

GRIT

ISSUES OF AMERICAN LIFE & TRADITIONS

Story and photograph by Chuck Graham

I was surrounded by horses. There were Caballine horses, Cerbat mustangs, Sulphurs, Curlies and Kigers feeding on rolling green pastures. Some paid no attention to my presence, others followed close by, occasionally nudging me. A pair gently nibbled on me.

The Return to Freedom Ranch, an American wild horse sanctuary, is home to 140 wild horses in northern Santa Barbara County, California. Just off Jalama Road, the rundown, 310-acre former cattle and chicken ranch was transformed by owner, founder and president Neda DeMayo in 1997. The sanctuary provides a safe haven for wild horses and burros that might otherwise face a dismal fate of separation, abuse and slaughter.

What sets this preserve apart is the dedication and focus of keeping and maintaining bonded, natural herd groups together by relocating and releasing them at the sanctuary. In order to do that and rescue more horses that are no longer allowed to roam free on public lands, DeMayo needs to acquire more land.

"As much as I love horses, I love land," she says. "There's nothing more important than preserving natural resources, habitat and wildlife. To truly understand a species, you have to allow it to live the way it should."

DeMayo's immediate goal is to purchase 20,000 acres of land to create a Wild Horse Land Trust and Conservancy. The project allows for funds to be donated that are earmarked for a much needed expanse of land. There is an urgent need for land because 200 years ago there were more than 2 million wild horses roaming North America; three years ago, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) announced that only 48,000 wild horses remained on public lands throughout the West.

The federal government is requiring the BLM to remove approximately 26,000 of those ani-

All The Pretty Horses



Kiger horses feed in a pasture at the Return to Freedom Ranch in Santa Barbara County, Calif. The former cattle and chicken ranch was transformed by owner Neda DeMayo in 1997 and provides a safe haven for wild horses and burros.

mals because it says public lands can't viably sustain the animals. Since then, herds have been removed and their family groups have been decimated.

DeMayo said there are as many wild horses in government holding

Environmentally, wild horses preserve the land they roam. They reseed land instead of overgrazing it. They provide fire protection, and they break open snow so other animals can graze.

Return to Freedom is an open classroom for people to learn the way of the horse. There are volunteer programs, holistic healing courses, and mentoring classes for horse owners and handlers. On the first and third Saturday of most months, Wild Horse Walks are available by appointment.

"I knew I had to educate because I knew I couldn't save every horse," says DeMayo. "This is a model to explore alternative management for horses."

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For more information on the Return to Freedom Ranch, visit our Web site at www.Grit.com. **G**

facilities as in the wild, because the government believes the animals aren't providing any economic value.