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After a decade in South Salem, endangered wolves to go on display

Written by [Matt Dalen](#)
 Thursday, July 02, 2009

It's taken 10 years, but this fall, visitors to the Wolf Conservation Center in South Salem will be able to see a pair of the center's endangered red wolves, previously held away from visitors. The breeding pair of wolves will be in a new enclosure, built as the center celebrates its 10th anniversary.

Construction on the new enclosure, expected to be close to an acre, began last week, and is expected to be completed in the fall, according to center Managing Director Maggie Howell. The display of the endangered wolves is to complement the center's four "ambassador" wolves on display.

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"It will be the very first time that we will give our visitors not only the opportunity to learn about our red wolves, but also to see our red wolves," Ms. Howell said.

For about the past four years, the center has unsuccessfully been attempting to breed a pair of red wolves, as part of the red wolf's Species Survival Plan, a network of zoos and wildlife centers dedicated to keeping the species from going extinct. Last year, the center's male wolf was transferred to another facility, to be paired with a different mate, and the center is due to receive a new mate for its six-year-old female after the plan members meet in July. It is this pair that is likely to be on display in the new enclosure.

Because mating is so important to the program, the enclosure will include a camera in the wolves' den, so that the center's staff, as well as visitors, can monitor mating and birthing behavior. Should the wolves successfully breed, some of the pups may be taken and fostered into a wild pack in order to increase the numbers of wolves in the wild.

Unlike the center's 22 Mexican gray wolves, which are kept away from visitors in order to maintain their natural fear of humans, adult red wolves are not released into the wild, Ms. Howell said, which is what enables them to be on display. The only wolves released will be those pups fostered into wild packs.



Spencer Wilhelm F1291, the Wolf Conservation Center's female red wolf, howls in her enclosure. F1291 is to be one of the two inhabitants of a new enclosure being constructed at the center which will, for the first time, allow visitors to see its endangered red wolves. - Spencer Wilhelm photo



A decade of wolves

The Wolf Conservation Center was founded a decade ago by wildlife photographer Henry Fair and pianist Hélène Grimaud in 1999 in a house on Buck Run, not far from the entrance to the town park. They started with three ambassador wolves — Apache, Lukas, and Kaila, later to be supplemented by Arctic wolf Atka — and a goal of joining in conservation efforts for endangered species of wolves.

"We shared a love of wolves and a larger concern for the environment, and a wolf center seemed to be a very effective vehicle for having some effect," Mr. Fair told The Ledger. "We started just with an ambassador program, and then had to earn recognition and respect in the endangered species world."

Although initially met with suspicion — zoos tend to look with suspicion on private individuals and organizations caring for endangered species — the center managed to prove its bona fides. Initially staffed only by volunteers, many of whom are still working with the center, the operation began with small programs and educating people about wolves. Eventually, the center was accepted into the Mexican gray wolf's Species Survival Plan, and then the red wolf's, and its staff — now including paid employees, as Mr. Fair and Ms. Grimaud faded into the background to work mostly on fund raising — began the job of working to restore endangered species.

"Our success, I think, is due to the support of the town, both from individuals and the larger community," Mr. Fair said. "The people that came to us right in the beginning are still volunteering, and they are what makes the wolf center the great institution that it is."

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