

WOLVES IN THE UNITED STATES

Back to the Wild: The Twentieth Anniversary of the Red Wolf Reintroduction

by *Cornelia Hutt*

In 1980, red wolves were considered extinct in the wild. Habitat destruction and human persecution had forced the last red wolves into marginal habitat along the Texas and Louisiana coasts, where they interbred with coyotes and succumbed to parasite infestation. After years of captive breeding, eight red wolves consisting of four breeding pairs were reintroduced to the wild in 1987 at the Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge (ARNWR) in northeastern North Carolina. This was the first attempt ever to restore an officially extinct carnivore to a portion of its historic range.

No one knew if the wolves would make it. Would they learn to hunt? Would they breed successfully in the wild? Would they adjust to the humid heat of the coastal summers and the chill of raw winters?

Make it they did! One year after the reintroduction, the first litter of red wolf pups was born in the wild on the ARNWR. During the ensuing 20 years, many more pups have been



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born and survived. The population has expanded to over 100 wolves roaming free in a five-county area that includes two other wildlife refuges and pockets of private land as well.

The Red Wolf Recovery Team has faced a number of obstacles throughout the years and has met each challenge with science-based action plans and on-the-ground fieldwork. However, in spite of the successes of the recovery program, red wolves continue to die because of humans. At one time, vehicular accidents were the number one cause of adult red wolf mortality. Today, and over the past

several years, gunshot and “suspicious circumstances” are the primary causes of adult red wolf deaths.

In response to an alarming loss of red wolf breeders, the Red Wolf Recovery Program in partnership with the Red Wolf Coalition and Defenders of Wildlife has launched a major hunter education initiative. Thousands of hunter education cards (shown above) have been distributed throughout the state. This wallet-sized card helps hunters distinguish red wolves from eastern coyotes and promotes the message, “Don’t Shoot!” east of NC State Highway 32.

The Red Wolf Coalition is seeking funding to develop a permanent exhibit that will demonstrate the benefit red wolves bring to hunters and farmers in rural northeastern North Carolina. We want 2007 to be a year of celebration for the red wolf and for the people who are determined to ensure its long-term survival in the wild.

 For more information about the Red Wolf Coalition, visit the Web site at www.redwolves.com, or go to <http://www.fws.gov/alligatorriver/redwolf.html>.

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