

South Salem wolf released into the wild

Contributed by Matt Dalen

Thursday, November 13, 2008 00:00



Almost exactly four years after she came to South Salem's Wolf Conservation Center, the Mexican gray wolf F836 is being released into the wild. The wolf, the second released into the wild by the center, is now at a pre-release facility in New Mexico with a wild-born mate, ready to be released.

"We're really proud and we hope that she'll have great success," Maggie Howell, the director of the center, told The Ledger. "It will give a chance for one of the wolves that we help take care of to take her rightful place in the wild."

F836 was first brought to South Salem with two sisters in November 2004, after being born at the Minnesota Zoo in 2003. She was raised with her sisters in the center's forest enclosures, away from humans so as not to acclimate her to being around them. In 2006, her sister, F838, was released in Arizona, but was illegally shot and killed by a hunter a few months after she was released, Ms. Howell said.

She has been living with a two-year-old wild-born wolf from another facility since March, and the two wolves have bonded enough that the decision was made to release them together. The pair, which is being called the Moonshine Pack, will join several other packs living in that section of New Mexico, about 10 miles southwest of Alpine. According to the Arizona Fish and Wildlife Service, there are 12 other Mexican gray packs living in the wild in Arizona and New Mexico.

"They're the keystone predator within that ecosystem," said Ms. Howell, explaining why it was important for the wolves to be released into the wild. "Without that predator, the ecosystem won't be balanced and healthy."

The Moonshine Pack is to be placed in a nylon-mesh acclimation pen for up to two weeks. If they do not free themselves by the end of that period, then the project biologists will release them. A one-mile enclosure will surround the pen until the wolves are released.

The Wolf Conservation Center

The Mexican gray wolf is the rarest of the five subspecies of gray wolf present in North America. F836 is one of only about 400 Mexican gray wolves left in the world, according to Ms. Howell, of which about 50 are living in the wild. Five packs, totaling 23 wolves or about 5% of the world population, are cared for at the wolf center, which is located on Buck Run, off Route 35 near the town park.

The center, founded in 1999, is part of the Mexican gray wolf's species survival plan, a network of conservation groups and facilities that works to keep the species from going extinct. The center's first pups were born in April, two litters born three days apart. Ms. Howell said that the six pups from the first litter were healthy and had passed their six-month health check a few weeks ago, but the pups in the smaller litter had not survived.

In addition to the Mexican gray wolves, the center is attempting to breed a pair of endangered red wolves, a separate species from the gray wolf. The red wolves did not reproduce the past two breeding seasons. The center also maintains four "ambassador" wolves, the only of its wolves that have human contact, and which participate in educational programs at the center and at local schools and organizations.

Information: nywolf.org.{sharethis}