



Greg Koch

Red Wolf FAQ

by STEVE GROOMS

What is a red wolf?

A great many facts about red wolves are controversial and mysterious, including this most basic question. Some scientists think the red wolf is a species of wolf that is native to the southeastern seaboard of North America, and that preceded the evolution of the gray wolf.

Aren't there many species of wolves?

No. Current thinking is that there are two, three or four. In spite of the many names for different kinds of wolves—buffalo wolves, McKenzie Valley wolves, timber wolves and so forth—those are all subtypes of the gray wolf. The gray wolf is the common wolf of North America, Europe and Asia. The red wolf is a different species, which might be the same as the eastern Canadian wolf, another possible species (see below). Some authorities believe the Ethiopian wolf is another species of wolf, although others believe it's a jackal.

Where did red wolves originally live?

Red wolves once lived and hunted an area that largely overlaps the states of the Confederacy of the 1860s. That area extends from central Texas all along the coast through Florida and as far north as southern New England, including some parts of Pennsylvania and Ohio (see map). One of the most intriguing areas to be explored is the question of how far north red wolves lived. The wolf that

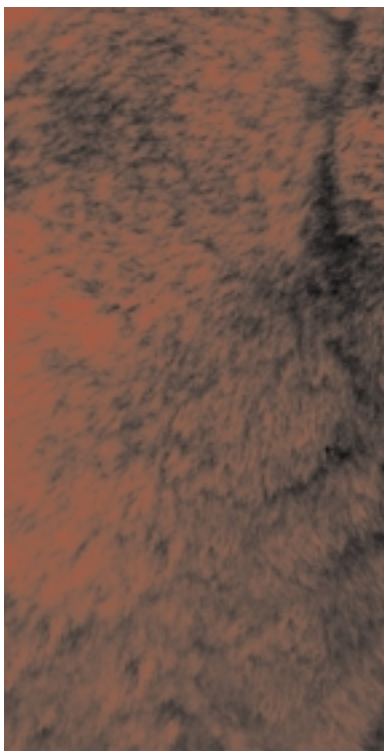


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currently lives in Canada's Algonquin Park in eastern Canada, once thought to be a type of gray wolf, bears a great resemblance to the red wolf. Analysis of the DNA of that eastern Canadian wolf and the red wolf show them to be very closely related and possibly essentially the same species.

Are red wolves a species or hybrid?

Many scientists used to believe that the red wolf was a hybrid, not a species, being a cross between the gray wolf and the coyote. Scientific opinion is still divided on whether the red wolf has existed as a distinct and unique species in North America for at least 150,000 years.

What do red wolves look like?

The red wolf is a beautiful animal. Red wolves are mostly brown, buff and cinnamon in color. Most have some black along the back and often some red on the head, ears and legs. Compared to gray wolves, red wolves are leggy and delicate. They have sharper, longer muzzles and prominent, pointed ears. Their fur is not as heavy as the pelage of gray wolves, and their feet are smaller.

How big are they?

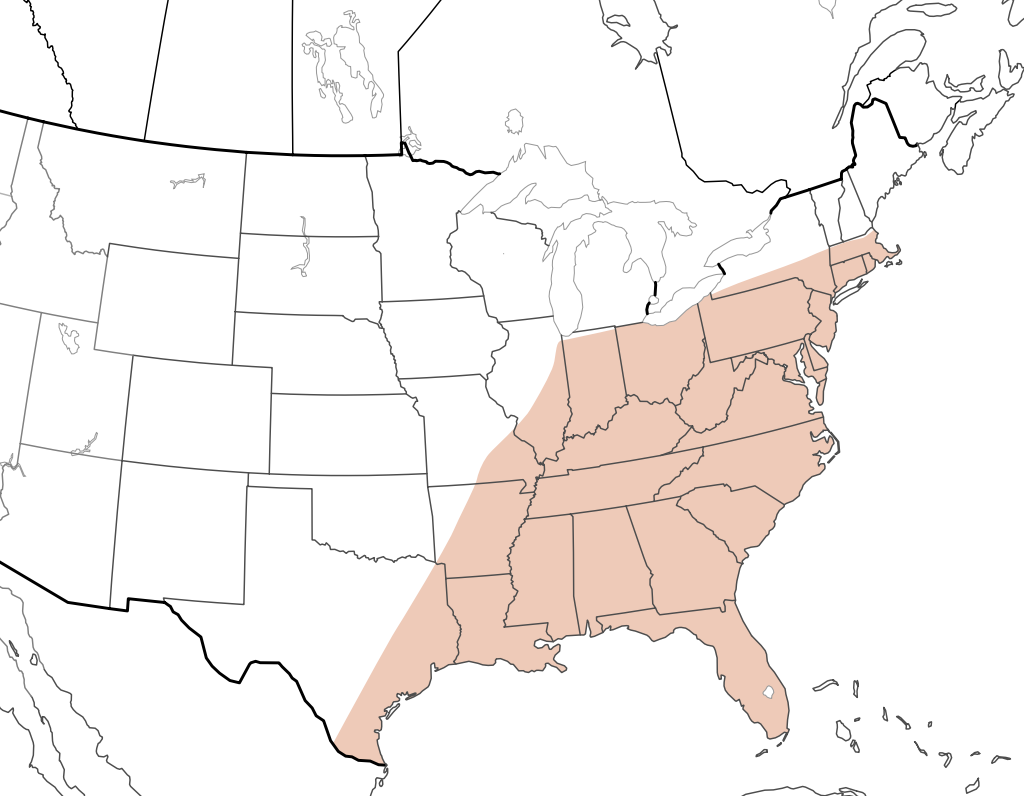
The average adult male is 61 pounds, and the average female is 52 pounds. Gray wolves range from 80 to 120 pounds; coyotes, from 20 to 45 pounds; and red wolves, from 50 to 80 pounds. The red wolf stands about 26 inches at the shoulder, comparable to a male German shepherd dog.

What do red wolves eat?

Like any wolf, the red wolf feeds opportunistically, taking what is available. Today, that includes white-tailed deer, raccoons and such smaller mammals as rabbits and nutrias. A red wolf consumes about two to five pounds of food a day and can travel up to 20 miles a day in search of food. They are carnivores.

Do red wolves live in packs?

Red wolves live and hunt in family groups, or "packs." As with gray wolves, this unit is the adult breeding



Approximate original range of the red wolf.

pair and several offspring of various years. Only the primary adult pair breeds. The pack size is usually five to eight individuals, and this group of wolves works as a tightly knit group to find food, defend territory and rear the pups.

Where are red wolves today?

Most wild red wolves inhabit a region of eastern North Carolina that overlaps five counties and includes 1.7 million acres (see map on page 5). This area includes the Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge, Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge and

Mattamuskeet National Wildlife Refuge. A few wild red wolves live as breeding populations on islands that are too small to sustain larger populations. Additionally, many red wolves live in zoos, often in captive breeding programs.

How many red wolves are alive now?

The number varies as young are born and as wolves die, but the wild red wolves in North Carolina usually number about 100 to 130 individuals. An additional 208 wolves live in zoos or captive breeding programs.

How has the red wolf restoration program differed from the program for gray wolves?

While gray wolves have lived continuously in at least some regions of North America, at one time all living red wolves were trapped and moved to a captive breeding program in a desperate effort to save the species from extinction. The red wolf is the first predator ever restored to the wild after existing only as a captive population. Moreover, the red wolf is in danger of losing its genetic identity because it hybridizes with coyotes, which most gray wolves do not do.

Many think the red wolf is an ancient race of wolves that preceded the evolution of the gray wolf.

Are red wolves a threat to humans?

There is no record of a red wolf ever harming a human. The red wolf is a large predator and should be given the respect with which we regard any wild predator, but red wolves are no threat to humans. Since restoration to the wild, red wolves have lived with remarkably little conflict with humans.

Why should these wolves be restored and protected?

The Endangered Species Act of 1973 calls for unique species to be protected and restored in the wild, insofar as possible. The red wolf is a unique type of wolf that may have lived in North America for at least 150,000 years. Its genetic identity needs

to be preserved, but beyond that the act dictates that such important species be sustained in the wild, not just in zoos. Moreover, it is desirable to have ecological communities that are as complete as possible. The red wolf was once an important member of the ecological community of the U.S. Southeast. It continues to play that role, albeit in a small area now.

What are the primary threats to red wolves now?

Each year, intentionally or unintentionally, some red wolves are killed by humans. But the number is not a major threat to the long-term prospects for red wolves. Potentially, diseases such as mange, hookworm and heartworm are a threat since

most wild red wolves live in just one area. Above all, the biggest threat is hybridization with coyotes. Red wolves will mate with coyotes, and the southeastern United States is now saturated with coyotes. That raises the constant specter of “genetic swamping,” the loss of distinctive, pure red wolf genes by mixing them with coyote genes. This problem is currently being addressed by aggressive coyote control operations along the interface between coyotes and wild red wolves in North Carolina.

Is the red wolf now safe?

The red wolf once was extremely endangered but has been brought back to a status that seems more or less secure. Because red wolves are limited in number and only live freely in one area, managers will need to exercise great care to preserve this unique and fascinating species. The future of the red wolf would be much more secure if other areas could become home to more wild red wolves. If genetic studies prove the wolf of eastern Canada is actually the same as the red wolf, the genetic future of the species will be greatly enhanced.

What are the most important next steps to secure the future of red wolves?

First, managers must maintain the integrity of red wolf bloodlines by suppressing coyotes in the region where wild red wolves and coyotes encounter each other. Second, it is important to establish a Red Wolf Center facility to spread information and promote tolerance of red wolves. Third, we need to find other areas where red wolves can live in the wild. ■

Steve Grooms has been writing about wolves and wolf management since 1976. He is the author of the book Return of the Wolf, and he serves on International Wolf's advisory committee.



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