



Chris Crowe

Return to the Wild

The Cliff-hanger Story of Red Wolf Recovery

by STEVE GROOMS



The red wolf just barely dodged the bullet of extinction, not once but several times.

Evelyn L. Mercer

When wildlife managers give progress reports on their programs, they typically exude confidence. “Well, we face some challenges,” they will report, “but we’ve got this thing going the right way.” Sometimes, however, the truth behind those blandly optimistic reports is dramatic. The managers never report about those nights they stumble home after a disastrous day and admit to anyone patient enough to listen, “Oh man, I think we’ve had it.”

In the case of the red wolf program, the drama could hardly have been more gripping. The red wolf program has been a lot like an Indiana Jones cliff-hanger film, full of narrow escapes from situations that looked like sure death. The red wolf just barely dodged the bullet of extinction, not once but several times.

In one sense, it was sheer luck that saved the red wolf from extinction in the 1960s. For decades, federal policy had been to extirpate wolves. That process had eradicated red wolves from all but a sliver of vile habitat along the Texas and Louisiana Gulf Coast.

Then, just before the red wolf was wiped out forever, more sophisticated thinking about predators led to a stunning reversal. The animal that had been considered a menace to be eradicated would, under the new program, be protected and managed as a critically endangered species. So abrupt was the change that for one year the red wolf was listed as endangered while federal agents continued to trap and destroy them. If management had drifted for another decade before the great change, the red wolf

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Many people—wildlife biologists, agency officials, wildlife managers, researchers, citizens—have been instrumental in red wolf recovery. Their names and their specific contributions would be listed here if space permitted. To represent all the heroes of red wolf recovery, *International Wolf* has chosen red wolf recovery pioneers Curtis Carley, Glynn Riley, Roy McBride, Warren Parker and Mike Phillips. *International Wolf* salutes them and all the men and women who have devoted a great portion of their lives and energies to saving the red wolf from extinction and returning it to freedom.

would probably have been pushed off the cliff of extinction.

Studies done in the 1960s revealed that humans weren't the only threat to red wolves. The new and more insidious threat was hybridization. Red wolves were mating with coyotes. After passage of the federal Endangered Species Act of 1973, managers tried to save the red wolf from being genetically swamped with coyote genes. Agents trapped and destroyed coyotes in the last remaining red wolf habitat.

That effort failed. The supply of coyotes was virtually endless. The situation was so dire that it seemed the red wolf was doomed to disappear as a distinct species. That drove managers to an extreme remedy. They would save the red wolf from extinction by trapping all remaining wolves and putting them in captive breeding centers.

Consider how desperate that was. Removing the last free red wolves was the opposite of the intent of the Endangered Species Act. Red wolves might be saved from genetic extinction but at the price of being lost from the wild. Managers could not be sure that it would ever be politically possible to reintroduce wolves, one

of the most reviled species on earth. They could not be sure that wolves would survive the transition from zoo life in captivity to life in the wild. No predator species had ever been successfully restored. This decision was a massive gamble analogous to putting a man dying of cancer in a cryogenic chamber, hoping that some day the technology for thawing and curing him would appear.

And then things got worse. When managers began examining the 400 or so "wolves" they managed to trap and confine, they saw the taint of coyote blood in many. They culled away dubious wolves until there were just 43. But there was no test to indicate which of those animals were pure wolves. Managers went through a second anguishing round of culling. As managers destroyed the animals suspected of being hybrids they had to worry if they were killing authentic red wolves—one of the most endangered species in North America. After the last cull there were just 17 wolves, only 14 of which were able to breed.

When those red wolves began reproducing, managers were faced with daunting problems. Where could they reintroduce red wolves to the

Pioneers of Red Wolf

Glynn Riley

An outdoorsman and trapper who worked on a coyote control program in south Texas, Riley realized that red wolves were fast disappearing because of inbreeding with coyotes, starvation and disease. Riley urged radio-collaring and tracking to determine how many red wolves remained on the southeastern Texas coast.

Curtis Carley

In the early 1970s, Carley led the red wolf recovery project. Realizing the animal was on the verge of extinction, he recommended removing the last red wolves from the Texas and Louisiana coast, breeding them in captivity and finding a place to reintroduce their offspring in the wild.

And then a few wild-born wolves began rearing their own young. With that, the red wolf made the treacherous passage from zoo-born dummies to wild wolves. The wild-born pups of wild-born wolves were the real deal.

wild? It had to be a place where humans would accept them, if such a place existed. And it had to be a place where coyotes wouldn't hybridize with the red wolf, although coyotes are ubiquitous in the former range of the red wolf.

The next challenges to the program were legal and political. Managers struggled to find an area where people would tolerate wolves. Meanwhile, critical changes had to be made to the Endangered Species Act, which was so rigid in its original form that it imposed a straight jacket on restoration programs.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service finally found a place to release a few wolves. The Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge release site was a

coyote-free peninsula. The presence of water on three sides reduced the chances that wolves would run away or that coyotes would enter the restoration area.

The first reintroduction release happened in 1987. That began another harrowing time for the red wolf program. In spite of determined optimism by managers, everyone knew that the wolves faced daunting odds against survival. It takes more than claws and teeth to survive as a predator. Above all, what is required is knowledge. Wild wolves have to know how to find and kill food. They must know what animals or objects are life-threatening. They need to know to avoid humans. The reintroduced wolves were dangerously naive.

As expected, mortality rates were high. Wolves were hit by cars, had accidents, drowned, succumbed to disease, hung out around humans or just disappeared. About 80 percent of the reintroduced wolves died shortly after being released.

In spite of that, managers kept releasing more captive-bred wolves. Eventually, a few wolves survived long enough to mate and raise young. And then a few wild-born wolves began rearing their own young. With that, the red wolf made the treacherous passage from zoo-born dummies to wild wolves. The wild-born pups of wild-born wolves were the real deal.

Just when it looked like the program was a success, disaster struck again. In the mid-1990s,

Recovery

Roy McBride

A skilled trapper, McBride caught canids in western Louisiana and eastern Texas when the all-out effort was being made to capture red wolves for captive breeding.

Warren Parker

Parker ran one of the boldest and most innovative wildlife projects ever undertaken. The first Endangered Species Coordinator in the United States, Parker was Red Wolf Coordinator of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's red wolf reintroduction project starting in 1984.

Mike Phillips

From 1986 to 1994, Phillips was Coordinator of Field Projects for the Red Wolf Recovery Program. He serves on the International Wolf Center's board of directors.

The Red Wolf Recovery Program

has been granted the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) 2007 North American Conservation Award. This prestigious award recognizes the outstanding work of the Species Survival Plan, the island propagation efforts, the restoration of the wild population, the ongoing scientific research and more. Will Waddell, Coordinator of the Species Survival Plan (SSP) for the red wolf, accepted the award in Philadelphia in mid-September 2007.

coyotes began infiltrating the recovery area, and wolves began breeding with coyotes. While program leaders maintained determined optimism in public, some insiders believed that the red wolf program was doomed. It hadn't been possible to keep wolves and coyotes apart in the 1970s, and now it was proving just as difficult to keep coyotes from obliterating the red wolf species through hybridization.

Just in time, in 1999 managers crafted a new management protocol called "adaptive management." It focused intensive control on coyotes in the zone where they were most likely to encounter wolves. In spite of the discouraging precedent, this new protocol succeeded, and the program survived another crisis.

Although Indiana Jones almost dies about twenty times in each of his films, somehow he is always alive when the final reel has run and they roll the credits. Today, in spite of all the close brushes with extinction, the red wolf is still with us. Don't let anyone suggest it was easy! ■

Steve Grooms has been writing about wolves and wolf management since 1976. He is the author of the book Return of the Wolf, and he serves on International Wolf's advisory committee.

Wildlife biologists do a workup on a red wolf. A workup includes taking blood samples for genetic testing and to assess health, taking measurements (e.g., weight and body, limb and ear length), looking at overall condition and attaching a radio collar.

