You Win Some, You Lose Some

by Ryan Nordsven

Page 1: Getting Started

It was a Sunday night in early October, 2007, and I was once again on the road and headed for St. Vincent Island National Wildlife Refuge off the Gulf coast of Florida to capture red wolves. St. Vincent Island, as part of the red wolf island propagation program, is home to a single pack of red wolves consisting of an adult breeding pair and their offspring. Each year in late April or early May, the adult pair has a litter of puppies. Those pups are raised by their parents for about 18 months, during which time they learn the skills they will need to survive at their ultimate destination, Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge (ARNWR) in northeastern North Carolina, home of the Red Wolf Recovery Program. My job for the next couple of weeks would be to capture the three yearlings (those pups born in 2006, who were now 18 months old) that roamed the island and to transport them to their new home at ARNWR, where they will be used to fortify the existing wild population of wolves with a greater diversity of genes.

Also inhabiting the island, in addition to the three yearlings, were their parents (the adult breeding pair) and a litter of 6-month old puppies born in 2007. It had not yet been determined exactly how many puppies belonged to this litter, but if I could capture them along with the yearlings during my trapping effort, I could possibly confirm this number as well.

Early Monday morning I met up with Thom Lewis, the biologist at St. Vincent NWR, who transported me from the mainland to the island across the quarter-mile channel at Indian Pass. I brought enough food and supplies with me to last a few days, as I intended to stay at the island bunkhouse, but I didn’t really anticipate that this trapping effort would take much longer than a few days. All three of the yearlings had been previously captured and radio collared, meaning I could easily locate them with my telemetry gear, and then place traps around them—I guessed that it wouldn’t be long before they stepped in one. I wanted to thoroughly enjoy my time on St. Vincent, but having just returned from a couple of lengthy fire details, I was also ready to wrap up this job as quickly as possible and return home. With this in mind, I began setting traps.
As I worked, I was once again struck by the uniqueness of this place. The diversity of wildlife here is extraordinary. Once a private hunting preserve, St. Vincent Island is now home to exotic species such as wild hogs and the spectacular sambar deer (a species of elk from southeast Asia). It also harbors native populations of once- and currently-endangered species such as sea turtles, bald eagles, American alligators, and, of course, red wolves. The ground is blanketed in white sand, and from it grows an impressive variety of vegetation, from palm trees and palmettos to live oak, scrub oak, and stands of pine trees. A couple of things that seem to never change here, though, I noticed as I worked, are the sweltering heat and the bloodthirsty mosquitoes. But still, it was certainly good to be back.

After setting traps late into the afternoon, I returned to the bunkhouse to eat dinner and then wandered down to the beach to watch the sun set over the gulf. While I was there I was entertained by a pod of dolphins that was practically beaching while feeding on schools of fish in the shallow surf. There were shorebirds everywhere, and I even saw a bald eagle or two soaring overhead. Darkness soon brought with it an early night to bed and high hopes for what the next morning would bring in my traps that I had set earlier.
The morning did not disappoint. I pulled my truck up to my first set of traps and, before I even noticed the hole in the sand where the trap had been placed, I saw something struggling in the thick brush nearby. It was a wolf. With a closer look I saw that it did not have a radio collar and that it was not quite adult size. A male 2007 puppy! Using a noose pole and being as gentle as possible, I removed the rubber padded trap from his foot and placed him in a kennel. Not a bad start, I thought.

On to my next set, where I immediately saw a trap missing from the hole I had placed it in the day before. I got out of the truck, and could hear something thrashing around in the brush not far away. I grabbed my noose pole and an empty kennel and, with my heart pounding in anticipation, walked toward it. Another wolf, and this time it had a radio collar. After removing the trap and placing the wolf in the kennel, I checked the collar's frequency, which told me that this wolf was yearling male 11549. Excellent! This island trapping was easy! After checking the rest of my trap line and capturing nothing further that day, I placed the two wolves in the island's large holding pen with some food and water. At this rate, they wouldn't be in there very long, as I would probably be headed home with three yearlings in hand in just a couple of short days.

The next morning, I was thrilled to find another trap missing. When I located the captured wolf nearby, I found that it was another 2007 puppy, this time a female. After checking the rest of the line, though, I was a bit disappointed that there would be no further captures today. Oh well, still off to a good start. Three wolves in two days is nothing to be disappointed about. I placed her in the large pen where she joined her two siblings.

Day 3. Another trap missing, and another puppy. This time it was a second male, and again, nothing else was caught. I guess it might take a little longer than I thought, but as long as I can keep catching an animal a day, it won't be too long before I'm headed home. Besides, this would just give me more time to enjoy having this little island paradise practically to myself.
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Day 5. Again, nothing.

Day 6. Frustration slowly sets in as the remaining wolves keep managing to avoid all of my traps. In some cases, the tracks they leave in the sand show me how they would just barely miss stepping on the pan and springing the trap, seemingly oblivious to its presence. In other cases, they avoided the sets altogether, as if they knew exactly where they were. I began moving traps around and trying to get creative.

Day 7. Nothing

Day 8. Nothing

Day 9. Finally another capture! I breathed a sigh of relief as I took yearling male 11548 out of the trap and placed him in a kennel. I was fortunate enough to get him to step in a blind trail set when I was having no success attracting any wolves to the variety of lures and baits I had put out. It was becoming painfully obvious to me that this island trapping might not be so easy after all. I was being served up a big old slice of humble pie, and didn't much care for the taste.

But still, I did have two of the three animals I had come for. I had also apparently captured all of the existing 2007 puppies (as I was finding no sign of any remaining puppies outside of the pen) and they could now have radio collars placed on them in preparation for their release. I had about a week and a half to go before I would be required to pull all of my traps for the annual St. Vincent Island whitetail deer hunt. I had previously decided that if I was unable to catch all three yearlings prior to the start of the hunt, I would take whatever I had captured and head for home. But now I could focus all of my attention on capturing just one single animal, and although I hoped it wouldn't take this long, I still had 10 days left to do it.

Six more days passed, and I had nothing to show for them other than more frustration. I had tried every trick I could think of, and every type of set I could think of, and female yearling 1550 had managed to elude every one of them. I was starting to give up hope.
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The next morning, I was once again going through my daily routine of checking traps. Although I knew better at this point than to get my hopes up, I was unusually anxious this particular morning. The evening before, I had put in a trail set that I felt pretty good about. I had crept in close to where she was bedded down, but not close enough to spook her. I found a nice game trail that I felt she may very well use when she emerged from her daybed after nightfall, so I placed a few traps in the trail. It was a tactic I had of course already tried without success, but I felt unusually optimistic about this one.

So, as I eased my truck forward early that morning through the dim, misty glow, my heart suddenly skipped a beat when I saw through the windshield a flash of fur in the thick brush alongside the trail where I had set my traps. It was her! It all happened in a split second, and it was difficult to see through the brush, but I could just make out the form of a wolf jump up, struggle for an instant, make a short dash, and then...nothing.

I stepped out of my truck. Everything was still and silent. Even as I was hoping that she had simply laid down to quietly hide in the brush with the trap still on her foot, a sickening feeling came over me as I approached the set. As I got closer, I could see the trap's drag, pulled from the ground and caught on a large root. Then I saw the chain that connected the drag to the trap. And then I saw the trap. It was empty. She had escaped. I was in shock. It all happened so fast I must have just stood there in disbelief for some time. I had heard of this sort of thing happening before from my co-workers, but it had never happened to me personally. I walked slowly back to the truck for my telemetry gear, just to verify that the escapee actually was 11550. It was. Almost immediately, I had a bad feeling that my one chance to capture her had just come and gone, and I probably wouldn't get another.

I spent my last three days on the island once again moving traps around in a determined last-ditch effort to capture this elusive yearling, but it was not to be so. In the end I returned home with only two wolves. I knew that the future would bring more attempts to capture 11550, but I did not know exactly who would be assigned to that effort, or when. For now, the focus would be on the two male yearlings, 11548 and 11549. As of this writing, they are in a holding pen at ARNWR, awaiting release into the wild. When the time is right, we will choose a good location for them with potential mates nearby, and then we will wish them well and send them on their way. If this experience has taught me anything, I guess it would be that it's never a good idea to let your expectations get too high when trying to capture wolves.
Postscript

In addition to this journal entry, I wanted to also provide a quick update on the status of the four 2005 St. Vincent wolves transported to ARNWR a year ago. As mentioned in a previous entry, males 11461, 11462, and 11547 had settled into territories and apparently found potential mates. 11463, unfortunately, had been struck and killed by a vehicle shortly after his release.

After living successfully in the wild for several months, 11462 ended up meeting the same fate as his brother when he also was killed when struck by a vehicle. Being raised on an island propagation site provides young wolves with many essential survival skills; unfortunately, it does little to prepare them for highways and fast-moving traffic.

All was not lost, however, as the remaining two wolves, 11461 and 11547, fared much better. They were both successfully able to carve out territories, secure mates, and are raising families of healthy young wolf puppies as we speak. Overall, this is about the best scenario a biologist can hope for, and we consider it a success.

As for wolves 11548 and 11549—11548 was released in January 2008 with a single female wolf that holds a territory of her own. Soon after the release, he started to wander quite a bit, probably just exploring his new surroundings. It is still unclear if he will continue to seek out a new territory, or if he will return to the location of his release. Wolf 11549 has been placed in a pen with another young female wolf. They have not yet been released, but will be very soon.

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