



Rhett, taken only days before he passed away. PHOTO BY JULIE LAWRENCE.

# Rhett

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IN 2003, WOLF HAVEN was given the opportunity to participate in the red wolf captive breeding program, a cooperative program between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the Association of Zoos and Aquarium's (AZA) Species Survival Plan (SSP). This program was designed to bring the red wolf back from the brink of extinction. The SSP program is not exclusive to the red wolf, but rather myriad species. The SSP's goal is to preserve and propagate highly endangered species in captivity to ensure that we have them on this planet for years to come. Without this program we would not have red wolves and many other endangered species, today.

We are at a point in the world where we have extirpated many species to oblivion and others are unfortunately in line for the same fate. Human activity and progress is at the root of most species' problems on this planet, but we humans are also now the only hope for their survival. With programs like the SSP, we have an opportunity to give some of the animals we haven't yet wiped from the face of the planet *back* their chances for survival. As with anything in the world there are positives and negatives regarding the program. I personally believe that the program needs to be rebalanced; that it is obviously a necessity but that we need to reexamine how it is run. It focuses almost solely on the "big picture" without considering the fact that these animals are individuals... They are more than just numbers in a stud book.

I wish to share a little about a friend who recently passed away. In doing so, I

would like to take you past the stud book number M688 and help you glimpse a bit of the life of an amazing wolf named Rhett.

When I first met Rhett I was struck by how much zest for life he had in him, considering how old he was, and how hard his life was. About every year, Rhett and his current mate would be forced to split up due to the demands of the program. Since I'd known Rhett, he'd had four different girlfriends over the span of five years: Scarlett, Belle, Raelin, and Sissy. He would treat each of them with the utmost respect, and showed them nothing but love. Many times you could find Rhett standing guard over his girl while rain poured down on top of them both. Showing no concern for himself, he would lick the rain off of his mate while she lay down, to help her keep a little warmer; the whole time he would be standing, getting soaked. He would stalwartly stand guard while his girls went through pseudo pregnancies. But no matter how much he stood strong by his girl, the pair would inevitably be torn apart, and their relationship dissolved.

In 2005 Rhett became the proud father of two little pups born to Rhett and his then current girl, Belle. Rhett was a fastidious guard for his family during that short time. Due to potential health problems his pups were taken from him and Belle. This was visibly hard for both parents to take. But like always, Rhett persevered through the hardships that his life was filled with.

In 2009 due to his age, Rhett was no longer "a viable" breeding animal and was initially intended to go to a noisy enclosure at

a nearby zoo. That was the last thing we wanted Rhett to go through after such a turbulent life. So we made a commitment to find a way for him to spend the rest of his life here in peace, no matter what. But in order to fulfill our commitment, we had to pull Rhett away from Sissy.

Rhett remained alone here at Wolf Haven in his temporary home for about two months awaiting the transfer of his new girl from Graham, Washington. He seemed to be happy here even though he was alone, and we had high hopes that maybe we would keep him here for the rest of his life.

Rhett was found early one morning in his den. He had just passed away with no forewarning. We later found out that the cause of Rhett's death was gastric torsion, but we do not know the cause of this ailment or why he suffered from it. We just know that he passed away in his home and that all of Rhett's friends were very thankful he was able to spend the remainder of his days here at Wolf Haven.

During Rhett's life he was a loving father, a dedicated mate and ever watchful guardian to his girls. He was a very good teacher to the people who had the honor of caring for him while he was here. He was an icon for his species and a friend to those who accepted him for who he was.

It is my hope that when future decisions are made regarding the animals in the SSP program, we look past the number assigned to them and try to understand the individuals' needs, while still meeting the goals of the "bigger picture" of the program. We can accomplish the goals of the program, without cutting corners when it comes to the well-being of the individual animals. The point that I need to make for Rhett is that he was much more than a number; he was, and still is, Rhett the red wolf.