

BY MICHAEL BEHAR

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MATT SLABY

the mustang redemption

*At the Wyoming
State Honor Farm,
dangerous felons
are trained to
tame wild horses.*

*But can the horses
tame the men?*

George Reynolds is a 53-year-old felon. Sentenced in July 2008 for third-degree sexual assault against a minor, he'll spend up to twelve years in prison, with a chance for parole in four. Standing just shy of six feet tall, Reynolds has blunt shoulders, powerful arms, a shock of brown hair, icy blue eyes, and a bushy Hulk Hogan mustache that frames his chin and creates a permanent frown. He's an imposing figure, a guy you'd never want to cross. But at the moment, Reynolds looks terrified and minuscule next to his

adversary, a 900-pound mustang that is very pissed off. This is the Wyoming State Honor Farm, where convicts train, or "gentle," wild horses that have been rounded up from the high plains as part of a Bureau of Land Management (BLM) program to control mustang populations on federal lands. The Honor Farm admits good-behavior inmates from higher security penitentiaries. Reynolds transferred here in October 2008 to join a group of 25 prisoners who domesticate the horses so they can be offered for adoption.

He repeatedly tries to touch the mustang, captured three



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days ago, but it recoils violently, slamming its rear hooves into a wooden backstop with thunderous force. It grunts and snorts, and like a medieval dragon expels foggy plumes from its nostrils, its hot breath condensing in the crisp morning air. Other times it surges forward and bluff-charges, or gallops in furious circles. Reynolds doesn't flinch. His spine is rigid, and with his arms raised and elbows bent, he holds his palms open and tilted to 90 degrees. I recognize the pose. It's Buddhist and called "calming the ocean." Reynolds isn't a student of Eastern religion; the gesture is merely his instinc-

tive attempt to disarm the horse. It works. After a minute Reynolds slinks closer, extends his right hand, and gingerly strokes the mustang along its neck, which is quivering. Its ears pivot forward—an expression of attentiveness—and its panting ebbs. This is its first physical contact with a human being. I want to ask Reynolds how he feels, but I'm afraid to startle the horse. John Dowell, a 37-year-old felon serving seven to ten years, also for a sexual offense against a minor, quietly

To manage the wild mustang population, BLM helicopters drive herds into netted chutes. Some stallions are gelded and released, but most horses are put into long-term holding facilities.

In North America, mustangs have no real natural predators, and left to their own devices, they'll breed like rabbits fed Viagra.



approaches the pen. “Most of us are in prison because we’ve taken our wills and inflicted them on other people,” he tells me. “You don’t get to do that with these horses. They teach you how to be honest with yourself and they calm your spirit. If you push them around, they’re going to make you pay for it.”



The term “mustang” is derived from the Spanish word *mestengo*, or “stray animal,” and is used to describe any type of feral horse. In North America, mustangs have no real natural predators, and left to their own devices, they’ll breed like rabbits fed Viagra. Herds can double in size every five years. Spaniards brought horses to the continent in the 1500s, and by the end of the 19th century there were 2 million mustangs scattered throughout North America.

Then people started killing them. The horses were easy prey for anyone with a rifle and a flatbed truck; slaughterhouses paid cash for carcasses and sold the meat to pet-food manufacturers. In 1959, thanks to a grassroots campaign by Velma B. Johnston, a.k.a. “Wild Horse Annie,” Congress enacted a law that banned using motorized vehicles to hunt mustangs. It was only laxly enforced, so in 1971 Congress passed the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act, which mandated that the US Department of Interior protect the mustangs “from capture, branding, harassment, or death” and designated them as “living symbols of the historic and pioneer spirit of the West.”

Under the act, the BLM created 303 Herd Management Areas on 65,780 square miles of range throughout 10 Western states, an area about the size of Florida. A subsequent law also mandated that the BLM maintain herd sizes at 1971 levels, rounding

up—the contemporary lingo is “gathering”—excess horses to ensure a static population. But first the BLM had to figure out how many mustangs lived on the open range. Rough estimates made in 1971 put the population at 17,000; two years later a more rigorous census (using spotters in small planes) counted 42,000. Despite the gaping discrepancy, the BLM favored the lower figure, which meant that when the first gatherings commenced in 1973, tens of thousands of horses had to be relocated to federal holding facilities and government-funded private sanctuaries.

Today, the BLM is caring for 32,000 captive mustangs at a cost of \$29 million annually—a whopping 68 percent of the BLM’s \$40.6 million wild horse and burro program budget. While stallions sent to long-term holding are gelded, their wild brethren continue to reproduce. Meanwhile, sell-offs to private developers, oil and gas exploration, and, more recently, areas targeted for renewable energy projects have swallowed up about 20,000 square miles of viable mustang habitat. Of the original 303 HMAS, only 180 remain, on a patchwork of rangelands totaling 45,150 square miles—69 percent of the 1971 range. With so many horses on so little land, the BLM must gather and board an increasing number of mustangs each year.

By 2012, the soaring cost of stabling captive mustangs could top \$75 million. BLM officials want to winnow wild mustangs to a fixed population of 26,600. “We’re way over that number,” says Alan Shepherd, who manages the wild horse program for the BLM in Nevada, home to 20,000 mustangs. In fact, the BLM estimates the total number of wild mustangs is roughly equal to the number in



captivity. Shepherd claims that the HMAs simply aren't big enough to support the voracious herds—a single horse consumes about four and a half tons of plant matter each year. “Their foraging methods can be severely impacting. They will pull grasses completely out of the ground, so they can't grow back.” Mustangs share habitat with livestock (ranchers pay the BLM for grazing rights) and wildlife, including antelope, deer, elk, and bison. But too many horses will raze an ecosystem. “There wouldn't be any other animals around if mustang populations exploded,” says Shepherd.

Plenty of mustang advocates disagree with Shepherd, insisting the horses' threat to habitats is overstated and unproven, a product of zealous ranchers defending their turf. And they complain that the BLM decides how many horses should roam a particular HMA based on census-taking methods that are woefully imprecise. What infuriates those who want to protect the mustangs even more is the possibility that a cash-strapped BLM will sell off horses from long-term holding as a way to save money. Euthanizing mustangs is banned under the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act. But an amendment authored by Sen. Conrad Burns (R-Mont.) and passed in 2004 permits the BLM to sell mustangs at livestock auctions. Purchased mustangs are sometimes trucked to slaughterhouses in Mexico, one of the world's leading horsemeat suppliers.

The alternative is adoption. But few will take home a feral animal that will kick, bite, or trample anyone who gets near it. Thankfully, intrepid inmates at labor farms in Wyoming, Colorado, Nevada, Kansas, and Utah are tackling the problem. In 1986, a BLM wild horse specialist named Walter Jakubowski helped start the first gentling farm at the Colo-

rado State Penitentiary in Cañon City. He partnered with Jim Like, a corrections officer who wanted to create an innovative new job program for inmates. At the Wyoming facility, if gentling goes smoothly for George Reynolds, his mustang will be tame enough to saddle, mount, and ride in three months. “Once in a while an inmate gets bucked off, rammed into a fence, bit, or kicked in the leg—that's educational for the guy,” Jeff Martin, 41, who supervises the horse program in Riverton, tells me. Often the process is a duel of wills between two intractably stubborn and impatient personalities. But for the inmates, it's also transformative. A plaque mounted at the entrance to the farm explains, “There's nothing better for the inside of a man than the outside of a horse.”



The 1,080-acre Wyoming State Honor Farm, founded in 1987, sits on the outskirts of Riverton, a bustling frontier town perched a mile high on an arid plateau, and the fictional home to Heath Ledger's character, Ennis del Mar, in *Brokeback Mountain*. When I visit, in April, the sky is cloudless and celestial blue, and the sun is unexpectedly warm for early spring. Inmates partake in a variety of labor projects (forestry cleanup, road repair, general construction) for local, state, and federal agencies. Only inmates considered a low risk are sent to the Honor Farm, where security is almost nonexistent except for an eight-foot-tall chain-link fence that looks better suited for a Little League ballpark than a prison.

Left: Inmate Joe Vasquez hugs a mustang he trained prior to its adoption. Center: Well-behaved inmates like Leland Yung can transfer from the state penitentiary to the Honor Farm. Right: Extremely skittish, recently captured mustangs show the challenge the inmates face.



Inmate Kelly Smith works with a horse that has recently accepted a halter. Horses are no longer “broken” but trained via careful desensitization. Below: Serving up to 20 years for crimes including attempted sexual assault, John Shuck is now a “lead man” at the Honor Farm’s horse program.

There are no watchtowers or perimeter guards armed with high-powered rifles; no razor wire or attack dogs. “We’ve had a few escapes,” says Cindy Ferguson, the public information officer who arranges my visit. “Some guys can’t handle the freedom.”

Indeed, a week after I was there an inmate fled through the front

gate at dawn; police nabbed him two hours later in a stolen car on a nearby Indian reservation. We tour the facility without a security escort. But just to be safe, Ferguson gives me a “man down” sensor, which attaches to my belt. If it’s jolted or motionless for more than a few minutes, it assumes I’ve been attacked and activates a blaring alarm that summons a posse of (unarmed) officers to my location. (Later in the day, our photographer accidentally drops his sensor, and within seconds a security team appears.)

Ferguson leads me across manicured grounds, where golden willow and cottonwood trees are sprouting new buds. We climb up a gentle slope to the mustang area, known as Horse Hill, where there can be as many as 245 horses undergoing training. The 360-degree view encompasses the snow-clad Wind River and Big Horn mountains, with peaks topping 13,000 feet. “Not a bad place to be in prison,” says Joe Crofts, 44, who manages the farm and, along with Martin, is my guide for the day. Crofts is mustached and potbellied. He sports a broad-rimmed straw hat, aviator sunglasses, weathered cowboy boots, and blue jeans fastened at the waist with an oversize sterling-silver belt buckle he’s had since he was a kid. Sipping black coffee out of a dented tin cup, he recounts his two and a half decades at the farm and his memories of launching the Riverton gentling program, which recently celebrated its 20th anniversary. “When I first came here we had a dairy, some hogs, and I was looking for another job for the inmates. We didn’t want horses here to just take up room; we wanted horses that could go to potential adopters.”

Crofts is a fourth-generation rancher who walks bowlegged and admits to napping in chaps. He says that a few decades ago, taming a wild horse meant breaking its spirit. You chased it into a pen, forced a halter on it, and snubbed it to a fence, then mounted up and rode until the horse either submitted or bucked you off, at which point you’d repeat the process. “If I had known then what I know now, life would have been good,” laughs Crofts. Gentling, today’s preferred method, involves a sequence of desensitization maneuvers that lets the horse establish trust with the trainer on its own terms. “It creates an excellent bond between inmates and horses.”

Crofts lives east of Riverton, on a sprawling ranch where he keeps 17 adopted mustangs that partake in traditional ranching chores: hunting, cattle drives, and just getting around. “We use them every day. They’re really tough—good feet, good bones—because they grew up in rough country.” Mustangs are tenacious warriors because for generations they’ve had to survive famine, drought, wildfire, and the ruthless

high-plains climate. DNA studies have shown that some herds are still almost entirely descended from the original Iberian breeds brought by the conquistadors, while the bloodlines of others are a more generic mix of horses used by explorers and Indians, and those freed during World War I and II, when ranchers went off to fight and wives had to downsize.

Whatever their precise pedigree may be, rounding up mustangs is no easy operation. A census is conducted for each HMA individually to determine where and when a gathering will occur. After a herd is targeted, wranglers construct a trap designed to funnel the horses through a series of corrals and into a holding pen. Next, a helicopter flies behind the herd, driving it toward the trap. At about the same time, wranglers release a so-called Judas horse. “This is sometimes a wild horse that has been domesticated,” explains Scott Fluor, a BLM rangeland specialist who has been involved with the horse program since 1986 and owns seven adopted mustangs. I join Fluor for fist-thick steaks at Bull Supper Club, a Riverton institution and homage to locally raised beef. “The Judas horse is trained to run into the trap. Horses, being herd animals, see the Judas horse and follow it—he brings all his buddies into the catch pen; then we come up behind them and shut the gates.” Over a few days, a gathering might net as many as 250 horses, which are loaded onto trailers and taken to a sorting facility. In general, mustangs younger than four years go to adoption programs because they’re easier to train. For each horse gentled, the BLM pays farms like Riverton \$3 per day. The farm, in turn, gets a minimum \$125 adoption fee when it finds a horse a new home, though auctions can drive up the price. “The horses that are unadoptable—those that are older and set in their ways—we send to sanctuaries or long-term holding,” says Fluor.

Once brought to the farm, the gentling process begins—105 steps outlined in a five-page manual that Martin updates with tips and footnotes. He demonstrates step one, “accept human presence in pen,” by walking swiftly toward a herd of about 30 mares brought to the farm two days ago. “The hardest part is getting your hands on the horses,” he shouts over his shoulder. “They are prey animals; they think we’re going to eat them.” He gets within 10 paces when the mustangs bolt, clambering over each other and bounding in all directions. “The best way to get inside a horse’s head is to get it to move its feet.” Step one could take weeks, even months. “Sometimes we’ll have a guy just stand in this pen all day to desensitize the horses.”

In another pen, William Ricks, a 35-year-old inmate serving 20 to 99 years for the aggravated kidnapping of a teenage girl murdered by his accomplice, is circling a mustang on a mountain bike. “When I first came here I was terrified

“Once in a while an inmate gets bucked off, rammed into a fence, bit, or kicked in the leg—that’s educational,” says a prison official. A plaque mounted at the entrance to the Honor Farm states, “There’s nothing better for the inside of a man than the outside of a horse.”

of the horses,” Ricks tells me. “I was scared to get in the pens. I would be shaking. But you have to trust in your ability to be around the horses. It’s all about building trust—not only with the horse but with yourself.” Ricks is trying to get his mustang, in training for eight months now, comfortable with what it might encounter after it’s adopted, since equestrians often share trails with mountain bikers. Inmates also coax horses across plastic tarps (mustangs hate the crackling sound), through sand, and over buckets. At another stage, called “flagging,” inmates tie a plastic bag to a stick and waggle it on all sides of the horse. Every step is aimed at desensitizing the horse so it won’t spook and potentially throw its rider.

Ninety-five percent of Wyoming inmates leave prison eventually. The horse program makes it much less likely they’ll return, says a Corrections spokeswoman. “People have said that the inmates are gentling themselves.”

“All the stuff we do affects the horse for the rest of its life,” continues Martin, who manages the Riverton program. “When a horse gets scared, I don’t want it to think about fight or flight; I want it to think about relaxing.” He enters a pen where Dowell is loosely draping a saddle over a horse, then promptly removing it. “Repetition is our friend,” says Martin. “We use a lot

of baby steps.” Martin then climbs onto the unsaddled mustang and lies facedown and spread-eagled on its back. The horse is unblinkingly still, as if in a trance. With his nose buried in its wispy mane, Martin says, “You have to be balanced with a horse just like you have to be balanced in your life.” Martin had no prior experience with horses when he married into a cattle-ranching family. He’s self-taught, glean- ing what he could from books, magazines, and instructional DVDs. “I turned into an addict.” After a stint as a corrections officer he transferred to the farm in 1993, adopted four mustangs, and became a gentling guru to the inmates.

In an adjacent pen, Leland Yung, 33, who has been here since March 2008 and is serving a 30- to 35-year sentence for second-degree murder, is working with a noticeably more aggressive mustang that refuses to be haltered, objecting with bites and kicks. “I used to think I had a lot of patience,” Yung tells me. “But all the different emotions you carry into the pen, the horse will pick up on those.” And getting a mustang to obey once it senses hostility or fear is futile. “These horses know when you are mad or angry or frustrated before you do, so paying attention to them has helped me better understand when I’m getting frustrated. If you really want to learn about yourself, this is the way to go.” Martin, who is listening, chimes in, “I tell these guys every day, this is not about horse training; this is about life. If you get frustrated because the horse doesn’t do what you want, it holds you accountable.”

The inmates I speak with are all but teary-eyed about their interactions with the horses. “It’s just like anything in life,” says inmate Dowell. “You gotta struggle through the hard times to get to the fruit.” And if the program is a far more productive method of reforming criminals than just tossing them in lockup, the same is true for the horses: Competing

demands for public lands have created unrealistic management policies that sideline the mustangs in favor of everyone else. Gentling, at the very least, gives both horses and inmates better odds at surviving life after incarceration. “Take a guy who has come from a bad family, been abused, sold drugs, had no respect for anyone,” Martin says, “and now he has to get one of these horses to say, ‘I’d love for you to get on my back.’ Well, that’s just a huge accomplishment.”

“The Honor Farm is not only teaching inmates a new way to behave, it’s teaching them patience and job skills—how to show up to work every day. And we know that if you offer inmates a way to change their behavior, it’s much less likely they’ll come back to prison,” says Melinda Brazzale, a spokeswoman for the Wyoming Department of Corrections. “Victims are a big concern of ours. But it’s a fact that 95 percent of all people sentenced to our department leave prison. It costs us \$45,000 a year to house each inmate. So we need to make sure they are given all the tools to change their behavior so when they get out they’ll be productive citizens. We don’t have recidivism statistics, but it just makes sense that if they’re having to deal with an animal that doesn’t want to be dealt with, it’s going to teach them a lot of patience and make them feel very confident. The process gives the inmates a success under their belt, something they’ve maybe never had in their lives. People have said that the inmates are gentling themselves.”



Since 1988, when the Wyoming farm started taking its first horses, about 900 inmates have gentled 3,600 mustangs there. Each year, some 200-plus inmates at programs in five states help train more than 450 mustangs for adoption. Almost 95 percent of gentled horses get adopted. Even so, this simply can’t keep pace with new births in the wild. “The prison programs are fairly cost-effective,” says Shepherd. “But we just can’t get enough horses through the training. When you’re removing six or seven thousand a year from the range, you quickly outscale yourself.” The BLM’s goal: arrange adoptions for 8,000 mustangs a year. “We are nowhere near that,” says Fluer. “The economy is such that with the price of hay and the spike in fuel prices, Americans can’t afford to keep these as pets.” He continues, “It’s an emotional, political, and very costly issue. Budgets are shrinking, there are 36,000 wild horses on the range, they reproduce at 20 percent a year, and Congress wants us to do something.”

The BLM is permitted to sell horses that haven’t been adopted, but once they’re privately owned it’s impossible to track them. “There’s evidence of horses being sent for slaughter in Mexico,” says Virginie Parant, campaign director of the American Wild Horse Preservation Campaign. “They are used for human consumption in Europe and Japan.” Parant is a proponent of ROAM (Restore Our American Mustangs Act), a bill that passed in the House last July that would create additional sanctuaries, direct the BLM to expand roaming areas, and possibly boost funding for inmate gentling. Now Parant is trying to rally support for a Senate version. Sponsored by Sen. Robert Byrd (D-W.Va.), it’s currently undergoing review

in the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources.

“This is a massive money pit,” says Parant. “But the solution is to stop rounding them up indiscriminately and start managing them in the wild.” Patti Colbert, who directs the Mustang Heritage Foundation, which promotes adoption events, says, “Long-term holding is a very expensive place for these horses to spend their lives.”

Shepherd, at the BLM, believes it’s possible to slow the wild mustangs’ reproduction rate with a fertility control compound known as porcine zona pellucida, or PZP. “We’ve treated 2,500 horses, and it shows potential.” But the fix is temporary, lasting just two years. A contraceptive vaccine called SpayVac is also under consideration. According to Sally Spencer, a BLM spokeswoman, the agency is also investigating surgically spaying mustang mares, “but the practicality and safety of these invasive procedures have not been evaluated for use on ungentled wild mares in field conditions.”

Complicating matters further is that nobody knows exactly how many wild mustangs roam public lands. “We count the horses one by one, just the pilot and myself looking out the window,” notes Fluer. “It’s completely inaccurate,” says Parant. “The BLM decides what they want to do and then plugs in census numbers to back up their management policies.” Mustang advocates maintain that there are fewer horses on the range than the BLM claims. Reproduction rates are also disputed; a 1982 National Academy of Sciences study puts the annual rate at “10 percent or less”—half what is claimed by the BLM. This would argue for fewer

Top: As part of his duties as a go-between for prison managers and other inmates, John Shuck rises early to prepare mustangs for a day of gentling. Bottom: Self-taught gentling guru Jeff Martin teaches inmates to be patient with the horses—and with people.



roundups, which Parant describes as “cruel and imperfect.” The BLM contends gatherings are necessary to save horses that are dying because their habitats lack food and water, a problem caused by overpopulation and possibly aggravated by climate change. Then again, if less mustang habitat was being parceled off to developers and energy companies, the horses might do just fine.

ROAM would radically alter how the BLM manages wild horses. Shepherd thinks it will foment further conflict. “It increases the population of horses on the range, and the majority of management areas already share that range with livestock.” When I tell this to Parant, she shoots back, “There are 33,000 horses and 4 million head of cattle. To me, that doesn’t seem fair for sharing the land. The BLM is using gatherings as a management tool when it should be an extraordinary measure.” In August, a US District Court agreed. Weighing in on a BLM plan to gather 147 mustangs in Colorado, the court found that the plan “exceeds the scope of authority that Congress delegated to it in the Wild Horse Act,” and enjoined the gathering.

In October, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar announced his intention to overhaul the program by promoting “aggressive use of fertility control,” relocating mustangs to new preserves all over the country, even out East, and making some herds “a focal point for publicity and increased ecotourism.” The current program “is not sustainable for the animals, the environment, or the taxpayer,” Salazar stated. “Water and forage are extremely limited in the West.”

Parant thinks the Salazar initiative merely diverts attention from the more comprehensive ROAM bill. “It’s very sly. They are just asking Congress for yet more money for what basically amounts to long-term holding and putting an ecotourism spin on it.” At press time, neither ROAM nor Salazar’s plan had progressed. So the gatherings continue—and adoption remains the best way to save those captured mustangs.

Toward the end of my stay at the Honor Farm, I watch an inmate ride a mustang around an indoor pen. A gentle tug on the reins and the horse canters in a precisely choreographed figure eight. Crofts looks on proudly. “This is the most rewarding part of my job,” he says. “These guys have been taken out of society because they don’t like following the law. But you bring them here and you can see how that person changes—and change comes through frustration. Every one of these guys we have at the farm has the potential to be your neighbor. And I just hope we make that critical change in his life so that he becomes a law-abiding citizen.”

I’m about to leave when another inmate, John Shuck, trots toward me on a gorgeous pinto he trained. Serving 12 to 20 years for aggravated assault and battery, and attempted sexual assault, Shuck, who is 60, has been here since May 2006. He’s the designated “lead man,” the senior Horse Hill go-between for inmates and prison managers. “These wild horses have taught me trust and patience,” he says. “And once you build trust with them, they’ll do anything for you.” ■

BY BETH SCHWARTZAPFEL

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BENJAMIN DRUMMOND

the green mile

*Can turning prisons
into hothouses of
sustainability pay off
for everyone?*

By the time Anthony McKinney gets out of prison, he will have missed his 20s entirely. He’s 28 now, a compact man with a short mohawk and a tattoo of a chain on his neck. “When I get out, I’ll be only 30 years old, and I’ll have 13 years of prison. If that was all time wasted, I would have come out a very experienced criminal, with a stronger body and a sharper mind,” he says. “That’s not what you really want to unleash on the community.”

It’s a cloudless day in western Washington, sunny and hot, and McKinney and three of his fellow inmates are tending to the apiary at the Cedar Creek Corrections Center, in Littlerock, outside Olympia. Until he was transferred here from a prison in Arizona, McKinney says, he was on the road to exactly that scenario. “I was *very* angry up until about six months ago,” he says. “I’ve been active in negativity for the past ten and a half years in the system.” The bees changed all that.

McKinney is one of about 60 inmates involved in the Sustainable Prisons Project, a collaboration between the state Department of Corrections and The Evergreen State College. The project began here at Cedar Creek, a minimum-security work camp, and has expanded to three other prisons. Inmates compost the facility’s food waste. They sort recycling by hand. They grow organic produce. They collect rainwater for the gardens. They raise bees. And they partner with scientists to do ecological research projects; right now, two of them are painstakingly raising endangered Oregon spotted frogs.