



Photo by B. Bartel

In Our Hands: The Future of the Southeast's Wolf

BY TAYLOR BARNHILL

On a January night in the wilderness heart of the Albemarle Peninsula, the full moon reflects off the still black water of Mill Tail Lake. A barred owl hoots from a cypress down the shoreline.

Like the moonlight itself, the haunting chorus of an ancient clan drifts through the chill air. This song could be from the Swan Range of Montana or the foothills of Denali. Yet, this is the coastal plain of eastern North Carolina and this is the song of a red wolf family. They howl to celebrate, to mourn, or to simply acknowledge, “Yes, I’m here with you.”

As the “Southeast’s wolf,” the red wolf is a federally endangered species that returned from the edge of extinction in the 1980s when the last red wolves were captured from the wild in east Texas and western Louisiana. After genetic testing for species viability and the selection of suitable habitats, the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFW) crossed their fingers and released a handful of red wolf pairs around the Southeast. Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge and Great Smoky Mountains National Park received four mated pairs each, in 1987 and 1989, respectively.

The Red Wolf Recovery Program in the Smokies failed, due partly to lack of food prey and partly to exposure of puppies to domestic dog diseases. The four tenacious pairs of red wolves released in eastern North Carolina did well and, some would say, thrived, reaching a peak of 131 individual wolves by 2004. One reason given for this success was an innovative method of fostering puppies that were born in captive breeding programs, then introducing them into wild litters. Moms and stepsiblings did fine, thanks to the enduring wolf family structure and dedicated USFW staff.

Then, after 20 years of success and new hope for this noble species, a wrench was thrown into the program. Night hunting for coyotes was authorized by the NC Wildlife Resources Commission and, because coyotes and

red wolves are hard to distinguish in the dark, red wolf deaths by gunshot reduced their numbers by as much as ten percent per year, on top of the natural mortality.

Today there are fewer than 40 individual red wolves in the wild and, as this magazine was being prepared for publication, USFW announced its decision to restrict less than ten wolves to an area of federal land too small to sustain a viable population. The remaining wolves will be trapped and confined to zoos, essentially condemning the species to extinction in the wild. What was once the most successful mammal restoration program in the US is ending and, with it, the Southeast’s ancient wolf.

“I can’t imagine a world where we do not ensure their survival for future generations,” says Terry Deal of Wild South, an Asheville-based conservation group. “When we diminish the importance of wild creatures, we diminish our human connection with wilderness.”

Ben Prater, director of the Asheville office of Defenders of Wildlife explains, “The law is straightforward, the science is clear and public support is there to recover the red wolf. The bold vision and tenacity of the US Fish and Wildlife Service recovered

many of our nation’s most iconic and beloved species, from the bald eagle to the bison. The red wolf is no less deserving of our efforts and appreciation.”

DeLene Beeland is a red wolf scholar and author of *The Secret World of Red Wolves*. She adds, “The permanent management of red wolves ... prompts a realization tinged with hope: We have the tools to preserve them. All that is needed is the funding and the political will.”

Most of us will never hear the night song from Alligator River. Yet, we too have a voice—to stop the extinction of the most rare mammal in North America. The US Fish and Wildlife Service needs to hear from the public that their plan is not acceptable, and that the political will to save the red wolf is alive and well.



Photo by Ryan Nordsvén

To have your voice heard, visit wildsouth.org, defenders.org/take-action, Red Wolf Coalition at redwolves.com or contact the author at taylor.barnhill@yahoo.com.