



# Red Wolf



Red wolf, credit: Seth Bynum/Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium

## Description

The red wolf (*Canis rufus*) is one of the most endangered canids in the world. Red wolves are mostly brown and buff colored with some black along their backs, often with a characteristic reddish color on their ears, head and legs. They have tall pointed ears and long, slender legs with large feet.

## Natural History

The primary social structure of red wolves is simply defined as an extended family unit or “pack.” A typical pack consists of five to eight members, which includes a breeding adult pair and offspring from different years. Wolf packs have specific territories that they actively defend against other canids (dog-like animals), including other wolves. The

pack is a very close-knit social group; older offspring will often assist the breeding pair in the rearing of pups. Almost all offspring between one and two years of age will leave the pack or “disperse” to form their own pack.

Red wolves tend to form pair-bonds for life and mate once a year in February and March. Pups are born about 63 days later in April or May, and are well hidden in dens that can be located along stream banks, sand knolls, or in shallow depressions in the ground. Dens also have been found in holes dug in the ground near downed logs or forest debris piles.

The diet of red wolves varies depending on available prey, although it usually consists of a combination of white-tail deer, raccoons, and smaller mammals such as rabbits, rodents and nutria. The red wolf is an opportunistic feeder and can travel up to 20 miles a day or more to find food, which can be consumed at a rate of two to five pounds daily.

## Comparison to Other Canids

The red wolf is a native North American canid intermediate in size between the coyote (*Canis latrans*) and gray wolf (*Canis lupus*). Weighing 45 to 80 pounds, red wolves are about five feet long from nose to tail and stand roughly 26 inches at the shoulder. Coyotes weigh 25 to 35 pounds, are approximately three feet in length, and stand around 22 inches at the shoulder. Gray wolves can vary in size depending on the subspecies, but typically average between 80 to 100 pounds. Gray wolves are approximately five to six feet in length and stand around 30 inches at the shoulder.

Red wolves, gray wolves, domestic dogs and coyotes are capable of interbreeding and producing fertile offspring. Social structures and territoriality usually prevent such interbreeding. By 1960, widespread persecution of predators and the destruction of habitat had caused a decline in red wolf numbers, allowing the coyote to migrate into the southeast. As a result, some of the remaining red wolves were unable to find mates of their own species and they began to breed with the



*Red wolf pup, credit: Greg Koch*

more abundant coyote. Given a choice, red wolves prefer red wolves as mates. Hybridization is usually accepted as the final factor that resulted in the near extinction of the red wolf. The primary recovery objectives are to protect and promote the growth of a non-hybridizing population of red wolves in the wild, and sustain an active captive component. Together these efforts will help maintain the genetic integrity of the species.

### Distribution and Status

Historically, red wolves occurred throughout the eastern and south-central United States. By the 1970s, habitat loss and predator control programs reduced these populations to a small area along the Gulf coasts of Texas and Louisiana. These wolves were captured and bred in captivity, and are the ancestors of all red wolves in existence today. In 1987, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) began reintroduction efforts in northeastern North Carolina to re-establish a wild population. Currently, the wild red wolf population in the northeastern North Carolina recovery area is estimated between 100 and 120 animals, many of which are outfitted with radio-telemetry collars that allow managers to track individuals across a five-county area covering 1.7 million acres. Additionally, approximately 175 red wolves are held in about 40 captive breeding facilities across the United States.

The red wolf is listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

### Threats

Currently, the wild red wolf population faces a series of threats that originally caused the red wolf to decline across its historic range starting with early settlement of North America. Early persecution and habitat fragmentation originally reduced red wolf numbers to the point of near-extinction, and contributed to the interbreeding with coyotes. Human-caused mortality (e.g., vehicle strikes, gunshots) can remove breeders from the wild wolf population. These threats, combined with habitat fragmentation from increasing development, allow coyotes to expand into the recovery area. Coyotes may directly compete with wolves for resources, as well as introduce diseases, and dilute wolf genetic lines through hybridization.

### Conservation Value and Strategies

Red wolves are of aesthetic, ecological, educational, historical, recreational and scientific value. As predators, they can help maintain the balance of ecosystems and contribute to overall biodiversity. The presence of red wolves can also contribute to local economies through ecotourism interests in photographing and viewing these endangered animals.

To aid in the species recovery process, the [Red Wolf Recovery Program](#) has partnered with multiple dedicated individuals and organizations. The collaborative efforts of USFWS and partners, like the [Red Wolf Species Survival Plan](#) and the [Red Wolf Coalition](#), work towards the common goals of red wolf conservation, species recovery, and increased public education and awareness.

To hunt, harm, shoot, pursue, kill, damage, harass, trap, buy, or sell an endangered species or parts and products derived from that species is a violation of the Endangered Species Act of 1973, and can carry a fine up to \$100,000 and/or one year in prison.

### Contact and Resources

Red Wolf Recovery Program  
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Manteo, NC 27954

Website: <http://www.fws.gov/redwolf>

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/redwolfrecoveryprogram>

Blog: <http://trackthepack.blogspot.com>

Twitter: <http://www.twitter.com/redwolfrecovery>