

Endangered Species Restoration At Gulf Islands Seashore

Several projects underway at Gulf Islands National Seashore are aimed at restoring endangered species to portions of their former range. These include efforts to reestablish populations of bald eagles, brown pelicans, and beach mice in the park, and cooperation with the USFWS to propagate endangered red wolves, a species that has been extinct in the wild for several decades.

A hacking program on Horn Island, a wilderness barrier island in Mississippi Sound, has resulted in release of 19 young eagles in the park over the past three years. It is anticipated that these birds will return to breed when they mature at five to six years of age. Two birds already have returned – a second year bird in March 1988 and another immature bird in October 1988.

The project is part of a program aimed at restoring southern bald eagles across their former range in the Southeastern United States. Eggs collected from wild nests in Florida are hatched and hand raised at the Sutton Avian Research Center in Oklahoma. At eight weeks of age young eagles are distributed to release sites around the Southeast. The program moved from a research to a management phase last winter under the direction of park research personnel. The first of a series of large scale releases in the Southeast will take place this winter when 42 eagles will be loosed in coastal Mississippi.

Beach Mice Get New Lease

By 1986 the endangered Perdido Key beach mouse had been reduced to a population of fewer than 30 animals at one location on Perdido Key, making it one of North America's rarest mammals. A cooperative program involving NPS, the State of Florida, USFWS, and Auburn University was begun that year to reestablish the mice at Gulf Islands on portions of their former range. Thirty mice have been reintroduced to the Seashore over the past two years and a captive breeding program has begun. The mice appear to be thriving and a breeding population seems to have been established over the entire 7 miles of the park's Perdido Key Unit. This marks one of the first successful reestablishment of an endangered mammal population.

Brown Pelican populations have been increasing steadily along the Gulf Coast after being virtually wiped out by pesticides in the early 1960s. Populations in Alabama and Louisiana are expanding, and it is hoped that these endangered birds will return to coastal Mississippi. As part of an experimental project to attract pelicans to protected predator-free nesting areas in the Seashore, pelican decoys, nesting material, and nesting platforms have been provided for the birds on an isolated island in Mississippi Sound. No nesting has yet been observed, but up to 150 juvenile birds have used the island as a roost site.

Red Wolf Program Underway

The red wolf, a shy, solitary species of wolf that once ranged throughout the Southeast, has been extinct in the wild for almost 20 years. Last year the USFWS launched an exciting and innovative program aimed at

reestablishing the species on Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge in North Carolina. Unfortunately the only red wolves remaining have been in captivity all their lives, and it is feared that their survival rate in the wild may be low. One solution may lie in the propagation of wild wolves in a controlled but wild setting. The Seashore's Horn Island, a wilderness area 10 miles off the Mississippi coast, is ideal for such a program. Horn Island, which lies at the heart of the wolf's former range, contains ideal habitat for red wolves, and an excellent food source in the form of introduced rabbits and nutria, both of which are considered pests on the island.

A pair of adult wolves was transported to Horn Island in January 1989 as part of a five year research and propagation project. Research will document the biology of these poorly known animals and assess their effects on exotic and native prey populations. In addition, any offspring produced will be removed once they are independent of their parents, and released into the wild at Alligator River. It is hoped that the survival instincts developed by these animals on Horn Island will ensure their success in the wild.

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