

Southern California LIVING



Photos by KIRK MCKOY / Los Angeles Times

"The first part of the bond is to come to the horse with no agenda," says Carolyn Resnick, a horse trainer who introduces visitors to wild mustangs at Return to Freedom ranch.

Life Lessons on the Ranch

Haven for mustangs gives humans a glimpse of their own behavior.

By ANN MARSH
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

LOMPOC—As afternoon clouds chase shadows over rolling hills in the Jalama Valley north of Santa Barbara, a band of eight hikers ascends a ridge in silence. They are seeking a peculiar encounter between horses and humans. Up above them, a herd of 11 mustangs pricks their ears forward in attention, lining up like sentries.

Seeing this, the humans freeze, following the cue of their own "lead mare," a woman named Neda DeMayo. With the single-mindedness of a flock of birds, they angle their bodies away from the horses and stand still. Any sudden movement, they have

been told, might provoke a stampede.

The hikers have come from all over Southern California to see the wild mustang herds roaming about DeMayo's 4-year-old horse sanctuary called Return to Freedom ranch and to learn from her mentor, horse trainer Carolyn Resnick. Their visit comes at a time when Congress is considering whether to allocate about \$30 million over the next four years to drastically reduce the population of the remaining 48,000 wild mustangs on public lands. People like DeMayo fear for the mustangs' future.

DeMayo and Resnick have given the hikers detailed instructions for approaching the herd, whose

Please see Horses, E4



Visitors hike into the Lompoc ranch in hopes of interacting with the horses. All have been briefed to approach the herd slowly, being careful not to set off a stampede.

Horses: Sanctuary Offers Humans Many Life Lessons

Continued from E1

contacts with humans have been minimal. Most were rounded up by helicopter in Oregon and now have occasional encounters like this with visitors. The humans are not to face the horses, which instinctively flee creatures that move toward them, just as they will follow anything that moves away. Instead they sidestep their way slowly up through wheat-like grass. Eventually they come within a few yards of the herd. They keep their eyes cast down, checking the mustangs with their peripheral vision.

Two of the horses are chestnut-colored, one black and one roan.

Three babies poke about among them. The black horse makes a show of pushing two younger horses away from the people.

"He's just the cop," DeMayo explains softly. "He's dominant, but he's not a leader. When it comes to water, food and sex, he doesn't get a vote." The lead mares and stallions, she points out, stand to the side demurely but would lead the flight to safety in the case of danger.

A chestnut-colored animal steps forward. Freddie, DeMayo calls him. He seems to fear humans less than his companions. Resnick moves forward for a greeting. She runs her hands down Freddie's

spine and over his rump, mimicking the kind of ritual grooming common between horses.

She motions for a student and reminds the woman how to greet a wild horse, by first establishing eye contact and then offering the horse a hand. To the quiet delight of the group, the wild horse responds with a nudge to her palm.

The small band of people has come to the Jalama Valley hoping to learn different things from the horses and their human interpreters. Acting teacher Catherine Johnson drove from Ojai with her husband and daughter to learn how to communicate with their two new horses. Dodd Lew, a residential property manager, drove from Santa Ynez because, he says, the plight of orphaned wild mustangs seemed a metaphor for the loneliness he wants to heal in his own life. Screenwriter Susan McCabe drove from Van Nuys to research a script.

"I've been crying since I got here," says McCabe, who was moved to learn how horses instinctively do what is best to preserve the herd, not exactly the mentality in Hollywood. "The lead horse is not the dominant horse, not the most powerful horse. The lead horse is the one with the best ethics."

The Reverse of Traditional Training

Resnick, a diminutive woman in her late 50s with blond hair, grew up playing with wild mustangs in the desert near Indio. She begins her lessons in horse and human behavior on this July weekend with morning sessions in an open-air paddock. A white stallion named Shilo munches alfalfa nearby. Above the paddock, students gaze down on the lesson from a second-story viewing deck.

Traditional horsemanship forces the horse to enter the human world, Resnick says, whereas she operates in the reverse. "I bond myself into his world rather than having him succumb to mine. I work on getting a horse to accept me as family."

Resnick ambles about Shilo as he eats. "You give a horse fear by coming to him with an agenda," Resnick tells her students. "The first part of the bond is to come to the horse with no agenda." Resnick sometimes simply sits at a distance from a new horse, as she did when



KIRK MCKOY / Los Angeles Times

Neda DeMayo, who started the Return to Freedom ranch four years ago, has a federal contract to adopt wild horses from other areas.

she was a kid, and reads a book.

After Resnick establishes herself as a benign presence, she then says hello. She waits for Shilo to fix both eyes on her. Then she walks forward tentatively, a hand extended.

Shilo looks away, and Resnick backs off too.

This alerts Shilo that Resnick is receiving the horse's signals. A herd counts on every member to spot mountain lions or wolves. A horse sometimes will run off another member seemingly without provocation. Usually, Resnick says, it means one horse is disciplining another for not returning a glance, not paying attention.

As Shilo returns his focus to Resnick, she resumes her approach, clicking beckoningly, hand extended. The horse ever so slightly and hesitantly pushes forward and touches her hand. "Hello," Resnick says quickly and walks away.

The small audience murmurs its approval.

A circle of energy binds human to horse in this kind of interaction, explains Resnick, an Escondido-based horse trainer who has worked with horses all her life. Once a bond is established, horses then look for a strong leader. If they find one in a human, they'll follow it. If not, they will take the lead themselves, often with chaotic results.

Finally, Resnick demonstrates what a human can accomplish after convincing a horse she can lead. She works with a mare named Taj Rada to the strains of an old Eddie Rabbit song playing on a boom box. Resnick clucks and turns, and Taj follows tightly at her shoulder. Resnick lifts her feet and Taj prances in place. "Go," Resnick commands, shooting out her arms like a worker guiding a plane on a

runway. Taj bursts away in a sprint.

A minute later, Resnick waves her hands back and forth in front of her face as if she is whisking at pesky flies. The horse rears up repeatedly, shaking first her mane, then her hindquarters and finally her tail in a fit of glee. Resnick laughs and coos as if Taj were a big, friendly dog.

"It's one thing to abuse a horse into performing. It's another for a horse to have a good time," Resnick says. "You've got to let a horse feel this is all her idea."

Resnick believes human-horse relations can be purged of all physical and mental abuse. To get a sense of how radical Resnick's methods are, consider Monty Roberts, author of "The Man Who Listens to Horses." Roberts, who lives a short way from Lompoc in Los Olivos, has inspired change by introducing animals to bridles and saddles without whips or violence. But even Roberts initially employs fear and intimidation to elicit a horse's submission.

Watching Resnick, participant Johnson realizes she'd been fooling herself into thinking she was in charge of her horse. "I've been tiptoeing around my horse as if I was really powerful. I stand there with a whip like, 'Grrrrr,'" she says. "Now I'm going to go be a horse with him."

A Horse Ranch Where No One Rides

DeMayo, also a student of Resnick's, is on her own mission to change the way people treat horses. "We are here to point out that wild horses are a nation," DeMayo says. "They have a civilization and a community unto themselves."

DeMayo is so focused on this goal, so intent on observing and learning from her horses, that she's not much interested in riding them. The result is an anomaly: a horse ranch where practically no one rides horses. Some of DeMayo's 100-odd charges amble about in open-air pens, having been rescued from abusive owners or rodeos. Most were trucked to DeMayo's 300 acres from government-owned refuges.

DeMayo believes humans will lose precious keys to horse behavior if mustang herds become ex-

tinct. Some of what will be lost are lessons horses have to teach humans about how we treat each other. Roberts, for one, uses his skills with horses to illustrate leadership lessons for large corporations. And increasingly, Resnick's students come to her to learn how to be better leaders or team members. That said, DeMayo says she believes mustang herds should be preserved for their own sake, regardless of the horses' use to humans.

The preservation of wild mustang herds is a timely topic. The Department of the Interior's Bureau of Land Management wants the 48,000 estimated wild mustangs on its land reduced to about 27,000, in part because, officials say, years of drought have left insufficient food and water for the animals. They also say growing mustang herds are damaging wildlife habitats. Both claims are hotly disputed by people such as DeMayo, who suspects the cattle industry of exerting pressure to free up more grazing land.

DeMayo has contracted with the government to take these horses from Oregon and Nevada. But she has insisted on taking them in family groups. She may be the only horse sanctuary in the country to do so. "I don't know of anyone else," says Michael Nunn, a project leader with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service who negotiated DeMayo's contract. "I don't worry about horses going to Neda. She genuinely cares about their welfare."

DeMayo bristles at the notion that the wild mustang debate should be purged of emotions, a common refrain among proponents of herd reduction.

"You can't even say 'wild horses' without evoking something..." DeMayo says, gripping her belly to make the point. "This is never going to be nonemotional to the American public."

It has been an emotional topic for DeMayo since she rode horses as a girl. DeMayo was a costumer and a stylist-to-the-stars in Hollywood in the mid-'90s when two car accidents prompted her to rethink her life and set up the wild horse sanctuary she'd always dreamed of.

Eventually her parents and sister became her chief financial backers and helped her to buy the ranch. Her eventual goal is to create a vast land trust elsewhere in the country through donations. She wants to see larger herds of mustangs roaming in perpetuity without fear of government round-ups such as the one she saw on TV as a child. "I felt a shock. I thought, 'People do that?'" DeMayo recalls. Though she was 6 or 7 at the time, that impression never left. She is creating new ones now to replace it.

Up in the hills on that Saturday afternoon, DeMayo had the pleasure of introducing her guests to Salmon, a 6-month-old colt born on the hillside back in January. Unlike his parents, who were rounded up and trucked away from their home, Salmon has yet to experience any human cruelty.

If people like DeMayo and Resnick have anything to say about it, he never will.

Info: Return to Freedom, (805) 737-9246 or go to www.returntofreedom.org.