

TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEWEE: Ron Wooten, Jr.

INTERVIEWER: David Todd

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David Todd [00:00:03] Well, let me give a little bit of an introduction to what I think we're about today. With your approval, the plan is to record this interview for research and educational work on behalf of a nonprofit group called the Conservation History Association of Texas that would be towards a book and a website for Texas A&M University Press, and for an archive at the Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin. And of course, you would have all equal rights to use the recording as well for whatever purpose you might have.

David Todd [00:00:44] And so before we went any further, I just want to make sure that that sits well with you.

Ron Wooten [00:00:49] Yes, sir. That's fine.

David Todd [00:00:51] Great. OK, well, well, let's get started. I'll give a little bit of a context for the interview.

David Todd [00:00:59] It is June 6th, 2021. My name is David Todd. I'm representing the Conservation History Association of Texas and I'm in Austin. And we are fortunate to be conducting an interview with Ron Wooten, who is affiliated with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in Galveston and has been a witness to the appearance of some hybrid canids on the island that have really interesting traces of red wolf genes. And we're hoping that we might explore that today and wanted to, again, thank Mr. Wooten for taking time to talk to us.

Ron Wooten [00:01:41] My pleasure, sir.

David Todd [00:01:43] Great. Well, we usually begin these interviews with just a question about your childhood and if there might have been any people or events that were a big influence in your interest in animals and particularly these wolf coyote hybrids that you've seen over the last more than a decade.

Ron Wooten [00:02:07] For my childhood, I actually when I was in middle school, we moved to Lake Worth up in Fort Worth. And it was a very natural setting. And didn't have a whole lot of friends around. It was a little bit further out of town than where my high school was located. So spent a lot of time exploring, a lot of time swimming, a lot of time kayaking, boating around the, the different islands on the lake and you know, just essentially exploring.

Ron Wooten [00:02:39] And in high school, actually, I was interested in becoming a veterinarian at one point. And I worked for a veterinarian in the, in Benbrook, Texas, right off Highway 80. And he actually did some work with some native wildlife - deer, raccoons, possums, the raptors, you name it, we saw; even we'd see vultures sometimes. But he did a lot

of work with, with native wildlife. And it was exciting to be part of. One of the things that I always wanted to do was learn what the names of everything was that I was looking at because I hated being ignorant. And so I, when I saw that my my veterinarian for whom I worked, he was, he seemed to appear trapped, and he was trapped inside and he was trapped in. You know, a guy that throws I won't go into that, but he, it made me really consider the veterinary path and that my my grades were not, they were good, but they weren't great, and you have to have great grades to be able to get into vet school.

Ron Wooten [00:03:56] And so I chose to go, after, after letting baseball skills pay for a couple of years of school, I wanted to expand on the knowledge of wild and natural things. And so I went into Wildlife and Fisheries at Texas A&M and I took ornithology and mammalogy. I took some fisheries ecology classes, just a whole, as much as I could get in, as much as I could try to learn, I did - as much as the money would, would afford.

David Todd [00:04:33] Sure. Sure.

Ron Wooten [00:04:36] So that was the basis for my, my looking into creatures and becoming a biologist. So I wanted to work outside. I wanted to be outside. I wanted to be a field biologist.

David Todd [00:04:52] And I understand that not only did you get a bachelor's degree in wildlife and fisheries science at A&M, but you also returned to get a marine resource management master's degree there, too.

Ron Wooten [00:05:06] Yes, sir. Yes, sir. What they don't tell you in college is they don't tell you that working as a biologist or working as a social worker or in any job that helps, that seems to help things, that seems to help people, seems to help the planet, it doesn't pay much, which is unfortunate. So I, after, after teaching in the high school and after having my own landscape and irrigation company, I decided that I needed to get a master's in order to be able to get a different job that paid a little bit more. And it was, it was truthful. I mean, got the Master's, and I was able to sign on with the Corps of Engineers not too long afterwards, actually.

David Todd [00:05:57] And during your education, were there any people who were influential in your interest in, in the outdoors? I think you mentioned the veterinarian, I guess, at an earlier age, but was there anybody that you met in the classroom, on campus who might have been a help to you and an encouragement?

Ron Wooten [00:06:18] Yes sir, there were actually a couple. Well there were several, but some of them I can't remember their names. One of my, my mammalogy teacher, was, was excellent. We learned quite a bit from him.

Ron Wooten [00:06:36] My, my ethology teacher, Dr. Jane Packard - she'd done some work with, with wolves up in the Arctic Circle, one of the islands up there. And her, her work was fascinating. And I was able to do some work under her with collared peccaries at A&M. She was, she was examining communal suckling of collared peccaries. And so I participated in that.

Ron Wooten [00:07:08] Dr. Keith Arnold. It was one of my, my favorite professors. I had him as a field ornithology class and also ornithology. And, you know, going out, and he said, you hear that? That's, that's this. You see that. That's this. And for our final, he had us number our paper one through fifty. And he would say, OK, you hear that? What is that? So it was pretty

impressive that he had actually been able to get across to us the names and the, you know, the genus and species and common names of all the different birds that we were looking at. So Keith Arnold was definitely one of my, my favorites.

Ron Wooten [00:07:50] As was Dr. Tom Linton. Tom Linton lived down here in Galveston, but he was up in College Station at the time. And I worked under him as a student aide, a student worker. But he was a fishery biologist and worked for the Department of Natural Resources in North Carolina, I believe, or South Carolina, one of the Carolinas. He had a pretty high position and he ended up teaching in the college and he worked as the administrator of the co-op education program. And so I, you know, I wanted to get some, some field experience. I want to get some working experience as a student, because I had heard that was always a good way to get in with a company, with an organization. So I did a co-op work experience with the National Marine Fisheries here in Galveston, and he was instrumental in setting that up. And he was also instrumental in helping me get the job at the, when I graduated. So it was, he was, he's probably one of the most important people. And if you ever talk to him, he'll always tell you that he introduced me to my wife. But that's not quite true.

David Todd [00:09:12] Well, it sounds like he was a big influence in your life. And it is important to have those, those friends and boosters, I'm sure.

Ron Wooten [00:09:19] Yes, sir.

David Todd [00:09:20] Well, you know, it's interesting to me how flexible and resourceful you've been in finding different kinds of work that use your biology skills. You know, whether, like you said, teaching in high school, or running a landscape firm, or I think you, you did some outdoor writing for the Galveston Monthly magazine, and..

Ron Wooten [00:09:45] Yes, sir.

David Todd [00:09:46] I think just a moment ago you mentioned this job that Tom Linton got you at National Marine Fisheries Service, or helped you get. Are there any experiences there, or along the way, that, that really stand out to you in, you know, sort of tipping your interest in and well, wildlife in general, but, but the, you know, red wolves and these these very unusual canids that you've found?

Ron Wooten [00:10:13] The fishery service was primarily, the work that I did there was primarily wetlands research. And I did, I worked under Roger Zimmerman and Tom Minello and there was different, we were studying different, different habitats and things like that. But, you know, perhaps the, the thing that took my interest was the endangered species program and their work with the sea turtles there and I became a little bit more familiar with the, with the Endangered Species Act and the implications and, you know, the impact that the endangered species had on all kinds of things. And throughout my different, different time periods, different, you know, as a student at my graduate classes, I did the sea turtle patrol. And while it's not directly related to these canids, it did give me an appreciation for, for endangered species and for, their protection and their understanding.

Ron Wooten [00:11:24] As far as the, the Galveston canids, I can't really say that anything really led me to want to learn about them, except for, a, you know, I took genetics in college and I took the, the mammalogy and I took the ethology class with Dr. Packard. And all those things just, kind of, you know, when you take those kind of classes, the information just kind of sits and percolate sometimes. And you look at the world around you and you see how the

things that you were taught in those classes, how they play in the natural world. You know, we're given theories in classes, but actually observing them and trying to understand the, the physical implications is something entirely different. That's kind of what would have happened with these red, red wolves.

Ron Wooten [00:12:23] So we Hurricane Ike hit the island in 2007, maybe it's 2008, I can't remember which one. But the, the island itself was pretty much dead afterwards. There was no birds, there was no wildlife that you could see except for some roaming donkeys. We had a pack of donkeys that ran through Jamaica Beach nightly. And we'd also see the, the coyotes, we thought they were just coyotes. And I knew that their food sources were all gone and they were, we'd see them eating in the trash in Jamaica Beach as people were trying to recover and get their houses back in order and their lives back in order. And I knew that those animals were having the same issue because all their food supplies were gone.

Ron Wooten [00:13:14] And unfortunately, we let one of our dogs out and he crossed the ditch and one of the packs found him and took, carried him off and started eating on him. And I went over in the field where they had taken him and chased them off and grabbed what was left of him and brought him back to the house.

Ron Wooten [00:13:34] But at the time, I was writing for Galveston Monthly and I wanted to do a story that discussed the wildlife implications of the storm, and I wanted to use my own photography to help illustrate it, that's the way I worked with the Galveston Monthly was I used my own photographs to show the story. And, so that was, that was kind of how the interest in these, these Galveston canids started was by them eating one of my dogs, and I wanted to understand them more before I became emotionally charged and wanted to hurt them. So that's why I started.

Ron Wooten [00:14:20] I started always looking for them. And it actually took me several years to, took me five years to get a decent enough picture that I could have used for an article. At that point, I was on the verge of graduating from grad school and I wasn't writing for Galveston Monthly, except for occasionally, and I never did get the article written, but that's how that that picture came about, that's how the story came about.

Ron Wooten [00:14:50] And, you know, drawing back into the, the implications of being on an island, the island biogeography, and island genetics and the possibility that at some point, the Bay froze over, or at some point something swam across and got stuck here and it was never considered for the red wolf studies and the red wolf captures that they did - it just kind of sunk in after I looked at that, the picture that I took over in 2012.

David Todd [00:15:27] That's really interesting, and it sort of reminds me of what you said before, how they're these theories and lessons you get in class and they sit and percolate and then later something happens in the real world, and, you know, the concept of island biogeography really maybe helps you see things in a different light - on Galveston Island, with this canid, you know, something really specific. Could you maybe just tell how you came about taking that photograph in 2012 when you got close enough to these canids to, to get a good view of them?

Ron Wooten [00:16:10] Well, I'd put out the word on social media that I was looking for canids to take pictures of, of the, of coyotes. You know, that's what I was asking for, coyotes. And a friend of mine who worked with me at the Fisheries Service sent me a note and said,

hey, there's a big pack of them over here, come over and take a picture. They're howling, and they're, they're, they're making all kinds of noise.

Ron Wooten [00:16:36] So I went over there and went up on their deck with my wife and my daughter and one of our nieces. And we sat and watched those things and took pictures. The first night was, we saw them, it was, there hadn't been a whole lot of rain and that pond area that was, that was usually wet, was dry. And because it was dry, you know, that, that's not so habitable for mosquitoes and it makes a better breezeway for those things when they want to get out of the mosquitoes. So this big family group was over there. The pups were playing. The, the parents were sleeping or, or grooming themselves or each other. And it was just fascinating to watch.

Ron Wooten [00:17:29] The second night was just a, I think, I think it was a couple of nights later, she called and said, hey, they're back, come on over. And that was when the, the better picture was taken. When we first got there, the whole pack was howling and I tried to get my camera out. I was using a big lens. I don't like to get into the, I don't like to get into their territories and, and disrupt their behaviors or disrupt their, their life just so I can get a picture. So I use a big lens. And that was the night that I caught, that we got the decent picture. That was the night that they just didn't look right. It just didn't look like they were, they were not your typical coyotes.

David Todd [00:18:16] Well, maybe you can describe what you, you saw. You, so you saw these family groups, and the parents are sleeping and grooming, and pups are playing. And maybe you can tell us how many there were and why they looked different or acted differently than what a typical coyote might appear to you.

Ron Wooten [00:18:37] Well, as we were watching them, the first thing that you noticed was the size of the group. There was between 12 and 15 animals. I don't, I couldn't tell exactly because some of them were back in the brush. But in the pond area, there was, there was 12 that we counted for sure. And that included probably six or seven pups and some adults of various ages. And then you could kind of tell from behaviors that there was an alpha male and alpha female over there.

Ron Wooten [00:19:12] And we were just watching them play and watching them commune and be, be what they are. And in watching them, you know, the first thing was that I'd never seen such a huge pack of coyotes. The second thing was the size of the ears: the ears were just super huge and their faces were much bigger and rounder and broader than any coyote that I had ever looked at.

Ron Wooten [00:19:43] I'd taken some pictures up in Colorado of some coyotes that were in a wildlife preserve. And, you know, compared to the animals in those pictures to the ones up in Colorado, there was no, no similarities, except for the fact that they were, they were both canids. They were much different. Their long legs - they had very long legs. They had a reddish tint to them. My first thought was that, you know, perhaps there'd been a Great Dane or something that had got loose and had interbred with these coyotes because they were so big, they were so, so much bigger than the typical coyote that I'd seen.

Ron Wooten [00:20:26] And now we, my wife and I, do a lot of camping and we did that with our girls when they were growing up, and occasionally we would see a coyote out in the field. But, you know, there's these things. These animals were much different. They were, their

appearance just said, you know, they're either animals that are bred with, with dogs or they are entirely different and need to be examined.

Ron Wooten [00:20:55] So having worked with the sea turtles, and having understood a little bit about the Endangered Species Act, I knew that the only way that we could, I'd have to reach out to biologists, and show them the pictures. But I also knew that the only way that, because of the, the physical appearance can be so different among different animals, different animal groups of the same species, that the only way that we were able, ever going to be able to tell a difference in these animals versus your typical coyotes or your typical red wolves was to find some dead animals and collect some tissue.

Ron Wooten [00:21:42] So from the time of taking those pictures, and I'm, I'm, I'm a, I'm a believer, I'm a firm believer in God, and I believe that God puts things in our lives for specific purposes. And I feel like God was thumping me on the head to seek some truth with these animals.

Ron Wooten [00:22:09] So from the time I took the picture to, I guess it was 2015 or so, I was constantly looking for a dead animal on the side of the road and happened to find a couple in the same area that were pretty close to where I'd taken the picture. And so I would, they had been hit by a car and I took, again the only way that they're going to be able to tell what exactly they are is with genetics. And so I took some tissue samples from some tears in their skin where they got hit and hit by the car and put those in a bag in the freezer and held onto them and kept on reaching out the entire time to try to find out what was going on with these animals. What, what, what were they? So those two samples sat in my freezer, along with a dead rattlesnake and a flying fish from offshore and some, some other things that biologists put in the freezer. My wife is, I'm very grateful, she's, she's tolerant of my ways because sometimes I just become a little bit too "biologist", not so much a husband / father.

David Todd [00:23:34] It's nice to have tolerant people around us, I'd agree. So you've got these tissue samples and I know you're trying to verify what you'd seen and found. How, how did you go about that?

Ron Wooten [00:23:52] I tried reaching out first to Texas Parks and Wildlife, and they, they just weren't interested. They, pretty much, they were dismissive. I was at, I had actually gotten a job with the Corps at the time and I was meeting the U.S. Fish and Wildlife biologist at a, at a restoration area on the beach. And I showed her the picture and said, "hey, you know, what do you think? These, these look pretty different to me. How about you?" And she expressed a lot of interest. And she suggested I talk to somebody at her office. I talked to that person and he suggested I talk to somebody else.

Ron Wooten [00:24:44] And the trail led to the person at the time who was the leader of the red wolf conservation program. And I sent her the pictures and I said, you know, I believe that these are different kind of animals and they, they may need some protection because they, they just don't look like, you know, my daughter had made a comparison. She's taken the one of the animals from the picture and cropped it and put it side-by-side with both the coyote and a red wolf. And I, I sent her, those, I sent her that graphic and I sent her the, one of the pictures.

Ron Wooten [00:25:29] And I said, you know, these are just, they're not coyotes. They're something different. And I said, they might be, they might have bred with a big Great Dane or some other large animal, a large, a large dog. Or they could be red wolves. What do you think?

Ron Wooten [00:25:46] And she expressed a little bit of interest, but she didn't really she didn't want to pursue it, which was kind of frustrating. So I, you know, the way I am is if I, if I want to find out about something, I will watch videos, I will listen to podcasts, I will do whatever I can to try to figure out an answer.

Ron Wooten [00:26:10] And I finally saw a video with Dr. Dave Mech, M-E-C-H, and he's, I think some people refer to him as the wolf biologist of the United States, probably the world. And he's with the Department of Interior, I think he's with the Bureau of Land Management. I'm not sure of that. Anyway, he, he was giving a presentation on wolves, and having read up on his biography, I thought, well, you know, if this is, if there's anybody here that's going to be able to help me out, this guy will. And this was this was at least five years after I take his picture.

Ron Wooten [00:27:00] And, you know, sure enough, he, I sent him the picture and I said, "sir, you know, I found these, these different looking animals and I don't know if they're, they've bred with a big dog, or if they are red wolves, but they look entirely different. And so I sent them about three pictures of different animals that I had seen, plus the main picture that I'd took that started the whole thing.

Ron Wooten [00:27:32] And within a few minutes, he responded and said, "where is this and who are you?" So I replied back. And he was very interested in it. And Dr. Mech put me in contact with several other prominent red wolf specialists and began the conversation, which eventually led to me being able to send the two tissue samples up to Dr. Vonholdt, Brigitte Vonholdt at the Princeton Canine, the Princeton Canine Ancestry Project.

Ron Wooten [00:28:13] And from there, the, the results yielded the surprise that they weren't expecting and they weren't looking for. And, and so they got they published their paper. And that was December 2019 and maybe it was December 2018. And the news came out in the first of 2019 and it was, I couldn't believe how, how big it got. It was crazy. Anyway, that's the, that's the short and long of it, I guess.

David Todd [00:28:49] Well, and could you tell us a little bit about what Dr. Vonholdt found when she got a chance to analyze these samples that you'd sent her?

Ron Wooten [00:29:01] What they found was that, and I don't have the paper in front of me, so I can't, I want you to know that if I quote a number, it may be off. But to my recollection, the, one of the animals proved to have 40 percent red wolf DNA. The other proved to have 60 percent red wolf DNA. And they also had what the geneticists call is "ghost alleles." And they have genetic material from the, the current living population of red wolves. Those are those that they captured and released in Alligator River Wildlife Refuge, as well as the ones that are in the various captive breeding programs throughout the nation, including St. George, St. George Island in Florida. The place in Washington - Point Defiance. There's one here in Texas, if not more. But they compared the DNA of these animals to the DNA of the known canids and they found ghost alleles and ghost alleles, are genetic traits that are not found in a population, in a living population. So that was telling me that these animals have been isolated, you know, that island biogeography and biodiversity in the way that islands can keep genetic material separated from the outside world. It just kind of brought some, some closure to that thought, and found it true.

David Todd [00:30:50] Wells so, if I'm following you, these, these two animals that they sampled, they had essentially two sets of interesting genes. They had one, one group that had a lot in common with the foundation brood that, you know, was released in the Carolinas and that was sent to zoos for breeding. And then it had another group of genes that were these ghost alleles that, that weren't represented in any of those animals that went into captivity and then were released. This is the isolated population you're, you're discussing. Is that right?

Ron Wooten [00:31:29] Yes, sir. Yes, sir. These animals have traits that aren't found in the, in the current population. And I'm not sure that they, they know what those traits are because they, they aren't expressed in the current known red wolves or the ones that they call red wolves over there - 100 per cent red wolf DNA. So, you know, the thought of that, it just tells me that these animals have some very special genetics. And in the world of that we're moving into with, with CRISPR technology and with, with genetic, the ability to determine what specific genetic traits are, just says that these animals have some value, that, you know, if we can get those genes expressed in these living ones, maybe it's a trait that will help them live better. Maybe it's a trait that let them live better on this island and with all the hurricanes and things that have come through.

David Todd [00:32:35] That's a really interesting insight. Well, I guess one other thing I'd be curious about is: so these, these animals that you sampled and that were tested up in Princeton, they had a large proportion of wolf genes, both the ones in the foundation group and the ones that were these ghost alleles. And what were the balance of the genes? Are they the dog, or coyote, or what?

Ron Wooten [00:33:07] Yeah, that was one of the first tests they did, was to determine if there was any common dog, you know, any, any domestic dog gene, and there was none. So that tells me that there was no, it tells me that, I don't know, I think that this is a correct assumption, but this tells me that the, my first thought that they had mated it with a Great Dane or some other large dog was, because of their long legs and long, thin bodies, that that assumption was, was cast out then.

David Todd [00:33:42] Mhm.

Ron Wooten [00:33:42] It's either red wolf or it's coyote. And, you know, based on the appearance of these animals, they look more red wolf than coyote.

David Todd [00:33:51] Well, and something else (and this is just going to show how little I know about genetics) - but was it possible for Dr. Vonholdt and her colleagues to, to figure out when these coyote genes might have gotten introduced to the forbears of these animals that you collected?

Ron Wooten [00:34:12] That's a good question. That, that is something that I think that they can actually do. But I'm not sure. I'm not a geneticist, sir, and I don't know. My, my, Kristin Brzeski was one of the co-authors on the initial paper, and she was working for Dr. Vonholdt and that was kind of her, her postgraduate research, that she was doing with her before she got her full-time position at Michigan Tech. And she came down and she and one of her graduate students had been doing some research on these animals, doing some genetic collection through scat analysis. And she sent me a book. It's called Conservation with Genomic. I was talking to her and I was expressing my, my ignorance of genetics. And so she was nice enough to send me this book that said Conservation and the Genetics of Populations. And I haven't read it yet. It's on my list of to read, but it will help me understand, hopefully, a

little bit more about these animals. And, and I think that they can actually, through analysis, find out at what point that these genes diverged from the population that they are now dealing with the current red wolf population. I don't know that for a fact, but they might.

David Todd [00:35:46] I see. Well, so, has she been able to look at this scat yet, or is that still a work in progress?

Ron Wooten [00:35:57] It's still a work in progress. We hosted a young man named Tanner Barnes and he was doing his master's thesis on these animals. And he came out for about a month at a time for three different times, he came down here and, and ran transects in the island looking for scat and collecting scat. And he took samples and and took them back to the lab. And they are extracting the DNA from those samples and analyzing that. And that will be, the paper that comes from that will be his, his master's thesis. And I'm sure that will be published as it's, as it's done. And that's going to be a very interesting work when it is published.

Ron Wooten [00:36:53] They're also, they've also started work, at the same time that the paper that Dr. Vonholdt and Kristin released, came out, there was another paper in Louisiana in which they, they did other genetic examinations of animals, but as it was only through scat, kind of like what they're doing now with these. And they found one that had, the DNA evidence wasn't so great, but it, the results showed that they had found one that was possibly 100 percent red wolf, over in the Cameron, between Cameron and Sabine River. So that's pretty exciting to.

Ron Wooten [00:37:42] So these both of these papers seem to suggest that, you know, that the red wolves weren't all collected. I talked with Ron Nowak. He's another biologist who was working with the red wolf program at the time it started. And he was, he's told us some anecdotal stories of how they were collecting the animals here in the Gulf Coast region. And it was just was a very few people that was doing it, maybe two or three trappers. And they would use sirens to initiate howling and from the howling, they would determine if they had a wolf around and if they had a wolf around, they'd set a trap. And these were modified leg-hold traps that they, or maybe they were live capture traps. I don't, I don't know how exactly they trapped them, but my understanding is that they were modified leg-hold that wouldn't hurt the animals. And they were collecting those animals. The ones that were red wolf look, looking (at that time, they didn't have DNA analysis). So the ones that looked more red wolf, and sounded red wolf were the ones that they collected. And the other ones they, they let go. So, you know, a long way from the '70s and '80s when they were collecting to now when you can do a genetic analysis and determine if you have a red wolf.

David Todd [00:39:23] I see. So it's possible that they didn't catch a red wolf because there were only two or three of these trappers out there and maybe they didn't respond to the sirens. Or they caught one, and it didn't look like a red wolf because they didn't have DNA analysis techniques. So either way, what were you're, I guess, sort of conjecturing is that maybe there were some red wolves left in the wild.

Ron Wooten [00:39:52] Yes sir. You know, they had a specific amount of time. They had a specific amount of money, as in all things. It's all related to the amount of time and money that you have to, to accomplish a goal. And when they ran out of time and money, and they were not collecting as many animals, then they decided to declare them extinct in the wild. And I think that might have been a premature call.

David Todd [00:40:18] I see. Well, I think you've talked about the DNA approach to sampling, and if I'm not mistaken, when I was reading some of your other work, it sounds like you're also looking at the behavior of these canids and thinking that they just don't act like coyotes. They have behavior that's somehow distinctive, more like wolves. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Ron Wooten [00:40:51] Well, you know, it kind of boils down to what I was telling you about trying to learn about these animals and looking up videos and looking up, reading research papers. Behaviorally, they just, they act different than coyotes, according to what I've heard, and what other people have said, and what I read. And that was one of the things that just made me think that especially with that large of a group hanging out together in such a large, strong, bonded group, just made me think that they were they were different.

Ron Wooten [00:41:30] And that was, that was validated by the thoughts of, of Ron Nowak and Joey Hinton and Dave Mech and a few other people, after talking with them, after getting that little group together.

David Todd [00:41:53] So, so I guess there's a distinction between the way coyotes and wolves form packs and create these bonds, social bonds, is that right, that coyotes tend to be more loners and wolves more act in a group?

Ron Wooten [00:42:11] That was what, that was my takeaway from the communication with that group of people and from reading some of the research papers and reading some of the, re-watching some videos. And I, to say that I'm a red wolf or a coyote expert is very far from the truth. I have only researched to try to determine these animals and the information that, I have never written a paper. You know, my name was added to that paper, but I, perhaps it's because I sent the samples in, but those people did the work and they, they understand the results. I did do animal behavior studies at A&M and I have some, some background in ethology in that respect. But as far as coyote or wolf behavior, I've never done a paper on those methods to, to be able to say that I'm an expert at all. I just try to take the information that I read, information that I see and what other people tell me. And I try to put that together in my head to try to understand these animals.

David Todd [00:43:28] Sure. Well, it sounds like you're being cautious and trying to just go where the facts lead you. And it sounds like this is a sort of ongoing research project. As you mentioned that Tanner Barnes has been out there and, you know, collecting these scat samples. And if I'm not mistaken, you've been working with Galveston Animal Control to try to find more roadkill samples, is that right?

Ron Wooten [00:43:59] Yes, sir. They are now working with the, with the researchers and they're sending the samples directly to them. So as a full-time employee at the Corps, unfortunately, I don't have time to every time there's a dead animal, to go out and pick it up. And they also want the skulls of these animals. And I'll tell you that I, I have a hard time even taking the tissue samples because I don't like doing that to a body. I just, it doesn't feel right to me. It doesn't, it doesn't sit well. I don't want to take their heads. I don't want to, I don't want to take anything but something that's already torn or something that's already damaged. And I guess if they're dead, it doesn't matter. But it just bothers me to to take a body and, and shred it for research. It just, so I'll usually, what I was doing before is if I found them dead, I would I would take the sample and I put them back in the dunes and let them, let them have their way there in the back. Naturally, I try to respect the, the creature that was in that body.

David Todd [00:45:19] Sure, no, I understand that. I think I'd also heard that you were trying to organize a kind of citizen science effort to study these same animals. Can you explain that approach?

Ron Wooten [00:45:35] Yes, sir. We've, we've actually, we started a Facebook page. It was Galveston Canid Research. And I was a little reluctant to do this, because the more that you put out there, the, the more at risk it puts these animals. Specifically, you know, when you start giving locations of where you took a picture or if your picture shows a specific thing that can only be at this location, then what you have is if people are wanting to go out there and take pictures. Or go out, they don't like them, they want to shoot them or poison them or kill them, then you're giving them the tools to be able to identify where they are and go do those things.

Ron Wooten [00:46:25] I gave, I gave a young lady that I fully trusted her, and I gave her a location of, of a known pack, and next thing I know, I hear that she's out there walking around near their den and planning where she's going to put her, her camera traps up. You know, she's, she's not a known researcher. She's a, she was somebody that had a, and then she's setting up trips to bring people to take pictures of these animals. And so it just really bothered me. So I try to keep these locations as confidential as possible.

Ron Wooten [00:47:08] But now the, the Galveston Animal Control has set up a website that allows people to post exactly where they're seeing them and it provides a map that shows these locations. So, you know, it's kind of, kind of pointless to not tell the location, but I'm still not sure the locations that I know.

David Todd [00:47:33] Sure. Well, this makes me think about the habitat issues regarding the, the canids. I know that you've been concerned about the pace and extent of development on the Island and I was curious if you could sort of discuss a little bit about what sort of impact that might have on, on these canids.

Ron Wooten [00:48:00] I think that some of the research that I have read showed that these animals can travel up to 20 miles in a night. And they're mostly nocturnal for hunting, not always, so we've seen about in our neighborhood, hunting cats and dogs, easy prey. But because of that and because of the fact that, you know, Galveston, when we moved down here in the, in 1990, there was still quite a bit of open green space property that had wetlands on it and property that was close to wetlands and some good wide open fields. There are still some good areas like that, but they're slowly being developed.

Ron Wooten [00:48:53] And it's just kind of like an encroachment on these animals' habitat. And the resulting consequence is that these animals are pushed into the neighborhoods. And the human interactions become more, more significant, more numerous. And you know, the other thing that these animals need is a green corridor. You know, people talk about that in ecology and conservation about corridors for animals to use as areas of migration, or areas of nightly or daily movement. And what's happening here on the Island is one of the most significant green corridors that these animals had has now turned into a, one of them was turned into an RV park, the other one is rapidly becoming an RV park. So their, their means of getting through the Island are diminishing pretty quickly,

David Todd [00:50:01] And these corridors that you mention, are these to allow the animals to go from the marsh to the beach mostly, or which sort of direction are they traveling?

Ron Wooten [00:50:15] That, that's, that's pretty much it. They, they have, they tend to, to live in uplands that are pretty close to wetlands, or just upland areas.

Ron Wooten [00:50:28] And what we're seeing is that these open fields that were pretty numerous when we moved down here are slowly becoming neighborhoods, you know. As property values have gone crazy, so has the building. The building has also been elevated quite a bit. So, so we're seeing a lot of property just disappear. The places that they used to be able to use for, for traversing from the bay to the beach are disappearing as well.

Ron Wooten [00:51:09] And those areas also have hunting grounds, you know, open areas where they can find rabbits and other prey. So there's a, that's one of the big problems.

Ron Wooten [00:51:25] You know, if we could. If we could do one thing down here, if we could take, if we had some financier, or we had a large pool of money and we could just quietly purchase these properties that have been for sale for a long time but are now selling quickly, then we could just put those away and put them in. We can't put conservation easements on the island, which is unfortunate, but we can certainly take the ownership and just leave them alone, you know, leave the properties alone, and that's, that's something that I've wished we could do since, since I learned about these animals.

Ron Wooten [00:52:12] Karla Klay with Artist Boat, Artist Boat is a, it's a conservation-minded, they do a lot of work with students and they take them out on kayaks and they, they go through wetlands and through the different wet areas, the different water areas. And she lets them paint. And, and at the same time, she's talking about the conservation, about the biology and about the ecology of the areas. And so it's a very strong teaching and education program. But she's also managed to purchase several hundred acres here on the island, and she's turned that into the, I think it's called the Gulf Coast Nature Preserve or Gulf Coast something or other. I'll have look it up and tell you. But she's one of the few persons on the island who's working very hard to preserve habitat.

David Todd [00:53:15] Well, you know, one thing I've always found intriguing about coyotes, I don't know if this extends to these canids, the hybrids that you're working with, is that they seem to be so resourceful in living in the nooks and crannies and margins around human developments. And I think that there, as I understand it, there have been some seen in cemeteries and golf courses and so on in Galveston Island. Can you talk a little bit about how they seem to be somehow reconciling themselves with, you know, the developing habitat there?

Ron Wooten [00:53:59] Well, it's as you, as you noted, they are they do have, they do have dens in some of the cemeteries. And there are dens on the airport property. And if there are, it would seem like an acre or more property anywhere on the Island, they seem to be able to find that property and set their dens in those properties and use those as their places to raise their pups.

Ron Wooten [00:54:32] But at the same time, that causes them to hunt in the neighborhoods and Galveston Island has always had a very, a very large feral cat population and a lot of the people take to feeding these feral cats without actually adopting them and bring them inside. And so they become more or less like outdoor pets. And then these animals get preyed upon by these coyotes and canids. And that causes them great consternation because they, you know, these animals that they started caring for are now being eaten. So that's one of the

problems with them living in the, in the neighborhoods and hunting in those neighborhoods, is that people...

Ron Wooten [00:55:28] I think the primary, the primary issue is the personal responsibility that people are not willing to take for the animals that they take in. You know, it was very clear when those animals ate my dog that it was my fault because I let the dog out and my dog ran off. He was across a ditch and he was over in an open field, in an open lot, here in the neighborhood and the animals got him.

Ron Wooten [00:56:01] Kind of what happens around the Island, you know, people let their cats outside, they'll let their dogs outside without fences and they get taken. And so that's a problem.

Ron Wooten [00:56:14] So these, these animals are very resourceful in finding any place that doesn't have direct human involvement, even if it's, if it's occasional human involvement, they can work around that, it seems, with like, with the cemeteries and some of the open lots in the Island. There's, we've also heard of, some that are in some of the areas around the port. So that's something different. They find whatever space they can take and they use it.

Ron Wooten [00:56:47] Now, that that said, I would say that most of the animals that seem to be pushed into the neighborhoods are the more coyote-looking animals. And the larger animals, the more wolf-like animals seem to be in, the more open spaces. So I think that that may be one of the methods that they, they keep the genetics separated a little bit. And that's been proposed by a couple of the other biologists and geneticists that these, these animals, their behaviors, the red wolf animals are driving the coyote-like animals away. And the only time that they will ever interact is negative for the coyotes, or it is because the red wolf pack has been diminished to the point where they need a mate and they'll take whatever they can get.

David Todd [00:57:41] So, so there's some, some competition between these more red wolf like canids and then and then with the coyotes, and then sometimes there's also interbreeding. It's, it's the whole range.

Ron Wooten [00:57:59] And I think that that's going to be something that's going to come out with Tanner's paper. Tanner sampled across the Island, both in the natural areas and in the neighborhoods where he could find the scat, and I think that that's something that hopefully will be able to tell, help tell the story about what kind of animals are where and if we need to work more proactively on preserving a specific portion of the Island or a specific population on the Island versus others. So, I'm looking forward to seeing what his results are..

David Todd [00:58:41] Oh, yeah, I'm sure. I'm sure that'll be interesting. Well, as you said, some of these animals are moving into the neighborhoods and causing, I think you said, "consternation". What sort of pushback have you seen among Galvestonians to having these canids on the Island?

Ron Wooten [00:59:08] There's, on social media, on all different types of social media, there's been some people trying to organize and, and ask the city to either sterilize these animals or go out and shoot them and destroy them. And there was a, there's been a petition signed. There's a fellow I know that's, that's working very actively to try to, he wants to sterilize the ones that are in town so that they're, they're not increasing and causing more problems with populations. And I'm just not so sure of the, I'm not sure that's the best way to go about this.

David Todd [01:00:01] Well, and what are their arguments and why they need to be controlled, sterilized or shot, trapped?

Ron Wooten [01:00:07] Because of the, they don't want their, first, you know, a lot of people are just afraid of them. You know, you show them a coyote or you show them a wolf and, and they immediately, it strikes fear in them, and they want nothing to do with them. And they want them shot, and they want them gone and dead. And I don't know if that's because of the, the way the media has portrayed them or if they've had experiences. I just don't know.

Ron Wooten [01:00:35] You know, others, like I say, they, they've been, they've taken in feral cats and they're feeding feral cats. And they became, they've become emotionally attached to these animals. And when they are taken, it, it causes them a lot of anger and a lot of grief. And they want to they want to destroy whatever is taking and killing and eating their, their feral cats.

Ron Wooten [01:01:00] You know, some justifiably so, if their animals have been in a fenced yard and have been hurt or killed or taken, it bothers them immensely. And that kind of bothers me, too. You know, if you have an animal in your yard and it's fenced and it should be safe, but it's not because these, these things can burrow and they can, they can jump these fences pretty easily. You know, that's a, I would say that's probably a legitimate problem.

Ron Wooten [01:01:28] But, you know, when people are not responsible for their pets and allow their pets to run free outside without, without being there for them or watching out for them, you know, either from cars or from from other animals or whatever, the responsibility is going to be placed back in the, they have to look in the mirror and see who's responsible for this. It's not the, it's not these coyotes. It's, it's them.

Ron Wooten [01:01:59] That's one of the, that's one of the big things. And plus, you know, sometimes people just don't realize you don't put dog food out for them and you don't put food out for them. You're drawing in a predatory animal into your area and some people are actually doing that purposefully. They're feeding them or they're, they want to see them so they'll throw stuff out and bring them in.

Ron Wooten [01:02:24] You know that there's educational programs we could install here on the island that would help harass them to the point where they would leave these neighborhoods or, or leave specific areas well enough alone. And that's, that's, that's got to be an effort that I will probably have to initiate because I don't know that anybody else will.

David Todd [01:02:50] Mhmm. Well, looking into the future, you know, you're talking about the research and the management, education needs there might be here. What, what sort of role do you think these hybrids might serve in the restoration of the, the pure red wolf? Is, is there a role there for their genes or for the animals themselves?

Ron Wooten [01:03:15] Well, that's a, that's an interesting question. That's the kind of question I've been asking of these biologists and geneticists. You know, I, once a, once the genetic makeup has been diluted up, you know, up to a certain point of time, you know, that, it was lost. But with the technologies that we have now, perhaps there's ways that they could extract that genetic material and add it to these currently existing animals, or maybe there's a way to, to breed so as to bring out these traits. I don't, I just don't know. I don't know. That's a, that's a question that I have as well. Can we, can we use these things to help fortify the current

population to help, so we can see what these genes are and maybe these genes will help the current population survive better because obviously they've done something pretty good for the animals here on the Island as, as they've gone unprotected for hundreds of years now.

David Todd [01:04:37] You are very familiar with endangered species there. I think your work years ago was with sea turtles and then, of course, with the red wolf now. My understanding is that the law doesn't really provide for much protection for hybrids. Do you think that they deserve some kind of protection because they are carrying these rare genes, or how do you think the law should, you know, sort of apply to these, these hybrid canids?

Ron Wooten [01:05:13] That's another good question. I, as I look at these animals, as I keep on getting people sending me pictures of them, as I find more dead animals on the road, I keep seeing very unique creatures that you don't see in other parts of the, the country. You know, from their coloration, to their leg size, to their head size, to their eyes, to everything, they are very unique. And, you know, if this, if they served as a genetic pool that needs to be put, that has some value, then I would be all for protection. You know, if these animals have, I think they're, based on what I've seen and based on what I've looked up, these animals are as unique as, as any other canid that I've seen.

Ron Wooten [01:06:22] And because they're specifically Galveston, you know, maybe there's a way that they could be protected. But, you know, there's going to be a lot of pushback from people who own land and want to do something with that land, especially if they find them on there.

Ron Wooten [01:06:35] You know, an example. I, we had worked with the, the golf course, the Moody Gardens golf course a bit, and we told them that we'd seen them several times on there and several of their guests playing on the course had seen them. And I'm not sure if they, you know, this is speculation, pure speculation, but after they were told this and they were told that these were possibly very special animals that needed to be protected, then they noticed that they've started tearing down what used to be (my wife has said) habitat. Yeah, it looks like they are pushing it, purposely destroying the habitat that these animals were, were hiding in, or hunting in, or using as, as cover. And they've done that throughout the golf course. And there was one specific place that was up in the corner of the golf course that isn't used for the golf course, but it had fresh water, a big freshwater pond and lots of shrubs and lots of places for them to hide. And they completely shredded it.

Ron Wooten [01:07:53] So, you know, learning that you have what could be a protected species on your property and learning that with the Endangered Species Act, that property could be taken or could be, it could, it could become part of an essential habitat plan and that causes a lot of problems for people. So to get on, to get out in front of that, I think that some people are starting to shred their property to shred that habitat to try to push the animals out. That's just one example, there's a couple of different properties out here that I've noticed that they had some wetlands on them, they would be very expensive to develop, but they also had some, some of the canids on them and they knew about it. And so now they've, they've taken and shredded all the, all the vegetation around them. So there's no place for these animals to hide anymore. And they therefore are forced out into a different area.

David Todd [01:09:07] I see. Trying to, trying to forestall any kind of critical habitat, essential habitat designation, I guess.

Ron Wooten [01:09:17] Yes. Yeah. Getting out in front of the game so that they're not going, their property won't be considered that and they can do whatever they want to with the property.

David Todd [01:09:26] I see. You know, a little bit ago you're talking about what makes these wolves' / hybrids' / canids' behavior distinct from coyotes, and their size and their shape and their color and so on. Do you think that there is a unique ecological niche that these canids are filling that is distinct both from what the coyote might have held and then also from what the red wolf, that this is maybe a sort of evolutionary next step?

Ron Wooten [01:10:07] I think that's a that's a high probability, you know, that. And then that's kind of something that's been crossing my mind a bit, especially as you look at these animals and you see that they have really long legs. And, you know, what better, you know, natural selection would choose for an animal with longer legs if they were, had to work through wetland areas and tromp through wetlands and marshy areas? And I think that these animals use those. There's multiple pictures and multiple videos of these animals swimming and moving through wetland areas very easily. And I think that that, as you said, you know, maybe this is just an adaptation, a long-term adaptation to these specific habitats that they are within. And maybe we are seeing that niche species that's able to use these habitats specifically. Yeah, I think that that, that's a good assumption.

David Todd [01:11:14] That's interesting. Well, we've covered a lot of ground today, and I know you've got things to do on a weekend. I sure appreciate the time you've spent so far. Could I just ask one more question?

Ron Wooten [01:11:30] Sure. Yeah. You bet.

David Todd [01:11:31] So just an open-ended question. Are there any sort of insights or thoughts that you've gained from this whole experience over the last, gosh, since I mean over a decade now, I guess, of seeing and, and actually getting samples and helping do research on these, these canids - any, anything that's sort of a take-home message for you?

Ron Wooten [01:12:01] The, I think the take-home message for me - early on, I was told by many people that these were just coyotes. I was told by many people that, oh, you know, that they they've read the papers, they've seen the, they've seen the news, they know that red wolves are endangered. They know that they don't exist. They know because the media has told them these, these things. They're not using their own eyes. I think the take-away for me was that, you know, we have to keep our eyes open and keep our ears open, and look and listen and take the information that we've learned and be able to apply it to understand that, you know, perhaps the narrative out there is not the truth. You know, be that mistakenly or purposefully, but the narrative may be wrong, and we need to use our brains that God gave us to be able to analyze what we see and what we hear and what we read and what we listen to and what we come to understand to be able to come to truth.

Ron Wooten [01:13:36] And that was one of the big take-aways from these animals was that, you know, I was, I read in my textbooks that these animals were in endangered, that they were only located in the Carolinas. I heard from the media that they're endangered. They're only in the Carolinas. They are extinct in the wild. I heard all kinds of information just like that. But when it comes down to it and the physical moment is there. And you're looking at something and you say this, I know I've been told this and I know that I've heard this, I know

I've read this, but I'm looking at this animal, or I'm looking at this situation and this is what it is. I can't do anything about it.

Ron Wooten [01:14:25] It's, you know, so then you have to fight the uphill battle to try to fight the, the perception that, you know, you're wrong. You know, you don't know what you're talking about. These experts out here have said this or that. You need to listen to the experts.

Ron Wooten [01:14:45] And I say, "Well, you know, look at this. Let's use your own eyes. Use your own ears. What do you see?" And that's been the biggest problem is it's been both overcoming that personally and trying to get other people to, to see that. And then when you find somebody who has the humility to say that they might be wrong, and that's what Dr. Mesh, that's essentially what led him to, to invite me into that that conversation was that he thought that he might have been wrong, that the information might be wrong, that they might actually still be out there.

David Todd [01:15:36] Wow.

Ron Wooten [01:15:36] That's, that's a take-away.

David Todd [01:15:40] Well, that's remarkable and it's I think we're all lucky. There are people like you who, as you say, are keeping their ears and eyes open and are, you know, sort of following the facts where they may lead them. So thank you so much for telling us about your experience with these canids. I really appreciate it. And I think that maybe we can call this a wrap, as they say. If you could just hold on a moment. We'll just have a little bit of silence after the interview. And that allows the material to, to upload to the cloud.

Ron Wooten [01:16:21] OK, Roger that. I'll stay until we say goodbye.

David Todd [01:16:27] OK.