

Bombing Range Balloons

by Chris Lucash

Red wolf whelping season is a brief period each spring that the field biologists both look forward to and dread. This stage of the wolves' biological cycle is the payoff for our work throughout the rest of the year. It holds the promise of a new wolf generation and foretells, in part, the future status of the population. An annual, critical first step in monitoring and managing the red wolf population occurs at the dens. It sounds deceptively quick and simple: track to the breeding female's radio collar, find the pups, take a drop of blood from each for a genetic record and pedigree confirmation, and insert a tiny transponder chip under each pup's skin for lifelong instant identification.

The dreaded part stems from knowing that red wolves choose isolated den locations that are as unapproachable as possible. Sometimes the mother is not at the den, or she detects us before we get close and leads us off in the wrong direction. The whelping season also coincides with other uninviting seasonal changes: the beginning of high heat and humidity, the prolific growth of thorny vines and poison ivy, and the burgeoning population of biting insects.

Locating the Gator pack den is always tough. This pack dens near the target area of an air force bombing range; thus, the field crew has to work on Sunday, when the range isn't "hot" with machine gun strafing and practice bombs. Because the breeding female's radio transmitter has quit functioning, finding her den means tracking her mate, who might be near the pups. This requires fighting dense shrubs and downed trees overgrown with blackberry and entwined with honeysuckle, greenbrier and grapevine. Always the ground is rarely visible and all but unreachable when I fall.



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Red wolves choose isolated den locations that field biologists must reach by fighting through dense shrubs and downed trees overgrown with blackberry and entwined with honeysuckle, greenbrier and grapevine.

For long stretches, I have to drag myself on my elbows through low narrow tunnels, driven on by the fleeting hope of finding a den or a pup but also by the unnerving thought of countless seed ticks traveling up my clothing and the maddening realization that dozens have already made it through to my skin. Most searches yield pups only after many hours and repeated attempts. Some years, I find nothing but lonely, empty day-beds, followed then by several weeks of itching.

In spring 2007, we were fortunate. The male wolf's signal indicated he

was in an isolated patch of myrtle shrubs in a sparsely vegetated bog not far from our trucks. As a visual reference, I noticed his signal came from just north of two vagrant party balloons that had snagged on a nearby branch. I could see well-traveled trails leading through the bog in that direction. Moving quietly, we circled around to get downwind and crept within a few meters of the male wolf before he detected us and fled. Surprisingly, within 30 minutes, we found two healthy pups, one male and one female.

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<http://www.fws.gov/alligatorriver/red%20wolf/refieldnotes.html>

After processing the pups, we started back, lighthearted, relieved and joking. On the way in, we hadn't paid much attention to those two balloons bobbing in the breeze near the den. But now we took a closer look. They could not have been snagged there long with the thorny vines, wind, machine gun rounds, exploding practice bombs and all—a couple of days, tops. Someone made an offhand comment about birthday balloons for the newborn pups, and we all laughed. A co-worker veered off trail to retrieve the balloons, and his return put a sudden end to our jabbering. “Happy Birthday!” proclaimed a yellow balloon. The other was white and appropriately covered in tiny black puppy footprints. I took a photograph to remember and to prove the remarkable coincidence to my wife.

After more than 20 years of work with red wolves, I see some drawbacks. I get stuck in routines, and sometimes think I have it all figured



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In spring 2007, Chris Lucash located two healthy red wolf pups—nearby were these two balloons bobbing in the breeze near the den.

out. Often, however, I am reminded that I do not. And I look forward to “going to work” every day—sometimes even on Sunday. ■

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