

Government-funded study says red wolves are distinct species

March 28 2019, by Jonathan Drew And Matthew Brown



In this June 13, 2017 file photo, a red wolf female peers back at her 7-week old pup in their habitat at the Museum of Life and Science in Durham, N.C. A panel of top scientists has concluded that the endangered red wolf is a species unto itself. The government-funded study by the National Academy of Sciences gives the beleaguered canine a scientific and political boost at a time when its numbers have plummeted in the wild. (AP Photo/Gerry Broome, File)

A panel of top scientists concluded Thursday that the endangered red wolf of the southeastern U.S. is a species unto itself, giving the beleaguered canine a scientific and political boost as its numbers

plummet in the wild.

The government-funded study by the National Academy of Sciences also found that the Mexican gray wolf of New Mexico and Arizona is a subspecies, which advocates say should support conservation efforts.

Another wolf species, the Western gray wolf, is thriving in the Northern Rockies and Great Lakes and could lose [federal protections](#) under a proposal released earlier this month.

For [red wolves](#), the affirmation of their genetic uniqueness comes after some North Carolina officials and a small but vocal group of landowners pushed the government to abandon recovery efforts, arguing the animal is a coyote hybrid.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service spokeswoman Laury Parramore declined to comment on the agency-funded study beyond a statement saying it was under review.

Red [wolves](#) once occupied much of the Eastern U.S. but were driven to near extinction by trapping, hunting and habitat loss. Some of the last red wolves in the wild were removed from portions of Louisiana and Texas in 1980 and used in a captive breeding program. Their descendants were later reintroduced to a [wildlife refuge](#) along North Carolina's coast.

An estimated 35 wild red wolves remained as of late 2018, down from about 120 a decade ago. Their range is currently limited to five North Carolina counties.

Another 200 live in captive breeding programs.

Acknowledging longstanding questions among some scientists about red wolf ancestry, federal wildlife officials said last year they would treat it

as a distinct species while awaiting Thursday's report.

The nine-member national academy panel found that the red wolf is unique based on its DNA, its behavior and its size, which is larger than a coyote and smaller than a gray wolf.



In this June 13, 2017, file photo, the parents of this 7-week old red wolf pup keep an eye on their offspring at the Museum of Life and Science in Durham, N.C. A panel of top scientists has concluded that the endangered red wolf is a species unto itself. The government-funded study by the National Academy of Sciences gives the beleaguered canine a scientific and political boost at a time when its numbers have plummeted in the wild. (AP Photo/Gerry Broome, File)

While the red wolf appears more closely related to coyotes than gray wolves, red wolves diverged as their own species long ago, said Joseph Travis, chair of the national academy panel and a biology professor at

Florida State University.

"There's clearly been introduction of coyote genes and gray wolf genes into red wolves. But they also have genes not seen in coyotes and gray wolves," Travis said in an interview. "They must have continuity with some ancestor which was not a gray wolf or [coyote](#)."

Ron Sutherland, a biologist with the nonprofit Wildlands Network, said he had been waiting on "pins and needles" to see what the panel decided.

"That should be a kick in the butt for the Fish and Wildlife Service to stop the quiet negligence of letting the [species](#) go extinct in the wild," he said.

A government plan to further shrink the territory where red wolves roam stalled last year when a judge ruled officials were neglecting their duty to protect the animals under the Endangered Species Act. That same plan would have allowed landowners to kill any wolves that strayed from the proposed smaller territory consisting of federal land in two counties.

Conservationists accused the federal agency of neglecting the animals under political pressure and abandoning proven conservation techniques, such as releasing captive bred pups.

In 2015, North Carolina's Wildlife Resources Commission passed a resolution urging an end to the federal program, saying "the purity of the red [wolf](#) genome is questionable" after hybridization with coyotes. Republican U.S. Sen. Thom Tillis has also urged its end.

The study released Thursday had been ordered by Congress as part of a 2018 appropriations bill.

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