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Conservation Center Welcomes Wolf Pups

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SOUTH SALEM - The wolf pens deep in the woods overlooking this community might appear to be the eccentric contraptions of a philanthropist. But to peer into the puckered face of a week-old pup that holds all the promise of a species' survival is to know something momentous has happened at the Wolf Conservation Center.

The center's first pups have been born to pairs of Mexican gray wolves - one of the rarest mammals in the country - giving this nonprofit conservation and education organization its biggest thrill since it was founded in 1999. "It's incredible because it is the culmination of years of work," said curator Rebecca Bose, who pulled seven pups from their den to give them a one-week checkup late last month. "It was one of the greatest things I have ever done."

The healthy newborn pups - four males and three females born to two females in late April - are cuddly products of a tenuous and controversial federally supervised effort to reintroduce wolves to the American Southwest. A mere 50 Mexican gray wolves are living in the wild, making them a critically endangered species. And 350 more wolves are being held for breeding and release in zoos and wolf centers across the country, including South Salem. "These pups make us one of the largest holding areas in the East for Mexican gray wolves," said Maggie Howell, the managing director of the wolf center, swatting May flies from her face one morning as schoolchildren made their way up the hill for an educational presentation. "The fact that we went from zero wolves to 25 in such a short time is a big deal."

The mission, a vision of French pianist Helen Grimaud and photographer J. Henry Fair, is seen as worthy conservation work to some - particularly those in the East - but in states such as Montana, Wyoming and Idaho, wolves are viewed as a threat to the ranchers, farmers and hunters whose ancestors began the first campaigns to exterminate them hundreds of years ago. All the more reason why wolf pups are so valuable, conservationists say.

Except for the paws, and perhaps the jaws, the pups have every appearance of man's best friend. And the way they are heralded at the center, they would certainly seem to be. But don't expect a glimpse of them if you visit the wolf center. The only wolves visitors may see are the so-called ambassadors. A pack of four, all with names, the ambassador wolves are comfortable enough around people to visit gymnasiums as well as put on howling displays in a special visitor's section on the 28-acre center. Atka, the center's traveling ambassador wolf, recently drew more than 100 people in a two-day appearance at Borders in Mount Kisco that was partly to raise money for the soon-to-be-born pups. The other wolves that are candidates to be released have minimal contact with people to preserve their healthy fear of humans. "People, roads, ranches, cars, pets - we want the wolves to be uninterested in them," Howell said. "Making sure these wolves are best equipped to live in the wild means keeping them away from anything associated with humans." Yet it is hard to come to the center and not feel a connection with the creatures.

"How often can you have this in Westchester? Never," said Ed Thompson, 80, of North Salem, a wolf center volunteer and the former editor in chief of Reader's Digest. "And this is just the beginning."



The Wolf Conservation Center's Rebecca Bose examines a 7-day-old Mexican gray wolf pup. The two litters are the first pups the center has bred. Mexican gray wolves are one of the rarest mammals in the U.S. (Submitted by Henry Fair/The Wolf Conservation Cent)

FYI - To learn more about the Wolf Conservation Center and its new pups, go to: www.nywolf.org