



# Return to the wild:

## The cliffhanger story of red wolf recovery

In the case of the Red Wolf Recovery Program, the drama could hardly have been more gripping. Red wolf restoration has been a lot like an Indiana Jones cliffhanger 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. Steve Grooms explains.

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."

### A stunning revival

In one sense, it was sheer luck that saved the red wolf from extinction in the 1960s. For decades, US 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 a 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 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 (ESA) 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 ESA. 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 had 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 at that time, 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 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 wolves, although coyotes are ubiquitous in the former range of the red wolf.





## Legal and political challenges

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 ESA, which was so rigid in its original form that it imposed a straight jacket on restoration programs.

The US Fish and Wildlife Service finally found a place to release a few wolves: The Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge release site in northeastern North Carolina was a 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 naïve. 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.

1. Chris finds a red wolf den
2. Red wolf pups

Just when it looked like the program was a success, disaster struck again. In the mid-1990s, coyotes began infiltrating the recovery area, and where there were not established red wolf pack territories, dispersing 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.

## Adaptive Management

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!

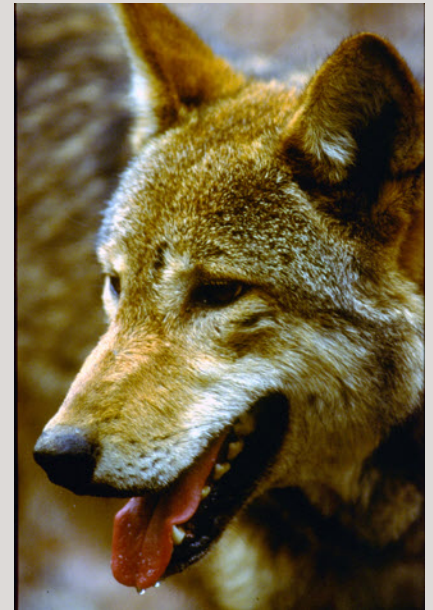
Steve Grooms has been writing about wolves and wolf management since 1976. He is the author of the critically acclaimed book *Return of the Wolf*, and he serves on the International Wolf Center magazine advisory committee.

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# RED WOLVES

• at a glance •



### Where do red wolves live today?

Approximately 100-130 wild red wolves inhabit 1.7 million acres of public and private land in northeastern North Carolina. An additional 190 red wolves live in captive breeding facilities.

### Why should red wolves be protected?

The red wolf is a unique species of wolf. Once an important member of the southeastern US ecological community, this top predator contributes to the overall biological diversity of the region where it now lives.

### What are the most important steps to securing the future of red wolves?

- Coyote control measures must continue in order to preserve distinctive red wolf genes.
- Two other areas where wild red wolves can live must be found.
- A Red Wolf Center must be built to educate the public about red wolves and to promote public acceptance of red wolves.

### How can you help red wolves?

The Red Wolf Coalition's mission is to advocate for the long-term survival of red wolf populations. The Coalition is grateful for the UK Wolf Conservation Trust's generous support! You can help the Red Wolf Coalition ensure that the howl of the red wolf will never be silenced by extinction.

- Learn more about red wolves. Go to [www.redwolves.com](http://www.redwolves.com) (a new website is in the works!) and to [www.fws.gov/redwolf](http://www.fws.gov/redwolf).
- You can donate online at [www.redwolves.com](http://www.redwolves.com). You can also contact Kim Wheeler, RWC Executive Director, at [kwheeler@redwolves.com](mailto:kwheeler@redwolves.com). The RWC is able to accept transfers of money from outside the US.
- The RWC is raising funds to build a viewing enclosure so that people can see red wolves "up close and natural" in a spacious habitat. Contact Kim Wheeler about ways you can help make that happen for red wolves!