

Born Free

The chestnut stallion with a black mane and tail had lived two decades on the open range in Nevada when he was rounded up and driven into a holding pen, due to shifting government policies. The stallion was slated to be gelded and kept in tight quarters for life. This untamed stallion is a wild American horse that was born and raised in the wilds of American public lands without the fetters of domestication. But like many thousands of horses, he was not left to live out his years on the land.

When Neda DeMayo learned about the stallion's plight, before the day was out she had placed the horse, whom she dubbed "Sir George," in a transport vehicle, bound for a better life at a place aptly named Return to Freedom (www.returntofreedom.org).



CHIEF AND SHUWA LIVE AT RETURN TO FREEDOM.

MARK MUNTZAN, COURTESY: RETURN TO FREEDOM

from page 13 | Located in California's Jalama Valley—between Pismo Beach and Santa Barbara—Return to Freedom, a 300-acre ranch, is a sanctuary for wild American horses. Since opening the ranch in 1998, DeMayo has brought close to 200 wild American horses here to live out their lives roaming open lands. The horses were all rounded up from Western states such as Arizona and Nevada, as a result of government mandates to thin the wild horse population on federal land.

"These horses are an American icon," says DeMayo. "The symbolism of what is happening to them cannot be ignored." With the help of numerous advisers from the naturalist and zoological communities, DeMayo is trying to save the horses. DeMayo and her nine staffers, along with many volunteers, try to rescue and provide sanctuary for horses in their natural herd groups when possible. Their work preserves unique and diverse bloodlines that make up the American wild horse of today.

Return to Freedom doesn't breed horses, but because mares are usually pregnant when they come from the wild, DeMayo has seen the birth of more than 20 foals on the ranch. With more horses coming regularly, DeMayo says that Return to Freedom isn't able to do enough right now. The nonprofit ranch is hoping to accommodate more horses by creating a 9,000-acre wildlife refuge in Northern California. DeMayo is relying on a \$1.8 million capital campaign to make the purchase.

In the meantime, she notes that once people see the horses, the animals are their own ambassadors. Return to Freedom offers public tours during the summer, when visitors can see herds such as that headed by the stallion Callisto, which includes lead-mare Drea with her filly Annie, and mares Luna, Tahoe and Estelle. Annie not only found sanctuary with her family at Return to Freedom, but she also found a lifelong companion when she met Dakota, a bachelor horse that broke through a fence to be with her; the two have been inseparable since. —*Ericka Chickowski*

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