivity while managing the threat of hybridization," explains Recovery Program biologist Michael Morse. Although red wolves have their share of ill-fated romance, those pairs that do bond and breed will help the rest of the red wolf species live "happily ever after."

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Please address questions and comments to:
Outreach Coordinator
Red Wolf Recovery Program
P.O. Box 1969
Manteo, North Carolina 27954
Email: Redwolf@fws.gov

For more information, visit:
http://alligatorriver.fws.gov
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