

Horse Haven

WHERE WILD MUSTANGS RUN FREE

STORY BY KRISTIN OHLSON PHOTOS BY FRANK GWIRTZ

THERE IS TROUBLE IN DON JUAN'S BAND. The horses look peaceful enough when we catch them during a mid-morning nap in their favorite spot on a dry hillside, near a knob of rocky soil. Some stretch out on the ground. Others stand with eyes half-closed, heads bowed. Don Juan—a handsome brown-eyed buckskin—and several of his mares snap to attention as our jeep nears, flicking their ears forward and flaring their nostrils. But they've seen Susan Watt's white jeep many times, so all they do is stare. We can drive close enough to see that Little Blue Aster is still missing.

In any other part of the 11,000-acre Black Hills Wild Horse Sanctuary near Hot Springs, South Dakota, a missing mare wouldn't be news. The sanctuary's 500 wild horses wander the terrain at their whim. Watt, the sanctuary's program director, and Dayton Hyde, its founder, don't see some of them for years. But Don Juan's 600-acre turf is fenced, because he and his mares are special. In these horses, the blood-

lines of America's original Spanish mustangs are the purest, so these wildest of wild horses are kept separate. To make her getaway, Little Blue Aster had to break through a fence.

"Maybe she had a fight with Don Juan," Watt speculates. "Who knows? Maybe a mountain lion scared her off."

So, before Watt takes me on an all-day tour of the sanctuary, we will stop at a neighbor's ranch. Watt has heard that Little Blue Aster was seen there, grazing on prairie grass that the neighbor jealously guards for his cattle. We drive past his collection of junked cars, past several generations of teetering buildings, and head for a creek at the bottom of a hill.

Suddenly, a bay mare breaks from the rushes, followed by a small creature that matches the dust and dried grass and shadows on the rise. Little Blue Aster pivots to observe the jeep, and the foal presses against her side. Watt focuses her binoculars, shouts with delight, and hands the binoculars to me. The youngster has the classic markings of a Spanish

mustang: dun coat, black stripe down her back, and black rings—like a stack of ebony bracelets—on her legs.

Watt parks the jeep and approaches the horses quietly with a bag of oats and a salt lick. They allow her to deposit these offerings 20 feet from them.

Watt will spend the next few weeks visiting the skittish Aster and her baby. She'll put fencing around the oats and salt lick, and get the horses accustomed to having her nearby. Eventually, she will coax them into a horse trailer and return them to Don Juan. She'll leave behind an envelope of money for the neighbor, to compensate him for the grass they eat. But that task lies in the future.

On this warm day in early summer, we'll explore what Watt and Hyde call the "wild side" of the sanctuary—the rocky canyons, windswept prairies, and dark pine forests west of the Cheyenne River. About 300 horses choose to live on the wild side. They might glimpse a human once or twice a week, if that, and often from a great distance. The other 200, including Don Juan and his band, live on the "tourist side." They are tolerant of the camera-toting visitors from around the world whose entrance fees and donations support one of America's greatest privately-held wilderness areas.

Five hundred wild horses live on the 11,000-acre Black Hills Wild Horse Sanctuary in South Dakota (below). Sanctuary founder, rancher, naturalist, and author Dayton Hyde (right) says that in 1988 he "set up this place to show how we can keep both our wild herds and our wild lands."



TIME AND PLACE

Spring and fall are the best times to visit the Black Hills Wild Horse Sanctuary. You'll avoid the summer heat and still see plenty of foals. There are many motels in nearby Hot Springs. If you're driving cross-country with a pet, as I was, try Anise's B&B for People with Pets (phone 605-745-7455; www.gwtc.net/~steffie/).

Even if you don't drive to South Dakota, you may want to rent a car and see some of the stunning natural environments, such as Badlands and Wind Cave National Parks, Custer State Park, and Buffalo Gap National Grassland. Among the state's impressive man-made sights are Mount Rushmore and the Crazy Horse Memorial.

The sanctuary welcomes visitors year-round. A two-hour bus tour costs \$20 per adult. Make a reservation if you plan to visit during the more-crowded summer months or the more-desolate winter months. For \$750, one of the senior staff will take up to three people on a four- to six-hour jeep Adventure Tour of the sanctuary's wild side, with lunch at a table near the edge of Hell Canyon, the rugged backdrop to new movies about the American West, including *Crazy Horse* and *Hidalgo*. The cost is tax-deductible and supports efforts to provide wild range for wild horses. Consult the Web site for information: www.wildmustangs.com.

The sanctuary runs on volunteer energy. This is a working ranch, and people are needed throughout the year to clean corrals, build fences, tend chickens, and staff the office, gift shop, and visitor center. Volunteers with carpentry, plumbing, electrical, painting, grant-writing, and other skills are especially welcome.

You might be interested in reading some of sanctuary founder Dayton Hyde's books. In his latest memoir, *The Pastures of Beyond: An Old Cowboy Looks Back at the Old West*, he recalls the colorful characters he encountered during his years as cowboy, rodeo clown, rancher, World War II soldier, and *Life* magazine photographer. A *Publishers Weekly* starred review says, "As wistful as it is humorous, this salty memoir is also an elegy for a bygone era."

K. Ohlson

Yesterday, I rode on one of the sanctuary's buses through the tourist acres. I loved the experience, even though I had to share it with 15 rowdy strangers. Beautiful in its desolation, the sanctuary's rugged land encompasses part of the Cheyenne River Valley that is held sacred by Native Americans because the river twists in all four directions of the compass there. At one point, the bus stopped at a bluff overlooking the valley, and we climbed out to have a look. Peering down, we could see circles on the ground left by Indian lodges. Farther along, we examined a cliff marked with 10,000-year-old petroglyphs—incised stick figures armed with spears, starburst-like depictions of yucca plants, and round things with twirly tails that looked like comets. There was also cowboy graffiti, with names and dates going back to the 1800s.

Before Hyde acquired this property, ranchers ran thousands of cattle through the valley and raised sturdy horses, which they sold to the cavalry at Nebraska's Fort Robinson, 60 miles to the south. The cowboys are gone, but at Hyde's invitation, hundreds of Native Americans return every summer to hold a Sun Dance ceremony on the hilltop.

Led by Afraid of Bear Clan from the Oglala Lakota Nation, they gather two weeks prior to the all-day solstice dance to clean the ceremonial ground, build a brush arbor of pine boughs, and set up a central pole that they drape with prayer ties—long colorful swathes of cloth with tobacco or sage leaves sewn inside. By the time I arrived, the dancers were gone and the brush arbor was turning brown, but the winds still made the prayer ties dance. I hadn't come to attend the ceremony, although I could have, because respectful guests are allowed to watch. I had come to see horses.

Our bus driver, a cheerful, gray-haired volunteer named Gwen, was confident that we would find some over the next rise. And there they were: pintos, sorrels, palominos, bays, blacks, dapple grays—bands of small, sturdy mustangs that were relentlessly alert but never fearful. Some of the older horses had white numbers on their haunches, having been branded with liquid nitrogen during their former days as Bureau of Land Management (BLM) captives. The ones that had been born on the sanctuary were digit-free.

The horse originated as a species in North America. It crossed over to Asia on the Bering Land Bridge before it became extinct here some 9,000 years ago. Spanish explorers reintroduced horses to this continent in the 1500s. Today's wild horses are a mixture of the Spanish mustangs plus the farm and carriage horses that broke or were turned loose when motorized vehicles took over.

Sanctuary founder Dayton Hyde brought 300 mustangs to this land in 1988. An Oregon rancher, naturalist, and author, Hyde was driving through Nevada the previous year and heard the screams of wild horses crowded into BLM pens. A federal law had been passed in 1971 to protect wild horses from slaughter, but its unintended result was that the wild horse population grew large enough to alarm other constituencies—cattle ranchers who wanted to graze their animals on public lands, suburbanites who found wild hors-



Most of the foals born on the Black Hills Sanctuary are sold as pets to raise money to support the wild herds and prevent overgrazing.

es nibbling at the edges of their gardens, and environmentalists who considered wild horses a feral species that was competing with native plants and animals.

But Hyde saw the mustangs as a symbol of the West, as creatures of great beauty as well as a repository of intelligence that has been bred out of many domestic horses. He thought about breaking into the BLM pens and setting the horses free. Instead, he used his credit cards to buy this land in South Dakota, which the Honeywell Corporation was considering turning into a munitions-testing site.

"I set up this place to show how we can keep both our wild herds and our wild lands," Hyde told me after my bus tour. He showed me around the 250 acres of farmland that he recently added to the sanctuary, snatching it from the jaws of subdivision developers. "We control their numbers by selling most of the foals [as pets] so the horses don't damage their own food supply. Still, you'll see more wild horses here than you will in five thousand miles of travel."

I grew up in a horsy little town in California, loving all things equine. When my family visited relatives in Nevada, I'd ride with my head hanging out the car window, looking for the wild horses that I knew still roamed the high desert. So, on my second day, as Watt aims her jeep across the drought-shrunken Cheyenne River to the wild side of the sanctuary, I'm sitting on the edge of my seat.

We drive through a large prairie dog town. Sometimes, the prairie dogs stick their heads out of their burrows and whistle; sometimes the startled head is that of a burrowing owl nesting in an abandoned hole. When I finally glimpse a horse lying on the ground, I assume it's napping. Watt shakes

her head. This horse is dead. The unwritten pact that Hyde has with the wild horses obliges him to leave the body there.

"Horses pick out the place they want to die," he told me. "They generally pick a hillside where they can see their buddies and the land they've loved. It always seems like a shame to me to move the body."

We pass more signs of former life: a dried-up well, a lone chimney, and foundation stones from homesteads long abandoned. We see threads of horse trails leading into the woods, along the steep canyon walls, but no horses.

Then, all of a sudden, the plateau in front of us is full of horses, hundreds of them, arranged across the landscape in colorful groups. They are mostly mares, and a handful of geldings and a few stallions. The mares travel in self-selected groups, and watch over each other's foals. I'm bowled over by their beauty. Their long, surfer-girl manes flutter in the wind coming off the canyon, their eyes gleam like black, sometimes blue jewels, and their coats are so shiny they look as if someone rubbed them with hot oil.

We stop to admire four mares. They approach the jeep, then prance away as if they are leading a parade. A red mare circles back, touches her nose to my outstretched hand, then pulls away, her lip curled back in what looks like laughter.

The next several groups have many foals that canter in circles around their mothers. Three pinto foals have perfect markings on their foreheads—a heart, a light bulb, and a Harry Potter lightning bolt—as if their genes held a contest before they were born to see which one would be the cutest.

I confess to Watt that I had been afraid we wouldn't see many horses on the wild side.

She laughs. "They don't keep appointments!" she admits.

Kristin Ohlson is the author of the award-winning memoir Stalking the Divine.