

Red Wolf Recovery Program *Field Notes and Observations*

(Field notes are observations made by the red wolf wildlife biologists: Art, Michael, Chris, Ford and Ryan and, occasionally, by a seasonal intern working as the red wolf caretaker.)

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MY EXPERIENCE AS A RED WOLF CARETAKER

I recently had the rare privilege to immerse myself in the world of the red wolf of North Carolina as an intern for the Red Wolf Recovery Program at Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge. As the Red Wolf Caretaker, I essentially lived and breathed *canis rufus* (red wolf), as well as the inevitable *latrans* variant (eastern coyotes) now ever-present in the east USA), and along with these responsibilities came many rewards, both on a personal and professional level.

I came upon the internship as I was researching opportunities for that crucial “field experience” necessary when pursuing a career on a wildlife refuge. Until then, I was only peripherally aware of the red wolf program’s mission, but had always been intrigued by the first restoration of a wolf species into the wild of the United States. (Yes, even before the much more publicized Yellowstone wolves!). As an older, non-traditional student, I was also seeking an alternative to the multitude of “dorm style” internships commonly available, and the caretaker position could not have been a more perfect fit.

This position is not for the faint of heart or the social butterfly, however, for although the cabin provided was beautiful and the setting could not have been more peaceful and serene, the living conditions went a bit beyond “rustic”, falling closer to the “primitive” category. No luxuries like electricity, or potable water, or phone, or internet, or really any of the eases of the civilized world. I faced these circumstances as welcome challenges rather than problems. There is an ample amount of time spent noticeably alone, and there are weeks with very little human contact. The whole situation was very “Waldenesque”, and the simple, solitary lifestyle only added character to the experience.

The best part about living in the Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge ecosystem (swamps, inlets, forests, canals, agricultural fields) was the daily encounters with the wildlife of North Carolina. Migrating flocks of geese and red-winged blackbirds, thousands strong, provided background dinner music at dusk, later joined by the hooting owls and multitude of

frogs. Each morning, black bears stomped and shuffled and scraped their way through a heavily traveled (though not by humans!) path behind the cabin. A friendly argument with the resident river otters was a daily staple with my morning coffee beside the front pond...otters can, indeed, growl! And I have to mention the other “wildlife” that became very familiar – the “birds” of the military that roared over the area, quieting all other sounds in the deafness of the latent burst of noise. And then the jet is gone, and every creature in the area is uproariously protesting the interruption of their songs.

My favorite “wildlife encounter”, of course, was the daily involvement with the Recovery Program. The wildlife that I was there to care for rewarded me with sudden serenades; the howlings were always unexpected, and never failed to speed up my heartbeat and bring a smile to my face. Try as I might (though it took awhile to get over the self-consciousness!), they never returned any of my attempts at “howling them up”, but that didn’t stop me from giving it a go! When I heard that eerie, high pitched carousing my very first night at Alligator River, I knew I was in for an exciting, once-in-a-lifetime adventure.

First impressions are usually correct, and this was no exception. I learned things about wolves (and myself), that I didn’t know I didn’t know. I never knew what would be in store with each new day. My first experience with a field capture is a great example of the unpredictable. The day before, an injured red wolf male was caught, and there was concern about his mate having also sustained injuries. So we were out using telemetry to track the female, and everyone was somewhat befuddled when the signal seemed to be broadcasting the strongest near an old abandoned trailer at the edge of the woods. She was so badly hurt, and the weather was so cold at the time, she found the easiest refuge in that old shack. As if finding a wolf in the closet of a shack is not enough of a story, it turns out she was sharing the residence with an emaciated hunting dog! This would never happen if even one of them had been healthy, but if we had not found them that day, it is unlikely either would have made it. There was a happy ending to this story however, and the Manteo Dog Pound graciously took in the dog and spoiled her rotten and found her a wonderful new home, and the lucky female wolf spent a little bit of time at the Sandy Ridge Facility being rehabilitated, and I’m happy to report that she was released in the weeks after I left.

The time I spent with the program was during red wolf breeding season, a very busy time of the year. The biologists spend much of the day – and sometimes into the night – in field tracking, trapping, and telemetry monitoring. There is an amazing amount of data to keep track of, but these professionals have an impressive and thorough knowledge of each individual wolf. A record is kept for each collared animal, which is identified by a special number, containing

every bit of information and history collected about its life. This information is then used to help monitor its health, position on the refuge, and generally keep track of its behavior and condition.

This information is especially helpful during breeding season, as the biologists sometimes help nature along a bit and introduce a pair to each other as a way to ensure genetic preservation and diversity in this still delicate and endangered species. One of my favorite memories – I still chuckle when I think about it – was on one of my first days on the job; while assisting with my first temporary capture and restoration, the biologists began singing *I'm in the Mood for Love* as we released the wolves into the holding facility. Time will tell if their serenade was assistive!

Roughly half of these “blind-dating” wolves remain a pair once they are released back onto the Refuge. (Yet, much like us, the other half prefers to choose their own mate to pair with and form a permanent pack). Overall, this method helps assure a genetically viable red wolf population in the wild.

The coyote population in North Carolina seems to be growing, so the risk of a red wolf and eastern coyote cross-breeding continues to be managed on the Albemarle Peninsula. Adaptive management used in controlling coyotes in the restoration area has provided encouraging results, despite the many complications presented by legalities and by nature.

The *Canis rufus* (red wolf) population continues to increase with each passing year, but challenges remain. Professionals continue to restore red wolves amidst challenges of gunshot mortality and human import of coyotes. Only through the help of such dedicated professionals and community support can steady progress continue. I will always be honored to have had a small part in leading these valuable predators into life in the twenty-first century.

If you are interested in becoming a Red Wolf Intern, visit the following link for information:

<http://www.fws.gov/redwolf/rwintern.html>