



CALIFORNIA WOLF CENTER
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LEGENDARY MEXICAN WOLF DIES AT 15

The last surviving Mexican gray wolf from the original release in 1998 died recently at the California Wolf Center in Julian, CA. “Rio” as he was known to most, or M166, had been living out his “retirement years” at the California Wolf Center after surviving the pioneering days of modern Mexican wolf recovery in Arizona wilderness. Where at one time only seven Mexican gray wolves survived, Rio made a significant contribution to the return of one of the rarest land mammals in the world, living successfully in the wild for several years.

The subject of a National Geographic photo story as well as a documentary on wolves, Rio was the first reintroduced Mexican wolf documented taking down native prey in the wild. He also fathered the first wild-born Mexican wolf pups in the United States in more than 50 years.

The challenges Rio overcame (and those he did not) represent for many the broader issues faced by endangered species today. In an ever-changing natural and political landscape, this wolf survived and thrived, all the while inspiring people to get involved in conservation efforts. The big wolf with bigger fan club will be mourned and missed.

For more information, please contact public relations at the California Wolf Center (415-531-5550) or see the full story below.

[Photos are available to credentialed press upon request.]

LEGENDARY MEXICAN WOLF DIES AT 15 (FULL STORY)

The last surviving Mexican gray wolf from the original release in 1998 died recently at the California Wolf Center in Julian, CA. Rio, or M166, had been living out his retirement years at the California Wolf Center, and he passed peacefully without suffering. This individual wolf is an important part of the history of Mexican wolf recovery, and he made a significant contribution to the return of this rare subspecies to the wild.

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Rio was born at the Wild Canid Survival and Research Center in Eureka, Missouri on April 27, 1994. He was the grandson of wild-caught wolves, and he was parent reared and raised with older siblings in a multi-generational pack.

Rio and his natal pack were the subjects of a National Geographic shoot with photographer Joel Sartore. He was also the subject of a Wild Canid video documentary of a year in a pup's life.

While a puppy, he helped his father stalk and 'chase out' a copperhead snake that lived behind the enclosure. As he moved from pup to yearling he was seen 'stalking' white-tailed deer outside the enclosure and when he got close he would look back at his father as if to get approval. He remained in his natal pack and helped care for his younger brothers and sisters born in 1995, acting as the primary 'baby sitter' and often playing with his younger siblings.

On November 29, 1996, he was transferred to Sevilleta Wolf Management Facility (weighing 90 pounds) to be paired with "Dark Eyes" (F174) for breeding and possible release into the wild. Rio was very timid when he arrived and would not come out of his transfer crate until after everyone had left, but with F174 it was 'love at first sight' and an immediate bond formed. This was the first mating for both of them, and they produced a very robust female pup (F511) in the late spring of 1997. Rio was a very attentive father, often playing with F511, who went on to become the "Poster Wolf" for the Mexican Wolf Recovery Project.

Rio, Dark Eyes, and F511 were released as the Campbell Blue pack into the wild as part of the first reintroduction on March 29, 1998. Rio and his pack made the successful transition from captivity to the wild, as Rio was the first reintroduced Mexican wolf documented taking down native prey. Rio also fathered the first wild-born Mexican wolf pups in the United States in almost 50 years.

The life of a wild wolf is more than a challenge. The act of hunting can leave wolves injured or even killed in the process. The human threat to wolves cannot be understated as well. Dark Eyes was badly injured when stomped by a cow elk in early June, and Rio had to do all of the hunting to sustain her and their litter from that year. There were supplemental feedings by the field team members during this time to help the pack survive this challenge. On August 7, 1998, Dark Eyes was illegally shot and killed. Rio continued to care for the pup(s) until late August, but it is unlikely that any pups from that year survived. Rio was also seen limping badly during this period suggesting he had become injured during a hunt trying to care for the pups as a single wolf parent.

After the loss of his mate and pup(s), Rio traveled extensively, likely in search of a new mate and other wolves (wolves would rather be in a pack than a "lone wolf.").

On November 18, 1998, Rio was captured by field team members and paired with F482. They were re-released into the wild in December of 1998 and again, Rios's pack adjusted well. Rio appeared to go through an 'attitude change' with this new freedom. He was no longer shy and timid, but was a dominant, bold, 'in charge' wolf. Rio seemed to thrive in the wild that year, gaining more weight than when he was released. He and his older brother, Maska or M131 of the Hawk's Nest pack, were the only two survivors from the original 13 wolves released during the initial reintroduction, and both were thriving. However, tragedy struck again in October 1999 when Rio's mate, F482, was killed by a mountain lion and Rio was again alone.

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Rio was paired with two additional females in late 1999 and early 2000, but both were removed from the wild. Finally, Rio paired with F592. After travelling to the San Carlos Apache Indian Reservation and being temporarily removed from the wild at the request of the tribe, Rio and F592 were taken to the Gila Wilderness of New Mexico and released back into the wild at Tom Moore Canyon on December 5, 2000. In June 2001, they were removed from the Adobe Ranch in New Mexico with the use of a helicopter netgun. The stated reason for their removal was livestock depredation.

Rio was never released into the wild again. He was taken to the Sevilleta Wolf Management Facility and, in March 2002, was moved into a pen with his sister Aspen, F168. The two of them would remain together as companions for the rest of his life. Rio was neutered November 6, 2002, and brother and sister were transferred to the California Wolf Center in Julian, California one month later.

At the California Wolf Center, they were allowed to 'retire' in an off-exhibit enclosure that looked out over the Southern California desert. He was one of the largest Mexican Wolves in the program weighing in at 80 plus pounds. Every year when it was time for his exam, he would quickly run into the wooden den box and quietly wait for a Y-pole to be placed over his shoulder, lying motionless while the procedures were completed. On examination, it was noted that his left carpal joint was completely fused, with no movement at all, and yet he never showed any sign of lameness. In the fall of 2007, it became apparent that he was losing his eyesight, yet he still seemed to thrive with the helpful guidance of his sister Aspen. In 2008, his hearing also was failing and yet he managed to sense the presence of caretakers, slowly getting up and moving away from them. December 7, 2008, at the age of 14 and a half years, he weighed 74 pounds, which was evidence of very good health for a canid of that age.

In the last six months of his life he was seen having more difficulty getting up with his hind legs and was moving slowly. He could still get to his food and he always managed to eat his fill. On May 28, 2009, he was no longer able to use his hind legs and the decision was made to humanely euthanize him.

Rio's contribution to the Mexican Wolf Species Survival Plan and to the reintroduction of Mexican wolves into the wild is unparalleled to date. Just as important is the knowledge and understanding that he imparted to the many people that had the honor and privilege of observing and caring for Rio.

For more information about how you can become involved with Mexican wolf recovery, please contact public relations at the California Wolf Center (415-531-5550).

[Photos are available to credentialed press upon request.]

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