

Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge

24 April 2013 – 26 April 2013

After a couple of email conversations with Jon Hall about red wolves, I decided to go to Alligator River to try to see one. I went knowing the chance was pretty much close to zero considering what I had heard about them. I was given the chance in the late 90's to work on two of the ones that had been released into the Smokey Mountain National Park when they were brought into the University of Tennessee Veterinary teaching hospital and since then have always liked them.

Alligator River is on around 152,000 acres close to Manteo in the Outer banks of North Carolina. There is a new visitor center in Manteo close to the Fort Raleigh National Historic Site. The center has information not only about Alligator River but about some of the other refuges in the area. They have a large collection of taxidermy animals including a section of red wolves. The center is staffed mainly by volunteers. The day I went no wildlife officers were present so the actual animal location information I was able to get was minimal. I think calling ahead and finding out when they are there to ask questions may be more helpful. I was trying to ask the volunteer good locations to look for marsh rabbit, a species I had not seen before, and instead of good spots in the reserve I did get her to belt out a song her son had written about the rabbit (without asking). Years ago she stated the rabbits could be seen in the morning along roads in Nags head (close to Manteo), however she was unsure if they were still there and I couldn't really wrangle out an exact location from her. Needless to say I did not see a Marsh rabbit. A gentleman in the Roanoke Island visitor center was more helpful. He had never seen a wolf but stated his best wildlife sightings were along Sawyer Road in the Reserve and thought I should concentrate my efforts there. From Manteo the best way to get to the reserve is from 64/264 west, cross a bridge then turn right and continue on 64 West. I did not see a sign at this point. Off 64 there are two ways to get into the reserve first by taking a left onto Milltail Road (recommended) or a left onto Buffalo City Road. You could also continue on 264 and take a right onto Borrow Pit Road. All of the above mentioned street signs are small white signs so be on the look out for them. I chose the Milltail entrance both days. There is a small parking lot on

your right when you first enter where you can walk on the Creef Cut wildlife Trail. It is about a ½ mile trail over a paved area that leads along a boardwalk over a marshy area. I did the walk around 5 pm and so no animals. I did however see a large pile of bear feces in the middle of the trail. Seeing bear scat along all the roads seemed to be the norm and the favorite place of many bears to go. All the access roads in the reserve are gravel. Three main roads are present including Milltail, Long Curve Road (also called the Wildlife loop) and Sawyer Lake Road. These roads all went through various areas of farmland and fragmented patches of forest. Some areas of the forest you could see into, but the majority had a large amount of underbrush making wildlife observation difficult. On both sides of these roads there were what I would call irrigation ditches/small bodies of water. They varied in length and depth as far as I could tell. There are also several small access roads you can go down. At the time I went, many of them were blocked off by gates or large machinery. The few I did go down (Bear Road, Butler Road and Buffalo City Road) all had dense vegetation on either side. There is a second ½ mile trail you can walk called Sandy Ridge wildlife Trail at the end of Buffalo City Road. The only wildlife I saw there were the ticks my friend Hillary was picking off herself (always good to have a bait friend that insects like better). I think trying to go in the summer would be miserable with the potential for large quantities of biting insects. Hiking off the two trails looked pretty much next to impossible due to how dense the vegetation was unless you wanted to walk on the farmland or along marshy terrain. I did not see a wolf while there and I think several factors played into this (besides the shy nature of the species). The amount of the reserve you can access seemed minimal. While I only saw 3-4 other cars with tourists there were plenty of workers on the reserve driving the roads so car noise could play into it as well. You also have to leave the reserve ½ hour after sunset and can not go in until ½ hour before sunrise. Considering they are most active at night this made looking then impossible. Like most US parks and reserves spotlighting is not allowed. The Dare County Bombing Range is also adjacent to the park. Both days I was there right around 5 pm they decided it would be a good time to do some military aircraft fly bys. This lasted for what seemed like hours both days and at some points I felt like the planes were on top of my head. If I was a wolf I would not have liked this. I read online that the noise was a “concern” and that the base funds a black bear project in the reserve. Not only did we not

see a wolf but also didn't see any signs of them (footprints, scat, etc). I did talk to one of the workers in the reserve while there and he told me he had been there in the actual park for years working and had never seen or heard a wolf. That being said I did have some excellent black bear sightings- eight in total. The reserve in the summer has tours that take tourists out at dusk to look for bears and owls. The bears here also seemed bigger and healthier than the ones I am use to seeing in the mountains in Virginia. I also saw two jump in the water and swim, something I had never seen an east coast bear do. On the first day in one of the small “water bodies” on the side of the road off Sawyer lake Road I had about a ten minute view of an adult river otter with two kits. I saw a fourth river otter in the water right were 64/264 splits into 64 on the right hand side so pay attention before you turn into the reserve. We saw four raccoons at separate times all at pretty close range again off Sawyer lake road all after 4:30 pm. At one point we had a black bear in front of the car and a raccoon behind the car, both of which then jumped into the water. The closest I thought I was to seeing a wolf was the first night on Long Curve Road when I saw a brown medium sized mammal on the side of the road just at dark. Sadly it turned out to be a white-tailed deer. Still a neat place to visit. Signs in the park did recommend fall as the best time to see wildlife so I may try again later this year.

Mammal list

1. American Black Bear - “*Ursus americanus*”
2. North American River Otter - “*Lontra canadensis*”
3. North American/Common Raccoon - “*Procyon lotor*”
4. White-tailed deer - “*Odocoileus virginianus*”

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