

The Red Wolf *Canis rufus*

Head—Body length: 95-120cm
Tail length: 25-35cm, Weight: 20-35kg

The red wolf (*Canis rufus*) is a native North American canid intermediate in size between coyotes (*C. latrans*) and gray wolves (*C. lupus*). As their name suggests, red wolves are known for the characteristic reddish color of their fur most apparent behind the ears and along their neck and legs. They are generally a crepuscular species, most active at dawn and dusk and live in discrete packs, which have an exclusive territory within their home range. A pack typically contains a breeding pair (who mate for life) and their offspring, although larger packs have been recorded. The breeding season occurs between January and March, and dens are located amongst dense vegetation, in deep burrows between fields or in canal banks, or in the hollows of large trees. Litters contain an average of three to six pups, but may range up to eight pups. The breeding pair both rear the young with help from the other young members of the pack. Offspring typically disperse from their natal pack between 15 to 20 months old. There are approximately 18-22 packs that currently exist in the recovery zone. The Red wolf preys on a variety of wild mammals such as raccoon, rabbit, white-tailed deer, nutria and other rodents. They are opportunistic feeders 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 per day.

Red wolves inhabit swamps, forests, wetlands and bush lands and formerly ranged throughout the south-eastern USA, from the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts, North to the Ohio River Valley and central Pennsylvania, and west to central Texas and south eastern Missouri. Following a massive decline during the 20th Century, the last 17 wild red wolves were taken into captivity to begin a captive breeding programme. Of the 17 remaining wolves captured by biologists, 14 became the founders of a successful captive breeding programme. The founding red wolves had to be a pure bred species, meaning not a mixed breed of wolf and coyote. Consequently, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service declared red wolves extinct in the wild in 1980.



A planned recovery programme has since reintroduced the Red wolf to a remote, five-county area of north eastern North Carolina, in and around the Alligator River, Mattamuskeet, and Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuges. Today, more than 100 red wolves roam their native habitats in eastern North Carolina, and nearly 200 red wolves comprise the Species Survival Plan captive breeding programme in sites across the United States, still an essential element of red wolf recovery. To enhance



the genetic diversity of red wolves in the wild, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Red Wolf Recovery Programme places captive-born red wolf pups with wild mothers and their pups in a method called "fostering." Threats to the red wolf include habitat loss due to human development, negative attitudes that hinder restoration, severe weather, deaths by motor vehicles, and illegal killings. Interbreeding between coyote and red wolf populations has remained a constant threat to the recovery of this imperilled species. North Carolina was initially determined to be ideal for reintroductions because of an absence of coyotes.

What is a red wolf? Two schools of thought exist. The most widely accepted position proposes that the red wolf is a distinct species of wolf, one that has been in North America even longer than the gray wolf. The second position maintains that red wolves are some sort of mutt or hybrid—part grey wolf, part coyote. With the increasing sophistication of genetic research, scientists are closer than ever to the answer. The position describing red wolves as gray wolf/coyote hybrids has been discarded by most experts. Support is now strong for the conclusion that the red wolf is indeed an ancient species that evolved along with the eastern wolf (*Canis lupus lycaon*, now thought by many scientists to be a third distinct North American wolf species, *Canis lycaon*) as a close relative of the coyote. This may be the reason red wolves breed with coyotes when they cannot find a mate of their own species, and grey wolves do not.

The Red Wolf is listed as endangered under the U.S. Endangered Species Act (ESA). The reintroduced animals and their progeny in north-eastern North Carolina are considered members of an experimental non-essential population. This designation permits the United States Fish and Wildlife Service to manage the population and promote recovery in a manner that is respectful of the needs and concerns of the local population. The species is classified as Critically Endangered (CR) by the IUCN Red List .

