DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR
news release
Fish and Wildlife Service

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REMARKABLE SURVIVAL OF ENDANGERED SPECIES REPORTED; HURRICANE'S IMPACT ON HABITAT EXTENSIVE

Soon after Hurricane Hugo ripped across Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, and then slammed the Southeastern United States, personnel from the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service began conducting preliminary surveys to assess damage to endangered wildlife and plants inhabiting areas in the storm's path.

"While vast acreages of vital habitat were heavily damaged, so far we have recorded a remarkable survival rate for most impacted endangered species," said U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director John Turner. He emphasized information is sketchy since accurate surveys are still difficult to conduct due to transportation and logistical difficulties. "We are now concentrating on confirming our initial surveys and are taking steps to aid the recovery of these species." Turner said the efforts include providing food, constructing artificial nest cavities, and moving some species out of heavily damaged areas.

Turner gave the following endangered species status report:

* **Red wolves:** Five endangered red wolves apparently survived on Bulls Island, South Carolina. The island, part of Cape Romain National Wildlife Refuge, was entirely submerged by a 20-foot storm surge during the height of the hurricane.

* **Red cockaded woodpecker:** 95 percent of nesting cavity trees in one portion of the Francis Marion National Forest in South Carolina was destroyed. This forest contained about 480 colonies--or 20 percent of the world population--of the endangered red cockaded woodpecker on public lands.

* **Puerto Rican parrot:** At last count, at least a quarter (13 birds) of the wild flock of 47 Puerto Rican parrots survived. In addition, all 53 parrots held in a captive flock survived. Disease and predation could spell disaster for this species.

* **Puerto Rican plain pigeon:** Hurricane Hugo brought unexpected good news concerning the endangered Puerto Rican plain pigeon. Difficult to count in dense vegetation, their population

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was believed to be 100 - 200 birds in the wild. After the storm blew the leaves off their preferred trees, surveyors were able to count more than 200 birds. All of the 100 pigeons in captivity survived, including one that hatched in the middle of the hurricane, and was promptly named "Hugo."

* **Endangered sea turtles:** The impact from a storm-caused oil spill on critical leatherback sea turtle nesting areas at Sandy Point National Wildlife Refuge on St. Croix in the U.S. Virgin Islands is presently unknown. Nesting activity for this species will begin next May and it is expected that any oiled sand will be flushed by then.

* **St. Croix ground lizard:** Speculative reports indicate that little cover may remain to provide essential shelter for this nocturnal lizard, which is known to exist on only two tiny islets off St. Croix. A preliminary survey of Green Cay, one of the islets, has turned up several juveniles which survived the storm.

* **Endangered plants:** During the next few weeks, Service personnel will be assessing impacts to several species of endangered and threatened plants. Of particular concern is the endangered Wheeler's peperomia, endemic to Puerto Rico's small island of Culebra, which was hard hit by the storm; the endangered prickly-ash, which occurs on St. Thomas and St. John; and the "cobana negra," currently proposed for listing as threatened. About a dozen candidate species (those awaiting consideration for listing) were endemic to areas hardest hit by the storm.

* **Yellow-shouldered blackbird:** The fate of a small remnant population of 20 endangered yellow-shouldered blackbirds which inhabited an area near Roosevelt Roads Naval Station near the town of Ceiba, Puerto Rico, is currently unknown. The naval station registered sustained winds of 120 miles per hour. The main population of about 250 endangered birds which inhabit southwestern Puerto Rico survived since it was not in the direct path of the storm.

Additional field and aerial surveys for all species will be completed as soon as weather, personnel, and local travel conditions permit. Eagles, falcons, sea turtles, manatees, plants, and other endangered species that were in impacted areas will also be inventoried.

For both the Puerto Rican parrot and plain pigeon, the problem now appears to be one of food and shelter. Some of the parrot's traditional nest cavity trees may have been lost, and

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the loss of protective cover for both these species may make them more vulnerable to predators, as well as poachers. Food for both birds will be in short supply until new fruits and seeds ripen.

Trapping and moving some species will be considered in extreme cases, though moving birds or lizards may present more risk than leaving them in their present habitat.

The available habitat for the red cockaded woodpecker in the Francis Marion National Forest is of particular concern. Initial surveys indicate approximately 75 percent of the timber was knocked down by the storm, and nearly all pines exceeding 10 inches in diameter are either down or severely damaged and unusable for nesting. This forest near the South Carolina coast provides habitat to the third largest population of red cockaded woodpeckers in the world. The birds nest in the cavities of old growth pine trees that usually exceed 60 years of age. Construction of artificial nest cavities is under way. Mortality of survivors is expected to be high; snakes and hawks are principal predators of this species.

Efforts will likely be made to capture and relocate the five red wolf survivors on Bulls Island. These wolves are part of a family of two adults and their five pups which were released on the island in August. At that time, the pups were several months old, and all were radio-collared. The female and one pup were killed, apparently by an alligator, in September.

With only 2 days notice prior to the storm, it was not possible to recapture the remaining five wolves, a process which may have taken at least a week. Thus, they were left to ride out the storm, which pounded the island with winds exceeding 135 miles per hour.

As the post-hurricane radio telemetry flight over the island began on September 28, most researchers felt the wolves were probably dead. The first signal from one of the radio-collared animals brought hope. This turned to amazement by the time the signal from the fifth wolf was located late in the day. Visual confirmation is necessary however to assure that all five are in good health.

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