

Chris Crowe



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Free to Wander

by DAVID R. RABON JR.

The conservation of an endangered species is a slow, incremental process, and the story of red wolf (*Canis rufus*) restoration is no exception. Many successes and failures have occurred throughout four decades of red wolf conservation, but the effort has moved steadily forward, never losing its momentum.

Following the unprecedented and precarious attempt to save the species by removing the few remaining red wolves from the wild, the birth of a litter of pups in captivity 30 years ago was a victory in the struggle to recover the species. Ten years later another important milestone occurred in the recovery of the red wolf and ultimately in the conservation of other imperiled carnivores.

"Nov. 12 1986 — Wolves arrived today, numerous media personnel." A short entry in a biologist's field notes marked the arrival of eight red wolves that would soon be released into the wilds of northeastern North Carolina. The wolves, four male-female pairs, would represent a new chapter in the species' recovery. How these wolves would respond when set free to wander the pocosins, agricultural fields and forested swamps of the Alligator River

National Wildlife Refuge was anyone's guess. They had never experienced life outside of a pen, and their release would be the first of its kind.

Born and raised in captivity, the wolves were healthy adults ranging from 3 to 6 years of age. Some, including males 140M and 227M and females 196F and 194F, were experienced and proven breeders. Their role in this endeavor would be to sire and whelp pups in the wild. The others, males 184M and 211M and females 231F and 205F, were chosen because they exhibited a wildness the biologists hoped would contribute to their survival.

Upon arrival at the refuge, the wolves were paired, radio-collared and placed in a pen, each named for its location. Wolves 184M and 205F were penned at Point Peter; 227M and 194F were placed at Phantom Road; 140M and 231F were positioned at Pole Road but later transferred to South Lake; and 211M and 196F, first placed at South Lake, were later moved to Pole Road. The wolves' new home was similar in many ways to the captive environment in which they had spent their entire lives. The difference would be in their ability to leave it.

Chris Crowe



Red wolves were first released in the Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge in northeastern North Carolina in 1987. The refuge contains diverse habitats, including several types of wetland, which are home to numerous wildlife species, such as black bears and wading birds.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service



That opportunity came on September 14, 1987. After a lifetime in captivity and 10 months in a pen on the refuge, the first of the red wolf pairs was set free. In contrast to the excitement generated by the wolves' arrival in northeastern North Carolina, there was no media fanfare for the release.

Chris Crowe



The new South Lake wolves (140M and 231F) were the first to be set free, but they didn't immediately take advantage of their new independence. For several days the wolves seemed reluctant to venture outside of the pen. Eventually, though, they took their first steps of freedom—first the female, then the male. The other releases occurred about two weeks later, on October 1. One by one, the pens at Point Peter, Pole Road, and Phantom Road were opened. After a century's absence, red wolves were once again roaming coastal North Carolina.

And roam they did.

Chris Crowe



Chris Crowe



When red wolves were reintroduced in 1987, they were first placed in pens, such as the one shown here, before being released to the wild.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service



The wolves took to exploring the refuge and, to the dismay of the biologists, the nearby communities. By mid-October, the new South Lake male (140M) had ventured into a small town east of the refuge. Scrambling to prevent an incident, the biologists set out to capture him. The South Lake male was eventually tranquilized and returned to his pen, but not before ambling around the post office and a few homes and creating quite a stir among town residents.

To limit the wolves' roving, the new South Lake pair was relocated and released at a site in the southern portion of the refuge, where they remained until mid-December when the female was found dead on the bank of Pamlico Sound. The necropsy report attributed her death to "pleural effusion and internal bleeding," most likely the result of an unknown infection. The new South Lake female was the first mortality following the release. Sadly, she would not be the last.

Meanwhile, the other wolves were also moving around the landscape. The new Pole Road pair (211M and 196F) traveled toward the Phantom Road male (227M), who had remained in the vicinity of his pen. His mate, the Phantom Road female (194F), had taken to frequenting private property, like the South Lake male. Abandoned by his mate, the Phantom Road male was left to vie for his territory alone against the new Pole Road pair. Eventually, the Phantom Road female was recaptured and reunited with her mate back in their pen. But the new Pole Road pair remained in the area. Sometime around Christmas day (1987), the Phantom Road female and the Pole Road pair got into a clash through the pen fence. The Phantom Road female was severely injured in the process and had to be euthanized.

The death of the two females and the disruption of the two wolf pairs during winter 1987 took its toll

on the reintroduction effort. In an attempt to restore the balance, the biologists released two female wolves, a yearling (322F) and a two-year-old (300F), in spring 1988. Although these wolves would be released too late in the breeding season to find mates and reproduce, the biologists remained optimistic for the birth of wild red wolves from the other wolf pairs.

Their optimism was rewarded on April 28, when the Point Peter female (205F) gave birth to a single female pup (351F). A second pup, a female (344F), born to the new Pole Road pair followed on May 5. Although the litters consisted of only one pup each (a typical litter is four to six pups), the biologists were elated over the wild births. More than a decade had passed since the last red wolf pup was born in the wild. Their excitement, though, would be tempered by even more loss.

The new Pole Road female died on May 25, 1988, succumbing to a uterine infection following the birth of her pup a few weeks earlier. Four

days later (May 29) the Point Peter male was killed when struck by a vehicle, as was the new South Lake male in mid-June (June 15). And later that year (December 27), the new Pole Road male died when he suffocated on the kidney of a raccoon he was devouring.

Naturally, with so many losses, more wolves would be needed for the program to continue. In the ensuing years, more captive-born wolves would be set free, and with these releases came the formation of new pairs and the birth of pups. In 1989, the Phantom Road male was paired with the Point Peter female and produced a litter of four pups. After the death of the Phantom Road male in September 1989, the Point Peter female paired with a newly released, island-born male (331M). They produced a litter in 1991, one of four wild litters whelped that year. The reintroduction effort was taking off; five short years into the reintroduc-

tion there were 30 free-ranging wolves in northeastern North Carolina.

In the years following the initial release, wild litters would be born of wild-born wolves, and the release of captive-born adult wolves would end. The original eight wolves may not have contributed to the program in terms of reproduction. But their release, the first reintroduction of a carnivore that had been declared extinct in the wild, solidified the red wolf's place in the history books. The red wolf reintroduction effort also became a model for reintroducing other imperiled species. With that, it is impossible to deny the contribution these first eight wolves made in preserving the future of the species and other species like it. ■

David R. Rabon Jr. is an endangered species biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Raleigh, North Carolina, and a Ph.D. candidate at North Carolina State University, where he is studying factors affecting social and reproductive behaviors of red wolves.



Ryan Nordsvan, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service