

Red wolves are battling high mortality, coyote inbreeding as agencies try to repopulate Outer Banks

March 11 2021, by Jeff Hampton



Eastern Red Wolf. Credit: LaggedOnUser, CC BY-SA 2.0 , via Wikimedia Commons

Only one red wolf female experienced at having puppies remains in the wild—and she's been canoodling with a coyote.

She hardly has a choice since just nine others of her kind are known to roam eastern North Carolina.

"This [population](#) is extremely vulnerable to simply winking out of existence in the short, near term," said Ron Sutherland, chief scientist of the Wildland Network.

The 10 confirmed red wolves in North Carolina are the only wild population in the world. There could be other wolves out there that haven't been tracked.

No litters were born in 2019 for the first time in 30 years. None were born last year either. About 250 live in captive populations in zoos. A wild pair that lives within the St. Vincent National Wildlife Refuge, located in Florida, also produces litters.

Following a lawsuit by [environmental groups](#), a [federal court](#) ordered the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in January to release captive-bred red wolves into the wild in an attempt to preserve the species.

The agency released in February two males onto federal lands that span nearly 2 million rural acres in five eastern North Carolina counties.

The males were paired with two wild females in acclimation pens before all four were collared and set loose in hopes they would mate. One pair still roams the same territory with a chance to breed. The other male was struck and killed by a vehicle less than two weeks after he was released, according to the federal plan. The other female remains in the wild.

At least one other pair of red wolves will be released this summer when food and shelter are plentiful, the plan said.

Federal biologists hope to add captive-born puppies to any new wild

litters the wolves produce, a method called "pup fostering." Adding captive puppies to a litter born in the wild has a better chance of success than introducing adult pairs, the plan said.

The FWS released a captive male and tried to pair him with a wild female last year, but the male disappeared even though he wore a collar.

Sutherland, the chief scientist with the Wildland Network, said the feds' effort to rebuild the wolf population falls woefully short, Sutherland said. The FWS should release eight pairs into the wild, he said; that's the only way for the species to recover with its death rate so high, he said.

"There is a desperate need to save the world's only wild population of [red wolves](#) by releasing a large number of fresh animals from captivity, and the captive population can easily support such an effort," Sutherland said. "There are far too many wolves that are just taking up pen space."

The FWS maintains the captive population can not sustain releasing that many wolves each year.

Sutherland proposes releasing of captive wolves annually with bright orange collars attached. Penalties for shooting them should be increased. Landowners could receive payments for wolf management on their property.

Red wolves were declared extinct in the wild in 1980. Biologists placed four captive-bred pairs in eastern North Carolina in 1987 to reintroduce wolves to eastern North Carolina. The wild wolves grew to a peak of roughly 130 about 10 years ago, with additions of more captive wolves over the years.

Since then, wolves have bred with coyotes, been shot by hunters and landowners and killed on highways. The agency stopped releasing [wolves](#)

into the wild and pup fostering in 2014, Sutherland said.

The FWS would not comment because of the ongoing litigation.

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