



CELEBRATING 25 YEARS IN THE MEXICAN WOLF SSP PROGRAM



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Female Mexican gray wolf at Wolf Haven. Julie Lawrence.



The first litter of Mexican gray wolf pups born at Wolf Haven in Spring, 1996, are photographed during their first pup health check. *Wolf Haven*.

ON A FOGGY SATURDAY MORNING, GYPSY EMERGES OUT OF HER DEN AWAKENED BY A SANCTUARY HOWL. HER COMPANION, MEXICAN WOLF HODARI, TAKES TURNS BETWEEN GLEEFULLY BOUNDING AROUND THEIR ENCLOSURE, AND PAUSING TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE CHORUS.

A

couple of hours later, the first guided visit makes its way through the public portion of the sanctuary. As the group stops at Gypsy and Hodari's viewing area, the curious pair approach the fence; guests – young and mature – marvel at the majestic presence of one of the most critically endangered animals in the world.

For thousands of years, family groups of Mexican wolves roamed the arid and high-altitude forests of the U.S. Southwest and the great mountain ranges of Mexico. Along with the other great predators – the black bear, the brown

bear, the mountain lion, and the jaguar – the Mexican wolf played a vital role in rich biological systems. Ignorance and fear, however, motivated humans to extirpate these creatures from their lands and by the late 1900s the free-ranging Mexican wolf had been driven to the brink of extinction.

Fortunately, while some humans failed, other were able to see and understand the intrinsic worth of each component of our natural world. *Canis lupus baileyi* (the scientific name for the Mexican wolf) was added to the endangered species list in 1976, and thus began the imperative effort to recover them. There is a saying "It takes a village"; for Mexican wolf recovery it takes two nations. For almost four decades the U.S. and Mexican governments have worked together to save the species. In order to support U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (USFWS) task of reintroducing a population to

the historical range, the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) initiated a program to generate a robust population of Mexican wolves in captivity. The Species Survival Plan (SSP) is a captive breeding program with the goal of maintaining a healthy and genetically diverse population of a species in danger of extinction. In 1994, seeking to expand its work for wolf conservation, Wolf Haven was selected to participate in the Mexican Wolf Species Survival Plan (MWSSP) and the arrival of our first four Mexican wolves kicked off our journey as dedicated contributors toward their recovery.

In 1996 the first litter was born at Wolf Haven, and two years later a family group, which was formed in our pre-release area, became one of the first three packs to be reintroduced into the wild. In 2000, a second family from Wolf Haven was released and the breeding pair of this pack gave birth to the first Mexican wolf pup conceived and born in the wild! Sixteen years later, thanks to a bi-national collaboration, the largest Mexican wolf pack – a family of eleven originally from Wolf Haven – was transported across the border and released at a Mexican reintroduction site. Recent field data has shown that at least one of its members has formed their own pack and successfully reproduced in the Mexican mountains.

Both F907 and M1458 (Gypsy and Hodari's respective MWSSP studbook numbers and official identifiers) came to our sanctuary as part of regular transfers that assist the program needs. Though they are the only two representatives of this amazing species that guests can admire when visiting the sanctuary, we currently care for a total of 13 Mexican wolves. Since 1994, Wolf Haven has housed dozens of Mexican wolves.

Through all this time, Wolf Haven has seen new pairs bond, pups born, family groups form and expand, young individuals transferred to other facilities to meet new mates, and older wolves retire from the program and live out their days in the peace of our

sanctuary. We have also had the joy of seeing them set free in their historical habitats, getting a chance to live their full potential.

During these 25 years, Wolf Haven has been committed to see the Mexican wolf thrive. Through educational programs—like sanctuary visits, onsite and offsite presentations, and our annual Wildlife Handling Class—we have spread the word about the importance of protecting this unique species and their habitat. We have given a respectful home and the best available care to each Mexican wolf who has lived in our sanctuary. We have supported the federal and state efforts on the ground by assisting the Mexican Wolf Interagency Field Team moni-

toring the wild population. We have provided liaison work to facilitate the binational collaborative efforts. And last, but not least, we have brought a sanctuary perspective to the table, offering a voice to an aspect of wildlife conservation that is often overlooked: the value of every individual in addition to the species. As Wolf Haven continues to evolve, we will remain flexible and attentive on how to best serve both the Mexican Wolf Recovery Program and each of the wolves under our care.

It is now a cool misty evening and all human activity has ceased for the day. Gypsy and Hodari hold their heads up and join, once more, an alluring  sanctuary howl.



Six female Mexican gray wolves from Wolf Haven are loaded onto a truckbed at dusk during the January 2009 transfer of six female gray wolves to a facility in Mexico. Julie Lawrence.