

# What is a red wolf?

**Status:** Endangered/experimental non-essential

**Scientific Name:** *Canis rufus*

## Description

The red wolf, *Canis rufus*, is one of two officially recognized species of wolves in North America. The other is the gray wolf, *Canis lupus*. Red wolves are intermediate in size between the larger gray wolves and smaller coyotes.

The average adult red wolf weighs from 50-80 pounds, stands about 26 inches at the shoulder and is about four feet long from the tip of the nose to the end of the tail. Red wolves have tall, pointed ears, long legs, and large feet. They are mostly brown and buff colored with some black along their backs. Typically there is a reddish color behind their ears, on their muzzles and along the backs of their legs.

Since coyotes sometimes enter the restoration area, it is important for people to know the physical differences between the two species. Adult coyotes weigh about one-half to two-thirds as much as adult red wolves and stand approximately four inches shorter. Coyotes are much less massive through the head, chest, legs, and feet. However, red wolf yearlings could be confused with adult coyotes based on size similarities.

## Habitat and Range

Originally, the red wolf roamed as a top predator from the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts, north to the Ohio River Valley through central Pennsylvania and New England, and west to southern Missouri and central Texas. Some biologists believe that it lived as far north as southeastern Canada. The red wolf lived in mixed forests, wetlands, and agricultural lands. By the 1920's, however, the red wolf, like its relative the gray wolf, had been extirpated in most of its range. Indiscriminate killing and large-scale predator control

programs combined with destruction of habitat sealed the doom of this unique species. Ranchers and farmers believed that red wolves caused widespread cattle losses. In addition, logging, mineral exploration, road development, and drainage projects destroyed the red wolf's habitat. As forests were cleared in Texas and Oklahoma, coyotes expanded eastward, establishing themselves where wolves had once lived. The few remaining red wolves, failing to find mates of their own species, began to interbreed with the coyotes, further accelerating the red wolf decline. By 1970, fewer than 100 red wolves remained in the entire United States. This remnant population was confined to a small area of coastal Louisiana and Texas. By 1980, the red wolf was considered to be functionally extinct in the wild.

## Pack Structure and Prey

Red wolf packs are usually smaller than those of the gray wolf. The pack is a family group consisting of the breeding pair, the young of the current year, and some offspring of previous years. Red wolves mate in January or February, and an average of 3 to 5 pups are born in April or May. Like gray wolves, red wolves maintain a strict hierarchy of dominant and subordinate animals within the pack. This enables the pack to function as a unit. Since the red wolf's diet does not consist of larger ungulates (elk, bison, or moose) group or pack hunting is probably less frequent. Most hunting by red wolves is believed to be done individually or in pairs. In northeastern North Carolina, most of their diet consists of white-tailed deer, raccoons, nutria, rabbits, and rodents.

