

# Wild horses gallop to safety in the Chilcotin

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It is dusk when we finally stumble upon them. All day, our truck has been veering along the dusty, gravel roads of the Chilcotin, our eyes keenly searching the meadows and forests for the shape of a horse.

But it is not any old horse we seek. The horses we are looking for have been here for centuries, if the rumours are true. Some claim they are descendants of the Spanish Colonial Horses, while others argue they carry the bloodlines of the earliest horses introduced into America - the conquistador's horse. Genetic testing is inconclusive as yet, and only one thing is certain: these horses are wild and carefree, roaming over this great, vast Fraser Plateau with grace, dignity and determination to survive.

The truck stops sharply and cautiously, we venture out under the watchful eye of a white stallion. He is guarding two chestnut mares and a foal, and while they skitter behind a tree, he calmly assesses the potential for danger, his eyes constantly on us. When we get too close, he bucks his head dismissively and canters off across the meadow, his herd in tow.

Stunned by this all-too-brief moment of sheer beauty, we listen to the hollow sound of hooves beating against the earth, the proud swish of their tails as the horses disappear like fleeting ghosts into the distance.

Somehow they have learned to survive in this rugged terrain, along with the moose, bears, coyotes, wolves, wolverines, fox, lynx and cougars indigenous to the Chilcotin. They appear robust, healthy and proud, with the long, shaggy manes and tails characteristic of the Spanish Colonial Horse.

## 'Just like falling in love with a woman'

Though the horses are relative newcomers in this ecosystem, they have carved a space for themselves and fiercely protect it, galloping to safety at the first sign of danger and remaining elusive, skittish, painfully shy and only slightly curious of their human admirers.

"Sometimes you find yourself falling in love with one of them, just like falling in love with a woman," confesses Edmund Lulua, a member of the Xenigwet'in First Nations who resides in the Chilcotin's Nemiah Valley. His is one of six bands comprising the Tsilhqot'in national government, and the horses have been part of First Nations' cultural life in this area for many generations.

Lulua, for one, learned to ride at the age of five, and owns 11 horses, using them for backcountry and range riding, as well as for hunting moose and deer. Eight of his horses were taken from the wild herds, caught using corral traps and broken in over a period that can take anything from a day to a week. "You rub down their body, talk softly to them," he explains.

"When they begin to trust you, they will start coming towards you."

It's not that easy for everyone. Ian Bridge, a manager at the **Elkin Creek Ranch**, caught a few wild horses using the same technique. Six years later, they remain unbroken, but have made good breeding stock.

Outside of the Brittany Triangle, an area roughly the size of Luxembourg, the wild horses are fair game and folks like Bridge do not need permission to catch them. But inside that triangle, it is a different story.

### **'We caught them from the wild'**

In 1996, members of the Xeni Gwet'in band began working closely with a non-profit group called Friends of the Nemiah Valley (FONV), its goal to protect the wild horses of the Brittany Triangle and their habitat, bound by the Teseko and Chilko rivers.

The triangle represents what is possibly the last true wilderness in Canada's British Columbia, a vibrant ecosystem that has remained untouched by loggers, and one kept in equilibrium by the prey and predators that inhabit it. The Xeni Gwet'in and FONV created a Wild Horse Preserve in this 155 000-hectare triangle, which is home to approximately half of the 400 wild horses that roam the Chilcotin.

It is these horses that we have come to see. The only trouble until now has been finding them. "The chances of finding them in a day are pretty small," Bridge explains.

For one, you have to venture out early in the morning or at dusk to give yourself the best odds. Those fortunate enough to spot them relish those seconds, for the horses are nervous around people, trusting no-one but each other.

You can hardly blame them for mistrust. Over the last four decades, government-approved slaughter programmes were the norm. The ministry of forests paid a bounty per pair of horse ears produced by ranchers and settlers, and more to those who brought in the testicles of wild stallions. While wild horses have been protected in the US for 35 years, in Canada they do not enjoy the privilege of legal protection.

"I grew up on horseback," says Chief Roger William, leader of the Xeni Gwet'in band and a strong voice when it comes to protecting the wild horse herds. "The horse was our television, computer and Internet, and since we could not afford to go into town and buy horses, we caught them from the wild."

But the Xeni Gwet'in's cultural ties to the wild horses are another major factor. There were no roads into the valley until the 1970s, so the horses were critical to the band members' transportation. Though many commute by vehicle these days, the wild horses remain an intrinsic part of their culture, used for ranching, hunting and recreational riding. "I use my horses all the time," William confesses. "They are a great source of pride to the Xeni Gwet'in, and have been part of our life for a long, long time."

One encouraging step towards protecting these wild beauties is the recent creation of a wild horse ranger position, funded by BC Parks and FONV. Harry Setah, the first wild horse ranger in the country, now spends several months of the year monitoring the horses, recording their numbers and data.

"Not too long ago there were just too many horses, and our chiefs had to catch and even shoot them," says William. "Our elders even remember harsh winters when they had to eat the wild horses to survive. But these days, it seems that the population has balanced out."

Nature is looking after the wild horse herds, according to Setah.

But it is good to know these wild, free-spirited survivors have some human protectors, too.