

## Mexican Wolves Released at Ted Turner's Ladder Ranch

A Longstanding Dream Realized

By Mike Phillips | Photos: Turner Endangered Species Fund



1 ABOVE – Six Mexican wolf pups were on their way to a remote acclimation-release pen at Ted Turner's Ladder Ranch in southwestern New Mexico

It took us a while—24 years to be exact, but persistence paid off. In April 2021 we—the Turner Endangered Species Fund (TESF)—learned that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) had decided to release a family of wolves on Ted Turner's Ladder Ranch in southwestern New Mexico. The decision was based on our persistent support of Mexican wolf recovery, and keen and justifiable desire for wolves to occupy the ranch. The decision caused a stir through the "Turnerverse." Not only would the release mark an important historic milestone, since Mexican wolves had never been released on private land to advance recovery—but it would also help satisfy our longstanding objective of establishing wolves on as many Turner ranches as possible. Achieving that at Turner's Vermejo Park Ranch in northern New Mexico and southern Colorado was so important that it gave rise to TESF and the Turner Biodiversity Conservation Divisions in 1997. Those actions matter because since then, they have stood together as the most significant private effort in the world to redress the extinction crisis through reintroduction projects.

Beyond that, the desire to advance the wolf's return to Vermejo undergirded the TESF's catalytic and seminal role in the effort to restore the species to western Colorado, which ended with a successful citizen-initiated ballot measure in 2020. Once a population is restored there, as our thinking goes, dispersing wolves will find and establish residency at Vermejo, which could easily support several packs, given its large size (583,000 acres), robust numbers of deer and elk, and roadless environment with restricted access.

That sequence of events occurred nearly 20 years ago at Turner's Flying D Ranch in Montana. During the winter of 2002 and 2003, wolves from Yellowstone Park wandered to the ranch and gave rise to the Beartrap Pack, which became a fixed and charismatic feature of the Flying D. By about 2010, it had grown to one of the largest packs in the U.S., often including 20-plus members. This is not surprising; the Flying D is large (114,000 acres), secure due to restricted access, adjacent to the Lee Metcalf Wilderness Unit of the Gallatin National Forest, and supports healthy numbers of deer, elk and bison.

When we first heard of the decision to release Mexican wolves 1693M and 1728F at the Ladder Ranch, they were in captivity at the Sevilleta National Wildlife Refuge and expected to give birth to a litter of pups. They had been removed from the wild weeks earlier because they had established territory in an area of the Gila National Forest where conflicts with livestock could be expected.

Additionally, because of their value to the recovery program, FWS decided to translocate them to the accommodating and secure surroundings of the Ladder, a working ranch with a focus on bison production, big-game fee hunting and wildlife conservation. With more than 150,000 acres adjacent to the Aldo



2 LEFT – By late July it was apparent that the six Mexican wolf pups were growing and enjoying life in the wild at the Ladder Ranch in southwestern New Mexico.



3 ABOVE – Members of the Seco Pack were doing well going into mid-September as two pups and one adult took advantage of a food cache we provided to ease their transition to the wild at the Ladder Ranch.

Leopold Wilderness Unit of the Gila National Forest that support robust numbers of elk, deer and javelina, the ranch was an ideal translocation site.

By early May, 1728F had whelped a litter of six pups, and by June 17 we had securely placed the family in a remote acclimation-release pen on the ranch (photo 1). During the evening of July 1, we left the gate to the pen open, allowing the wolves to come and go as they pleased. At that point they became known as the Seco Pack.

While little or no chatter came from the ranch's neighbors, the releases did agitate Sierra County Commissioners, who initiated legal action against FWS. They claimed that the administrative procedure employed by FWS prior to the releases did not comply with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). In response, FWS noted that the releases, like countless others conducted over the last many years, were authorized per a NEPA process completed in 2014. The lawsuit remains unsettled.

Through late July, the wolves restricted their movements to the area near the release pen (photo 2). By mid-September they had begun to explore more widely, as was expected and necessary for long-term survival (photo 3).

During the month, the adult male briefly left the ranch and explored the eastern flanks of the Gila National Forest. The adult female tagged along, but never left the Ladder.

Over a five-day period from late October through early November, the adults made a 60-mile round-trip exploration of the Leopold Wilderness. As none of the pups is radio-collared, we are unsure if they tagged along. We do know that when the walkabout ended, the family was together near the release pen.

With each passing day we grow more optimistic that the Seco Pack will become a fixed, enduring and most fascinating feature of the Ladder Ranch, and living proof that private working ranches can be beachheads of security for even controversial imperiled species (photo 4). ■

Mike Phillips is the director of the Turner Endangered Species Fund and a former Montana state senator.



4 BELOW – History was made with the release of Mexican wolves at Ted Turner's Ladder Ranch in southwestern New Mexico. Tracks of an adult wolf and a pup, along with tracks of a black bear, are evidence of the role wild, working ranches play for wildlife.