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South Salem pups get first checkup

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SOUTH SALEM - They're small, cuddly looking and among the rarest animals in North America. These are Mexican gray wolves and they're in South Salem at the Wolf Conservation Center.

The seven wolf pups - four males and three females born in late April - got a clean bill of health in their first checkup in late June.

Staff members and Dr. Charles Duffy, veterinarian with the Norwalk Veterinary Hospital, entered the wolf pack's 2-acre enclosure to give the then-9-week-old pups vaccinations, get their weights and check their vitals.

"As soon as we walk into the enclosure, the wolves will bolt as far as they can go," said Deb Heineman, the center's executive director. The pups live in a pack with their family - two adults and eight yearlings - who arrived from the Cincinnati Zoo in November. They are the first pups born at the center since it opened in 1999.

The wolf pups had to be gently tugged from their den one at a time for Duffy to check them out. The vet, who has donated his services to the center for the past 10 years, said the pups weighed 8 to 10 pounds each - "a nice healthy weight for a wolf pup at this age."

Mexican gray wolves are a critically endangered species. A mere 50 survive in the wild, while about 350 more are in zoos and breeding centers across the country.

"Right now, we're home to one-sixteenth of the global Mexican wolf population," said Maggie Howell, managing director of the center. "There are only 400 of them in the world, and we have 25 of them up on the hill here. I never get over that."

Curator Rebecca Bose is one of the few people to interact with the rare wolves. Contact with humans is kept to a minimum to improve the wolves' chances of survival in the wild. "This will be one of the only times they get to see people," she said.

The wolves at the center are part of the national Species Survival Plan, where wolves are raised in captivity with the aim of reintroducing them to the wild. The program, administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, selects wolves based on genetic diversity and survival traits.

"These wolves are excellent candidates for release," Heineman said. "They have excellent genetics, and they've never been in a zoo," meaning they are wary of humans.

The program has proved controversial, with landowners and ranchers concerned that the reintroduction of wolves will affect their livelihood.

"It's a very complicated political process," Bose said. "We're here to educate people with the truth about wolves."

The center also has four so-called ambassador wolves, which have been acclimated to people since they were pups. Visitors to the center can meet these animals, and they also take them on the road to provide educational programs at schools and to raise money for the center's mission.

"I ask if they're fearful of wolves, and a lot of hands will go up due to fairy tales and whatnot," Howell said. "But when the program is over, I ask again, and there are a lot fewer hands."

Pond offers creature comforts
