

Personal Encounters

The Bulls Boys

by Michael L. Morse

You never forget the first time a wild wolf responds to your howls, offered into the dark night. But my first attempt was even more memorable because, not being an accomplished howler, I finished with a series of uncontrollable coughs—to the great amusement of the senior wolf biologists. Everyone stopped laughing, though, when the two newly released red wolf brothers returned my howl. Although my vocal cords felt scorched, the swelling sensation in my chest and mind made all else insignificant.

I remember clearly when the “Bulls Boys” arrived from Bulls Island in 1989. These red wolf siblings, 331M and 332M, had been born in captivity on the island the previous year and released with their parents into the wilds of the Cape Romain National Wildlife Refuge off the coast of South Carolina. When the “Boys” were later set free into the Milltail Farms on the Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge in northeastern North Carolina, we had no clue that they would catapult the fledgling wolf project onto the road to success.

As yearlings, the brothers gave no hint of their substantial impact on the recovery program. With their tall, lanky bodies, sizable feet and broad heads, their appearance was not particularly impressive. Only one other wolf lived at Milltail Farms—the female 351F. We thought the 10,000 acres of fields and forest were enough to support the brothers and 351F, plus another wolf family. The Bulls Boys had other ideas.

Only a month after the release of a new wolf family (227M and 205F and their four pups) into Milltail

Red wolf siblings 331M and 332M, known as the “Bulls Boys,” were born in captivity on Bulls Island and released with their parents into the wilds of the Cape Romain National Wildlife Refuge off the coast of South Carolina in 1989.

Farms, the yearling brothers attacked and killed adult 227M. In the following months, one of the “Boys” (331M) paired with 205F (the mother of the four pups), and the other brother (332M) paired with 351F. To top all this, the Bulls Boys allowed 205F’s four pups to remain in the Farms and grow up with the two packs! The possibility of two family groups in the Farms producing two litters, one of which would contain second-generation pups was incredible. Second-generation pups were a major measure of the recovery program’s success, and it was happening in the first two years!

Unfortunately, it was all too good to last. Unused to negotiating highway traffic on Bulls Island, 332M did not have 351F’s experience with cars. She regularly crossed Highway 264, probably to hunt marsh rabbits. One night just before the 1989 breeding season, 332M was killed while crossing a highway just north of Milltail Farms.

In 2000, no longer a “Boy” at the advanced age of 12, 331M was still hanging on and living with the



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Milltail pack. One of his pups raised his own family virtually “next door” at the Farms, tolerated by the Old Man, who likely would not have given up a portion of his territory in his younger days. Near the end of his life, he may no longer have been the breeding male of the Milltail pack, but he has left a living legacy. Siring at least 22 pups from seven litters, his genes are today an integral part of the wild population of red wolves in northeastern North Carolina. And I hope it’s true, what the old-timers say: “All dogs go to heaven.”

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