

Red Wolf



COURTESY U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

Past

The red wolf (currently recognized as a different species than the gray wolf) once ranged throughout the Southeastern United States. Because of its wide distribution, the red wolf played a critical role in a variety of ecosystems, from pocosin lowlands to forested mountains. By the 1970s, habitat fragmentation and aggressive predator control claimed all but seventeen wild red wolves.

In a last-ditch effort to save the species, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) biologists captured the few remaining red wolves to start a captive-breeding program.

Reintroduction in the wild began in the late 1970s with a successful but limited release of captive-born red wolves on Bulls Island, part of the Cape Romain National Wildlife Refuge, off the coast of South Carolina. This experiment was followed by releases of captive-bred red wolves in two national wildlife refuges in North Carolina: Alligator River beginning in 1987 and later in Pocosin Lakes.

A second reintroduction in 1991 released red wolves in Great Smoky Mountains National Park along the North Carolina-Tennessee border. However, these animals could not find sufficient food or raise young successfully, and were removed from the park in 1998.

Present

Since 2010, the red wolf population reintroduced in North Carolina has plummeted. This decline can be attributed to a number of threats, including gunshot mortality and agency mismanagement. In 2015, the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission demanded an end to the red wolf recovery program. Succumbing to pressure, FWS abandoned recovery efforts, and, in June of 2018, proposed confining red wolves to the Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge and adjacent bombing range--12% of the current territory--and allowing landowners to shoot wolves on private lands.

Future

To ensure the species has a future in the wild, FWS must commit to science-based recovery and redouble its efforts in North Carolina.

Red wolves also need additional reintroduction sites. In 1990, FWS adopted a red wolf recovery plan that called for releases at three separate sites to create a total wild population of at least 220 red wolves, while maintaining a captive population of 330 for future releases. Studies have identified several promising sites throughout the Southeastern United States,

which require further evaluation. (Carley and Melcher 1983, Van Manen et al. 2000)

Although the majority of North Carolinians support red wolf recovery, public misconception and intolerance also pose a significant challenge. To address these challenges, incentive-based coexistence strategies will play a critical role in safeguarding the red wolf's future. Ultimately, Defenders will continue to influence sound science and policy, educate the public, and protect the red wolf from extinction.

How You Can Help

Become a Defenders member with a tax-deductible donation.

Join Red Wolves-Defenders of Wildlife on Facebook to stay apprised of updates and opportunities to take action on behalf of the world's most endangered canine.

Learn more about red wolves at Defenders.org

Current Red Wolf Habitat in the Southeast



Defenders advocates the restoration of red wolf populations in appropriate suitable habitat in numbers sufficient to ensure long-term survival of red wolves and maintenance of the critical role they play in the ecosystem. In addition to the area of northeastern North Carolina where red wolves are now present (defined by solid red line on map), researchers have identified potential reintroduction sites that have yet to be thoroughly evaluated.

References

Carley, C. J. and J. L. Mechler. 1983. *An Experimental Reestablishment of Red Wolves (Canis rufus) on the Tennessee Valley Authority's Land Between Lakes*. Unpublished.

