



Cutting Teeth

by LESLIE SCHUTTE

It is winter in northeastern North Carolina. The tourists are gone, the fishing is good, and this year's red wolf pups are old enough to be captured and radio-collared. I am the newest addition to the field team working with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Red Wolf Recovery Program. I am the youngest and currently the only female, and I am just learning the art of trapping. Capturing the wolves is the primary duty of the field team, so each day is a learning experience for me.

My opportunity to prove myself now stands in front of me on private property south of the Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge. During a radio-telemetry flight in the summer, as many as eight pups have been sighted with their parents and older siblings. These 9-month-old bundles of joy need new radio collars, just like their parents'. We have less than three days to accomplish the trapping, to accommodate the land manager's schedule. The pressure is on.

We set 18 foot-hold traps and draw a map of their locations. We see a lot of wolf sign, and we hope these youngsters, like most inexperienced wolf pups, will jump right into our traps. Three days just isn't very long to catch a litter of pups. I am going to be first on the trapline in the morning with the help of Amy, our trusty intern. It will be my first trapline check without one of the senior biologists. Whatever happens, I will have to handle it and not let anyone down. And people expect me to sleep tonight?

As we approach the first trap in the morning, our hearts sink. Nothing. A million different scenarios start running through my head. Did the animals move? Could they be sitting on a kill somewhere? Was the trap not set well? Or were the wolves just not interested and walked on by? Oh well, off to the next trap.

This time we strain hard to see something, anything—a mound of newly turned-over dirt, drag hook marks or, better yet, a scared-stiff wolf pup poised on the side of the road. Then, suddenly, there is something! I slam on the brakes and pull over. We are using drag hooks on our traps in lieu of staking them down solid, and the last thing we want to do is obscure the drag marks. I get close enough to see the hole where the buried trap had been and glance back at Amy with a nervous but ecstatic nod. Along the edge of the road are the unmistakable marks of a drag hook sliding through the dirt. Then the marks take a sudden right turn into a fallow field.

We cross the field, following a trail of pushed-down grass. The drag is shaped like an anchor, and as it moves across the ground, it snags vegetation until there is a huge ball of grass at the end of the chain. This trail leads us into a myrtle tree stand so dense we have to duck. A couple of meters away we see the wolf.

She has wrapped herself around the trunk of a myrtle tree and is lying at its base, watching our every move. As I approach her, she tucks in her tail and just lies there, waiting. Like a cat with a toy, she bats at the catchpole that I push toward her. She snaps once at the pole for good measure and then becomes passive. I place the catchpole loop around her neck. Then I muzzle her, take the trap off her and examine her foot. We pop her into a kennel and tote her to



Leslie Schutte holds a captured red wolf pup.

the truck. At the end of the day, a veterinarian and the field crew will weigh and measure her, affix the radio collar, vaccinate her, and draw blood samples for heartworm and other blood tests. I dare to hope I can repeat this success. Maybe the two

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kennels in my truck won't be enough. Better stop these thoughts! I'll jinx myself and not catch anything else.

As I am resetting the trap, a truck comes into view. It is the land manager with the news that there is a "good-sized wolf with his foot in a trap in an intersection, gathering a crowd of onlookers." So much for the jinxing! I have to ask the curious crowd to back up away from the animal so I can get a look at him. He is a pup much bigger than the female and has wrapped himself in full view around a signpost. This wolf is not a happy camper, and I am none too pleased to have an audience.

As I work to restrain the wolf's head, I realize I am straddling a red wolf pup with my back to the crowd, so our audience gets to see our best sides. Then with the wolf safely in the

kennel, I realize that some PR work is in order. It turns out the audience is one of the landowners with his son and some guests touring his land. Bonus! He is impressed. It's a good demonstration of what we are doing and how we are doing it.

In the next hour, we discover three more traps missing. The day is wearing on, and I am out of kennels. It's time to call for reinforcements. Thankfully, my support arrives in under an hour, loaded with extra kennels. We find one pup in a trap near a deep canal, but thankfully the pup is not wet. A wolf dying in a trap from hypothermia in the dangerous December winds would be, to say the least, counterproductive to our mission.

The other pups have taken the traps across open fields, leaving little sign for us to follow and making our



After being radio-collared, this red wolf pup is ready to be released from the crate.



Sometimes a pup needs to be persuaded to leave the comfort of the crate.



Above: Karen Beck (left) and Leslie Schutte try to direct the pup away from the road.

Opposite: Having found its legs, the wolf pup runs off.

All photos: Courtesy of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service



pup and put him across my shoulders because I am too tired to carry him. I can't even imagine what I look like coming out of the brush, a red wolf pup across my shoulders. This is a Kodak moment for sure. By the time we kennel him and rendezvous at the trucks, it is late. The day has flown by! And this is my job! Someone please pinch me.

I reset the traps for the night's activities with the potential of catching three more animals. Then we all load up our precious cargoes and caravan back to the office to process the fantastic five. By the time we arrive, it is dark. We unload the animals and set up to process them. I help with the first couple but then gladly give up my position for a seat on the workbench. As I lean back and watch the team work, I reflect on this day and feel a surge of pride. From all the trap sets, mine have taken four out of the five pups caught. This is, I learn, a new record. The rookie has set a record! I am too tired to gloat, but I reserve the right to do it later.

searches long and exhausting. The team splits up to make the search more efficient. An hour passes before I finally see a recently traveled trail heading into the overgrowth lining the banks of a ditch. It opens up into a slightly treed area. Where the grass is matted down, it looks as if an animal has been hung up but has freed itself. I follow along the ditch, peering over every couple of feet. Hearing something move, I cross my fingers as I look down into the grassy ditch. There I see the rear end of a

wolf pup whose head is in a clump of grass. It reminds me of that classic child's game—If I can't see you, you can't see me. I can just hear the pup thinking, "She can't see me, she can't see me."

By the time I manipulate the pup up the side of the ditch, I am exhausted. I muzzle and blindfold him and press him to the ground. Then I attempt to cover his ears as I yell to let the others know I have found him. A team member comes to assist me. She helps me pick up the



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We finish up and close down shop. The five pups will be spending the night with us to keep them out of the traps and to increase our chances of catching the last three pups in the litter. I am dying to get home, take a shower and crawl into bed. I am determined to be first on the trapline again in the morning.

The next morning we release the pups away from the traps in a timberline, where they will probably lie low for the day. Then it's off to check the line. The first missing trap has good drag marks that lead right to a pup crouched under some bushes. We quickly kennel her and find another missing trap. The drag has left little sign, so off we go in search of our lost pup, number 7. We finally

find her lying in the middle of a flooded area, soaked to the bone. She is so cold that we put her in the truck and crank up the heat. As they warm up, wet wolf pups do not smell so good. I can't imagine what the inside of that cab smelled like.

But the dedication has paid off. In three whirlwind days, we have caught seven out of eight pups. Forgotten are the hours with no food, the raw December weather, the worry over the well-being of the pups. I have "cut my teeth" and earned the respect and trust of my teammates. I shouldn't gloat, but I will. Just a little. ■

Leslie Schutte works as a biological technician for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Red Wolf Recovery Program.

Jennifer Gilbreath releases a red wolf pup wearing its new radio collar.

