

### Marvel the Marvelous Wild Mesa Verde Stallion

Marvel bolted from the shade of towering golden crowned cottonwoods, his coat a metallic pearl, fingers of light lacing his mane bleached pumpkin. The two-year-old stallion stood blinking his blue eyes in shock not only at the bright morning sun on Halloween eve but also at the peering human 'predators' lining the round pen against the backdrop of the salmon-colored sandstone of Canyons of the Ancients along McElmo Creek. Marvel dropped his head, confined to the pen after his capture at Mesa Verde National Park thirty-two days before. He was full of freely available hay and most importantly, he had water, clear, cold water, in a metal tub he'd come to find as life giving. Exhausted, secure enough with two previously tamed mustangs close by, he blinked repeatedly. Twenty hands quietly held out morsels of sweet alfalfa hay. He rested, a wild horse from a drought-stricken land.



Dr. Patricia Barlow-Irick from Mustang Camp, Blanco, New Mexico was conducting a clinic, sponsored by the National Mustang Association of Colorado (NMACO), focused on the use of positive reinforcement and scientific behavior principles for taming and training wild and

feral horses. The project is specifically associated with the gather and adoption of the horses of Mesa Verde National Park. Marvel was the first of the wild horses to be gathered and removed from the park. The first to be saved.



### **Wild horses at Mesa Verde National Park? A History**

Horses have roamed Mesa Verde for at least a couple of hundred years, long before it was a national park. Presently at least nine small bands of wild horses live in four or more canyons and on three or more mesas in the park. Water sources are rare, becoming nonexistent with the years of drought.

People had inhabited the green mesa top since 7500 BC, archaic people, basket makers, then Ancestral Puebloans building rock shelters in 750 AD. By 1300 AD, the nomadic family groups of the Ute tribes migrated from the Great Basin into the Four Corners region. With the explorations of the Spanish beginning in 1604 from Santa Fe, New Mexico, and north into Colorado, the Utes acquired the horse and the mobility to hunt, raid, and migrate. By 1776, Ute tribes had a highly developed tradition of horse use. The Ute people became the People of the Horse. Horses escaped and proliferated in the land. The Old Spanish Trail, a trade route between Santa Fe and California, used by pack trains in the late 1820s, provided new opportunities for trading, looting, immigrants, and escaping horses. By the 1870s, gold was discovered in the southwest mountains of Colorado, and the Brunot Treaty of 1873 was

negotiated which resulted in the ceding of the San Juan and La Plata Mountains by the Ute to the U.S. government and the Ute reservation was restricted to a strip along the southwest borders of Colorado, including Mesa Verde country. But Mesa Verde, the green table, had no rivers, no streams. It is high desert, dry plains dissected by canyons that make the topography look like crocodile skin from above. The people, the wildlife, the free ranging horses were dependent on springs or seeps or on the ability to travel steep sandstone canyon trails to reach water far below and miles away.

Mesa Verde was established as a national park in 1906, but the deceptive land grab from the Ute tribes in Colorado failed to include the most spectacular of the Ancient Puebloan cliff dwellings. The Assistant Commissioner of Indian Affairs and the Inspector with the Department of Interior negotiated a land exchange with the Weminuche Utes that was signed May 10, 1911, expanding Mesa Verde National Park about 3.75 miles southward, that addition surrounded by the Ute reservation. No one told the horses ranging across the park along with the elk and deer.

### **Trespass Livestock are prohibited in the National Park**

According to the park service, horses are not considered indigenous wildlife and federal law does not allow livestock in the park. In addition, the horses at Mesa Verde do not fall under the protection of the Wild horse Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act. That law identifies specific public lands in the West where wild horses are managed long term under the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Mesa Verde is not included.

In October 2013, the park's wildlife biologist stated that, instead of developing a management plan for the horses, the park would "use fencing to keep horses away from water sources." The *Denver Post* reported that this would "serve as a sort of management tool: Lack of water will force the horses to go elsewhere, and when horses are under stress from too little food or water, they are less fertile."

In the summer of 2014, at least six horses in the park died from dehydration after the park superintendent, citing "standard protocol for wildlife management on public lands," blocked their access to available water. Now those water sources are scarce.



### **Climate Change and the ongoing drought in the Southwest**

For several years, NMACO negotiated unsuccessfully with the National Park Service at Mesa Verde to manage the horses there with injectable fertility vaccine, but the National Park Service considers the horses incompatible with the antiquities and archaeological sites and plans to remove the horses. With the multi-year drought in the southwest, available springs and seeps are drying up. Much as drought and conflict triggered the migration of the Ancient Puebloans from Mesa Verde, drought has caused a crisis for the wild horses of Mesa Verde. The Park has agreed to allow habituation, bait trapping, and eventual low stress removal of the horses. NMACO will have title and possession of the horses for their training and further adoption. (Adapted from article by Patty Latham, DVM)

### **A Thanksgiving Update on Marvel**

Marvel is now a gelding, vaccinated, and transported to Mustang Camp for training with Patricia Irick. He has no reason to fear humans thanks to his planned habituation to two-legged critters providing water, salt, and food and his low stress capture methods. No helicopters, no cowboy roundups.

## **What if wild horses don't learn to fear humans?!**

### **Your gift can help!**

We want this pilot project to establish new methods of habituating horses to capture without fear-based chasing. Horses can learn to see humans as resources, making taming easy and not traumatic— Marvel is a first successful demonstration of the success of these behavioral principles. This project involves huge costs to NMACO for transport, feeding, veterinary care, training and the many other costs associated with removing the horses from the park and finding domestic homes for about eighty horses. We estimate a budget averaging \$3,000 for each horse captured. Your gift helps us continue to protect the horses, promote humane management and enable domestication when necessary. This letter may serve as a record of your donation. No goods or services were provided, in whole or in part, for this contribution. Contact us at [nmaco.org](http://nmaco.org) and follow us on Facebook!

If you would like to continue receiving newsletters and supporting us, please provide us with an email address as future newsletters will be delivered by email. We want all supporting donations to benefit the horses and save on printing and mailing.

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