



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
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**MEDIA AVAILABILITY:** Staff from each institution will be available by phone. Photos of the adult American red wolves traveling to North Carolina and pups being fostered to a wild pack are available and can be found at <https://www.dropbox.com/sh/6yshevv8bgxb03u/AACFkREJ4nv0i37HqsCBgpYpa?dl=0>

## **HISTORIC RELEASE OF EIGHT ENDANGERED AMERICAN RED WOLVES**

ST. LOUIS, MO, May 12, 2021: History was made on April 30 and May 1, 2021 when four American red wolves (*Canis rufus*) from the Endangered Wolf Center, Wolf Conservation Center and Wolf Haven International were released in a protected refuge of North Carolina, and four American red wolf pups from the Akron Zoo were fostered to a red wolf female in the recovery area within its historic range - events to assist in maintaining the only wild population of the most critically endangered wolf in the world.

This collaborative effort is the first time since 1998 that adult American red wolves were released directly into the recovery area of Eastern North Carolina from managed care facilities and is the first time since 2014 that red wolf pups have been fostered into the wild from managed care facilities.

This American red wolf recovery effort is the first of its kind. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), working with their partners, released the first red wolves into the wild in 1987. The program was successful for several decades and the wild population grew to an estimated 150 individuals. Unfortunately, over the past 14 years, the already critically endangered wild population plummeted to fewer than 20 American red wolves in the wild. Before these wolves were released there were 10 known collared red wolves and an estimated 17-20 total red wolves in North Carolina.

American red wolves are solely native to the United States. Historically, American red wolves roamed the Southeastern United States, from Pennsylvania to Missouri to Texas to Florida. Due to overhunting and habitat loss, the population declined dramatically, and in 1973, the red wolf was officially listed as an endangered species under the Endangered Species Act. In the 1960s and 70s, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service worked to capture the few remaining wild wolves to bring them into zoological institutions to launch a breeding program in hopes to recover this species. They accomplished this goal, but by capturing the few remaining wild red wolves, the American red wolf was functionally extinct in the wild. The breeding program in managed care was successful and led to the first releases in 1987 in North Carolina which is currently the only location in the United States inhabited by wild American red wolves.

### **Why It's Important**

"The American red wolf is a national treasure, and I am proud to be part of this committed team working to save the American red wolf from extinction," said Chris Lasher, Animal Management Supervisor at the North Carolina Zoo, the AZA Red Wolf Species Survival Plan (SSP) Coordinator, and the AZA American Red Wolf Saving Animals from Extinction (SAFE) Program Chair.

As a keystone species, the release of red wolves is critically important. Keystone species help maintain ecological balance and the plants and animals within this ecosystem rely on the red wolf to maintain this

balance. When red wolves remove sick or diseased animals, the spread of disease, including zoonotic pathogens, is reduced, creating a healthier environment for animals, plants and humans.

“We are connected and dependent on healthy ecosystems,” said Virginia Busch, CEO of the Endangered Wolf Center. “Keystone species such as red wolves are a crucial piece of the puzzle to help restore balance to these damaged and fragmented wild places, which are all around us.”

### **Who Was Involved?**

Collaborating partners in the release and foster project included the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Association of Zoos and Aquarium American Red Wolf Species Survival Plan (SSP), Akron Zoo, Endangered Wolf Center, Wolf Conservation Center and Wolf Haven International. Transportation for these red wolves was donated by Aero Charter, Lighthawk, and Pilots To The Rescue and at a significantly reduced rate by Alaska Airlines.

“This historic conservation effort was a great example of what can be accomplished when multiple entities such as the USFWS, conservation groups, nonprofits, and private companies all work together with the same goal to save an American species,” said Regina Mossotti, Director of Animal Care and Conservation at the Endangered Wolf Center and the AZA Red Wolf Species Survival Plan Vice Coordinator.

### **What is a Release?**

Releasing animals is a conservation strategy that takes individual wolves bred and born in managed care and places them in their native range. Because the wild population of American red wolves is dangerously low, it is vital to place individuals of breeding age on the landscape to assist in the repopulation of the most endangered wolf species in the world. The zoological institutions and conservation centers that house these red wolves manage them in a way that allows them to retain natural instincts which will help them survive in the wild. For example, working to maintain a wolf’s natural instinct to stay away from humans, the SSP does not habituate wolves to humans; wolves are housed in groups and are fed native prey (such as deer) to teach them what to hunt, etc.

The American red wolves were introduced to the landscape through a “soft release” process. A habitat surrounded by temporary fencing was installed and animals were placed inside for a length of time providing them an acclimation period to their new environment and time to bond with their mates. When the time is right, the fencing will be opened, allowing the red wolves to confidently enter their new home.

"The WCC is thrilled that red wolf Deven, born in New York and affectionately named by supporters, is a part of this vital recovery mission," said Maggie Howell, Executive Director of the Wolf Conservation Center. "Deven is now a living, breathing part of the southeastern landscape, and his story will help inspire children and adults alike to care about red wolves and support the active efforts to save them."

### **What Is a Foster?**

Fostering is a creative conservation strategy that takes wolf pups born in a managed care litter and places them within a wild litter. A wild wolf mother will adopt the new additions as her own. The goal of fostering is to increase genetic diversity. With fewer than 10 American red wolves left in the wild, these pups born at the Akron Zoo represent the opportunity for vital new genetics to be introduced to this critically endangered population.

The birth of the red wolf pups at the Akron Zoo is a first for the facility. The zoo’s female red wolf, Juno, gave birth to eight pups on Thursday, April 22, 2021. The pup’s father is the zoo’s male red wolf, Waya. Four of the pups were designated to be crossed fostered, with the other four pups to remain at the Akron Zoo.

Juno and Waya were paired based on a breeding recommendation from the Red Wolf Species Survival Plan (SSP).

“The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working tirelessly to bring back this national treasure and the staff at the Akron Zoo is proud to continue to be a part of the effort to save the American red wolf,” said Eric Albers, curator of animal operations at the Akron Zoo.

### **What It Takes**

The successful recovery of an endangered species is a constant challenge and one that requires coordination and partnership among government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and community partners.

Weather and other logistics make releases and fostering challenging, and for fosters, the timing of births is vital to success. Wild and captive litters have to be born within a few days of one another, and the transfer from managed care to the wild has to occur before the pups are fifteen days old.

Managing the shifting landscape during the pandemic made partnering with individuals crucial in order to overcome challenging logistics. This release and foster would not have happened this year without the generous donation of flights on private planes provided by Aero Charter, LightHawk, and Pilots To The Rescue.

### **About American Red Wolves**

American red wolves are a critically endangered wolf native to the Southeastern United States. Once numbering in the hundreds of thousands, extermination programs and habitat loss led to a dramatic decline and near extinction of the species. Scientists learned later how important those keystone species were in keeping an ecosystem healthy. In the late 1970s, the last remaining wild American red wolves were captured in an effort to save them, leading to extinction in the wild. These 14 remaining American red wolves were brought into managed care starting the breeding and recovery program now known as the Red Wolf Species Survival Plan. In 1987, four American red wolves were released into the wild in North Carolina marking the first time a canid considered extinct in the wild was ever re-established in its natal territory. That population has continued to face major challenges, but with the help of USFWS and the SSP, efforts continue to bolster this population. Learn more at <https://www.fws.gov/southeast/wildlife/mammals/red-wolf/>.

### **About the Akron Zoo**

Founded in 1953, the Akron Zoo is a non-profit, world conservation zoo with over 1,000 animals from around the world. Located just west of Downtown Akron, the zoo strives to connect your life to wildlife while inspiring lifelong learning and conservation action. The Akron Zoo is accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA). With its more than 200 accredited members, AZA is a leader in global wildlife conservation, and your link to helping animals in their native habitats. <https://www.akronzoo.org/>

### **About the Endangered Wolf Center**

Founded in 1971 by Marlin and Carol Perkins, the Endangered Wolf Center has worked to preserve and protect Mexican wolves, American red wolves and other wild canid species, through carefully managed breeding, research, reintroduction and inspiring education programs. The EWC is a non-profit organization located near St. Louis, Mo. <http://www.endangeredwolfcenter.org/>

### **About the Wolf Conservation Center**

The Wolf Conservation Center is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit environmental education organization committed to conserving wolf populations in North America through science-based education programming and participation in the federal Species Survival Plans for the critically endangered Mexican gray wolf and red wolf. Through wolves, the WCC teaches the broader message of conservation, ecological balance, and personal responsibility for improved human stewardship of our world.

<https://nywolf.org/>

#### **About Wolf Haven International**

Wolf Haven International is a nonprofit wolf sanctuary and education center located in Tenino, WA. The mission of Wolf Haven is to conserve and protect wolves and their habitat. Since 1982, Wolf Haven has rescued and provided lifetime sanctuary to over 300 captive born, displaced wolves. Wolf Haven also offers educational programs on the value of all wildlife; promotes wolf restoration in historical ranges; participates in federal Species Survival Plans for the Mexican wolf and the red wolf, and advocates for the protection of our remaining wild wolves and their habitat.

<https://wolflhaven.org>

#### **About LightHawk**

Founded in 1979, LightHawk is the largest environmental flying organization in the country. We engage our network of more than 300 volunteer pilots to provide 100s of flights each year. Working with conservation partners, we help solve pressing river, ocean, land and wildlife problems.

Since launching a Red Wolf SSP partnership in 2020, LightHawk has flown 13 red wolves including pups for placement in the wild and adults for breeding matches. LightHawk's collaboration to support red wolf recovery builds off of over a decade of partnership with the Mexican wolf SSP and the USFWS, flying 96 wolves.

<https://www.lighthawk.org/>

#### **About Pilots To The Rescue**

Pilots To The Rescue (PTTR) is a non-profit, volunteer-driven, 501c3 public benefit aviation organization. PTTR's mission is to transport animals and people at risk. PTTR supports its network of trained volunteer pilots so they can focus on their missions and do the greater good.

<https://www.pilotstotherescue.org>