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Graylen and Stephen Sanders photo

## RUNNING WITH THE PACK

WILDLIFE BIOLOGIST ROB GRUDGER TRAVELS WITH HIS FOUR WOLVES TO EDUCATE THE PUBLIC ABOUT ONCE ENDANGERED SPECIES.

STORY BY: MEGAN NORTHCOTE

Wildlife biologist Rob Grudger of Maggie Valley has always had a soft spot for wolves.

"Wolves are shy and misunderstood," said Grudger. "A long time ago, probably 200 to 300 years ago, man wanted a companion, someone he could relate to, and that's why he chose the wolf."

At times a self-described "lone wolf," Grudger decided to become a spokesperson for the wolves about 25 years ago, when he bought his first wolf from a lady in Cherokee, Alabama. Later, he bought three more from a woman in Candler, who used to breed them in a kennel.

Grudger owns four wolves, three gray or timber wolves and one arctic, and travels with them primarily to charter schools, academies and camps in North and South Carolina, educating children about this once endangered canine.

Last Wednesday, Grudger and his youngest, 2-year-old pup made a presentation at Maggie Valley United Methodist Church to a captive audience of approximately 20 children plus their parents.

"At one time, it was my mission was to save the wolves, but now we've got plenty of wolves and it's not a matter of saving them as much as it is educating people," Grudger said.

In June, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposed to remove the gray wolf from the list of endangered species in the lower 48 states, citing a rise in the wolf population. Federal protection has already been lifted elsewhere in the United States with a current stabilized population of 6,100 wolves in the country that roam primarily in the northern Rockies and western Great Lakes region.

For now, states are in charge of protecting the wolves. However, some states, particularly out west, are allowing increased hunting of wolves. In North Carolina, only between 100 and 200 red wolves live in the wild; they were reintroduced by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in a five-county recovery zone in eastern North Carolina.

Grudger has been a hunter, trapper and fisher all his life. He did most of his hunting near the North and South Carolina border, where he worked as a mosquito abatement specialist for Duke Power for 25 years near Lake Jocassee and Lake Keowee. Yet, the one animal he would never hunt is the wolf.

Hundreds of years ago, Grudger said his Scottish ancestors used to shoot, poison and trap wolves, which was due to ignorance and lack of knowledge.

"It's really bad to shoot into a wolf pack because if you hit the alpha female, the leader in the pack, it takes them a long time to recover," Grudger said. "When you hunt wolves, you can't tell which one is the alpha. Wolf packs limit their own population because only the alpha has pups that only live 6.5 years in the wild."

Grudger owns three female wolves and one male, all with Native American names.

They all live on Grudger's property inside a one-acre, shaded field enclosed by an 8-foot tall, chain link fence, buried four feet into the ground with electric fencing around the top.

He feeds each of them 10 pounds of chicken leg quarters once a week, similar to the feeding patterns of a wild wolf that feed on large, weekly meals of caribou or elk.

He also takes his wolves to the Canton Animal Hospital four times a year to receive their rabies vaccination.

In the state of North Carolina, no permits are required to own wolf hybrids, only annual rabies vaccinations.

Grudger said because his wolves are considered wolf hybrids, not wolves, they are legal to own. His wolf-hybrids are 97 percent wolf and 3 percent husky and are five generations removed from the pure wolf breed.

"Full wolves belong in a zoo," Grudger said. "These are not full wolves."

Grudger primarily relies on donations from his educational programs to cover his wolves' food and medical bills.

Another concern the federal government and the general public have for owners of wolf hybrids is the likelihood of these animals' natural instincts to take over, making them dangerous pets.

"The wolves can't be trained or tamed," Grudger said. "All four of mine are socialized, they know what to expect from me and I know what to expect from them."

When Grudger first brought his pups home when

they were between 6 and 10 weeks old, he worked on socializing them by keeping them inside to bond. For the first week, Grudger would carry the wolf pups around the house like dogs so that they could get used to one another.

“WOLVES ARE LIKE SMART SCHOOL CHILDREN, THEY CHOOSE TO DO AND NOT DO CERTAIN THINGS.”

- ROB GRUDGER  
WILDLIFE BIOLOGIST

However, Grudger has been bitten on the hand twice by his wolves, which he said was brought on by the wolves mistaking his hand for food during feeding time, but were not deliberate attacks.

During his educational presentations, Grudger keeps his wolves on leashes and allows them to walk up to the children, encouraging them to pet and snuggle with his wolves and accept their affectionate licks.

Yet, he makes sure to emphasize that the wolves are not dogs and should not be kept as pets under most circumstances. All dogs came from wolves, Grudger said, but the two breeds share very few



FOUR WOLVES — Grudger now owns four wolves, three gray or timber wolves and one arctic.



CLOSE ENCOUNTER — Hailey McMahan, a rising fifth-grader at Riverbend Elementary School in Clyde, gets face to face with a 2-year-old wolf pup.

similarities.

Grudger said the public's stereotype of wolves as dangerous animals, portrayed in fairy tales like Little Red Riding Hood are actually not true. Instead, Grudger believes wolves are actually quite docile, more like a feline than a canine, and would usually only attack a human if they were separated from their pack in search of food.

"Wolves are like smart school children," Grudger said. "They choose to do and not do certain things. They won't answer to their name, they won't play games and they won't pull a sled. They do what they want, but they do it well because they've been able to survive all these years."

## FACTS ABOUT GRAY WOLVES:

(SOURCE - U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE AND THE INTERNATIONAL WOLF CENTER)

- Live in packs with breeding pairs (the alpha pair), their offspring and non-breeding adults; red wolf packs are smaller than gray wolf packs
- Average life expectancy in the wild is approximately 13 years
- Five pups born each spring and summer
- Wolves can run up to 40 miles per hour for short distances
- Wolves howl to reinforce social bonds within the pack, to announce the beginning or end of a hunt, to sound an alarm, to locate members of the pack, or to warn other wolves to stay out of their territory. Wolves howl more frequently in the evening and early morning, especially during winter breeding and pup-rearing.
- Wolves can climb trees
- Wolves originally descended from the Northern Hemisphere including Russia, Siberia, Scandinavia, Alaska and Canada
- Adult male gray wolves weigh between 85 to 115 pounds
- Wolves kill large mammals and spend the rest of the day digesting it
- Wolves usually travel a radius of 50 miles per day for food
- Red wolves, the kind found on the coast of North Carolina, are larger than coyotes and smaller than gray wolves.



Graylen and Stephen Sanders photo