

**Red Wolf Recovery Program
Field Notes and Observations
August 8 – September 30, 2004**

Week of August 8th, 2004

Art

During a recent aerial telemetry flight, I saw both breeders from the Outfall pack, a group we rarely see from the air. They had a litter of eight pups born earlier this spring, and I was hoping to confirm that some have lived to this point. I dropped to an altitude of 500 feet and spotted the pair walking on a farm road, seeming to pay us no attention at all. Having been tracked by the air for a number of years, this pair seems to be used to the noise of a plane above them. On the second pass, I saw a whitetail deer that the plane may have spooked. It was running out of a fallow field and crossed the road roughly 100 yards in front of the wolves. I've seen wolves chasing deer during these flights in the past, but never successfully; so I wondered if this would be what I had been waiting for. As the deer crossed the road, I watched the two wolves for their reaction. They stopped, paused as the deer crossed the road, disappeared across a canal, and then continued on at their leisurely pace. Were they just full from a recent meal? Did it look like too much work for them at what was their end of the day? Didn't they know I was watching to see just what kind of awesome predators they were? Certain I'd never know the answer circling above them, we left them alone and moved on ourselves.

Week of August 15th, 2004

Michael

This is my week to conduct aerial radio-telemetry flights over the five-county area. Monday begins early in the morning with a cup of black coffee while I slip on my Nomex (fire retardant) flight suit. We prefer to fly early to make the most out of the cooler morning air and avoid the military fighter jets that use the restricted air space over the Refuges later in the morning. Another advantage of early flights is the wolves are still active and there may be a chance of obtaining the "coveted" visual observation of a red wolf. Hopefully maybe even a pup or two!

As the plane leaves the Manteo airport, we climb to our operational altitude of 1000 feet. Early into the flight, I notice an older member of the Gator Pack, 946M – born in 1994, is missing from his territory. At one time, 946M was the breeder of the pack, but now is a non-breeding "grandpa" while his son has assumed the breeder role. The Gator Pack produced a litter this spring, and 946M is helping raise the three pups. As I continue the flight, I finally locate 946M well south of his territory, at the southern border of the refuge. I'm not alarmed at this juncture because every once in a while he will go on "walk-a-bouts" down to this area, and he always comes back to his territory. I file the location in my mind as I continue the flight.

Week of September 12th, 2004

Scott

The highlight of this week occurred while I was assisting one of our cooperating graduate students to prepare for red wolf research. One of the duties in getting the ball rolling with her project entailed contacting a few private landowners to access their property. One landowner told us about an experience he recently had that involved five red wolves. He was harvesting corn on a combine with his young grandson, finishing the very last swath of corn. All of a sudden, one by one, five red wolves exited the corn to escape injury less than 100 feet ahead of the machinery. The farmer and his grandson were close enough to notice that each animal was wearing a radio collar. He also reported the consistency in their large sizes and the overall good health of the animals. Eventually, the red wolf family group trotted across wide open fields towards the nearest block of cover. He has not seen any of the animals since that time.

Week of September 19th, 2004

Scott

On Monday morning, I began a trap line at the outer edge of the recovery area. We have a couple of sterile, collared male coyotes that use the region I am concentrating on. Based on scouting efforts, it appears at this point that a third or even fourth canid inhabits the area. It is likely that an unknown female may be living here, which is what I hope for and am trying to capture. Although I have 16 traps in the ground, I have to avoid many harvest operations occurring in the area. Farmers are harvesting corn, cotton, and soybeans, and the equipment activity level in this area is very high. This limits my trapping opportunities for the time being, so I will just have to be patient. It is crucial that I am on the farms to check my traps at first light to beat the flow of vehicles and equipment. Weather was super this week, although effects of Hurricane Jeanne are expected to affect coastal North Carolina early next week.

Week of September 26th, 2004

Scott

It was a gorgeous Sunday morning. The sun was beginning to peek over the trees and agricultural fields with a bright orange glow. There were no noises from vehicles, tractors, people, or anything except for the occasional sounds of busy songbirds. The farm fields appeared nearly lifeless at first glance. It was day six of a new trap line, and I had four more traps to check before finishing up for the day. As I pulled up to the next two traps, I noticed fresh dirt, tracks, and knocked-down vegetation along the canal bank where my traps were located. I could see that the chain and anchor of the trap had been pulled out of place, so my heart began to beat much faster. I knew I had captured something, but I was still unable to see the animal to identify it. Was it a red wolf? A coyote? A bobcat? Had the animal freed itself from the trap after making such a commotion at the trapsite? Many thoughts began circulating through my head, but I was hoping for an unknown female coyote that I thought I had identified based on scouting efforts. I shut the truck off and quietly got out. As I slowly glanced over the canal bank, I

saw exactly what I had hoped for -- an unmarked coyote looking my way. The coyote quickly attempted to escape, although it was not successful because of the trap. In just a few minutes time, I was able to restrain the animal with the noose pole and slide it into the kennel for transport. During the time I handled the critter, I learned it was a female! Interestingly enough, the collared male hybrid in this area was only about half a mile from her based on telemetry. This gave me the impression that they are possible mates. I reset the trap, checked the rest, and transported the animal to our research station later in the day.

Art

I was trying to get a visual on the breeding female of the PLNWR pack during a telemetry flight recently to see if she had any pups with her. We were circling above her at 500 feet, looking down into some heavy shrub pocosin when we finally spotted something. A large whitetail deer was standing in one spot looking around. Though we circled a little lower it still wouldn't move, giving us the impression it was a little wary, either because of us, or maybe the smell of a wolf nearby. We kept watching hoping to see an encounter between the two when we finally spotted her. She was lying barely 30 yards away from the deer with her head down and legs stretched out, apparently asleep. She either had no idea the deer was so close, or didn't care, and showed no concern over us buzzing above her. We circled one more time before flying off, convinced, once again, we missed out on watching something spectacular take place.

Chris

As described in earlier journal entries, there are areas where one radio-collared wolf is present and it may or may not have a partner with it. I went to a wolf territory in the southern extreme of the recovery area to see if I could pick up sign of more than one animal. In this particular case, an older, resident male wolf was joined by a yearling female several months ago, following the death of his former mate, who was struck by a car. He and this young female remained close together since her arrival. For the last few weeks, the yearling female's transmitter was not audible. However, there were several hurricane remnants passing near enough to the area to prohibit telemetry flights; so, it is possible the female moved far out of the recovery area, undetected between flights. The other possibilities are that the transmitter in her collar quit prematurely and she is still present, or she may have been struck by a vehicle and the transmitter broken.

My expectations going into such situations are usually hopeful, but realistic. Finding tracks of two animals traveling together clear enough to discern their relative size difference is certainly possible, but not very likely, especially on the first try. It rained recently, so the road surfaces were soft enough to show clear tracks. But in the peak of crop harvesting, all I was likely to see were tracks of trucks, combines and grain trailers. Upon arrival, I was not surprised. Along with the expected equipment traffic on the farm roads were tracks of three dogs of various sizes that the farmers had seen earlier in the morning. I thought I found a few tracks of two wolves also, but mostly I found it confusing. I decided to try something else, something so obvious and simple that it rarely works as you might expect it to.

The male wolf was out in the center of a cotton field, about 300 meters from any road. I started walking into the field from far enough away that he would hopefully not hear the crunching of the dried leaves and branches of the cotton. The plants were waist high, enough to hide me in a crouch if he stood up to look, but unfortunately also high enough to hide the wolf or his mate. I moved down a row until I was directly downwind of his signal. I started easing towards him, crossing rows between plants as quietly as I could, waiting for gusts of wind to help hide the unavoidable crackling.

At 40 meters out, off to my left, I heard quick rustling, and I caught a glimpse of gray fur between plants. At least I thought I did. Then...nothing but a slight wave of jolted cotton plants streaking away from me down a row with a few sparrows fluttering just out in front, then diving into the cotton and popping back out as the wave caught up with them. It happened so fast, I was not certain I had seen anything...except the sparrows. I stood there for a while hoping to see something more. Oh, well. I presumed the male had heard me and ran off under the cover of the cotton plants.

I pulled my tracking headphones off as I closed in on the male to hear his or another animal's initial movement; in this field, sound is more reliable than actually seeing the wolf. As I started walking, I put them back on to try to determine how far he had moved away. To my surprise, his signal had not faded at all! In fact, it seemed to be all around me. This time, I did not have to remove my headphones to hear an animal get up. He was considerably more startled than the apparent first animal, and I happened by chance to be looking directly at him as he bolted from his day bed only a few meters in front of me. He moved off to my right rather noisily and kept on going.

It took me a little while to go back and find the row down which the sparrows had surfed the cotton wave. In between the dirt clods and under the fallen cotton leaves down the center of that row I found only a few recognizable tracks – but all I needed was one to bring my earlier observation, now teetering on the edge of my imagination, back into reality.

The farmer will be picking this cotton in a day or two, so I will have to wait to set traps for this particular mystery wolf. For now, I will settle for being certain that there is a red wolf there to catch.

Michael

Aerial Observations - New Pack Forming?

Over the past few weeks while conducting aerial telemetry flights, I've noticed a lone female wolf on the move. Adult 11165F was born in 2001 on Bulls Island, (Cape Romain NWR) and transported to Alligator River along with her brother in the fall of 2002. Both were released separately a few months later, and although her brother 11166M has become the breeding male in the Milltail Pack (ARNWR), 11165F has yet to find a mate or settle down.

Last spring, after a series of visuals from the plane, we decided to get her in hand after seeing evidence that she had contracted mange. After successful treatment she was again

released with a single male wolf, but still never seemed to pair. Within the last few weeks, she left the area completely and moved over 15 miles away. From flight to flight, we documented her successfully negotiating the Intracoastal Waterway, a highway and several wolf packs as she worked her way north. Now she seems to have discovered a very nice area to live in.

Just as important, there may be a couple of available males currently living in the area. One adjacent wolf pack has a non-breeding, two-year old male who's most likely about ready to leave home. 11206M has spent time near 11165F, but has not yet been located with her. The other male, 11001M, was located near 11165F once, but, wouldn't you know it, his radio collar battery has expired.