



Primitive-looking dun mare and foal atop the Pryor Mountains

Photo by The Cloud Foundation

Mustang! An American Original

by Ginger Kathrens

It was a few weeks before Thanksgiving, 1993. The phone rang in the office. It was Marty Stouffer, the host of the popular PBS “Wild America” television series. “I’ve always wanted to do a film about mustangs,” he said in his confident Arkansas drawl. “Will you shoot it for me?” I was stunned. I’d been researching, writing, and editing programs for Marty since 1987, but Marty never assigned me to shoot his films, using what I thought were lame excuses like “I can’t send you out in the snow and cold” or “You could get lost out there.” I really think girls shooting programs for him was an alien concept. But Marty had just seen my two-hour production for the Discovery Channel, “Spirits of the Rainforest.” I filmed the majority of the natural history sequences, which showcased a dazzling array of jungle wildlife from giant otters and macaws, to jaguars, and six species of monkeys. The program eventually won an Emmy Award for Best Documentary of 1993.

I answered Marty’s request with an enthusiastic and unequivocal, “Yes.” But as I hung up the phone, I started to worry. I believed that the extent of wild horse behavior was largely what I experienced as a child with my own domestic quarter horse, Sunny. All he did was stand around in a field and graze all day. How was I going to

fill a whole half-hour show with interesting action? I started my research, and, aside from a scientific study of wild horses in Nevada’s Great Basin by Joel Berger, I found nothing dedicated to the topic of wild horse behavior. This only served to underscore my belief that wild horses are as boring as domestic ones. So, I concluded, if I was to create an exciting and educational experience about mustangs for TV viewers, I would have to focus on their history. My rough draft script included everything but the kitchen sink—evolution, Conquistadors, Native Americans, wild horses living on an island in Nova Scotia. You name it, and I had it in my shooting outline.

All my misconceptions about wild horse behavior eventually flew right out the window when I met a stunning black stallion named Raven and his family. But that’s another story. My early research focused on the history of *Equus* (the taxonomic name for the genus of horses and asses). I ran across a story about a horse carcass unearthed by two placer miners in the Yukon. What I knew about the Yukon was based on a childhood TV program, *Sgt. Preston of the Yukon*, shot on location in California! In other words, I knew about as much about the Yukon as I did about wild horses.



Raven (Cloud's father) races back to his family—1994.
Photo by Ginger Kathrens



Grullo band stallion similar in build to the Yukon horse - Pryor Mountains. Photo by The Cloud Foundation

The story was fascinating. Two gold miners, Lee Olynyk and Ron Toews, uncovered a horse carcass in Last Chance Creek outside the gold rush town of Dawson City. I got out my atlas. Where is the Yukon anyway? Ah ha—way north and due east of Alaska. Dawson City, the heart of the Klondike gold rush that began in 1896, is just a couple hundred miles south of the Arctic Circle.

As required by the Yukon government, the miners reported their

flop-over, blondish mane.

But, when the carcass was radiocarbon dated, it turned out to be 26,000 years old! The species is known as *Equus lambei*, named for Canadian paleontologist H.M. Lambe. This type of ancient horse eventually became known simply as the Yukon Horse. I spoke with C.R. Harington, PhD, Curator of the Canadian Museum of Nature, who was in charge of the radiocarbon dating, and he believes that this Last Chance Creek Yukon horse died in winter and was buried and frozen before the summer because the carcass contained no remains of carrion beetles or blow-fly pupae. Also, it had not been consumed by all the very big and scary predators that lived back then.



Beringia Centre, Whitehorse, Yukon. Photo by Makendra Silverman

find to the authorities and specifically to archaeologist Ruth Gotthardt, PhD, in the capital city of Whitehorse, several hundred miles south of Dawson City. Discoveries of prehistoric animals are common in the far north where the ground just below the surface is permanently frozen. Well-preserved animal remains are *freeze-dried* in the permafrost layer. In this case the partial carcass was frozen in silt overlying gold-bearing gravel and bedrock.

I phoned Dr. Gotthardt, and she explained how she had immediately flown north to Dawson City to investigate the find. As she hiked into Last Chance Creek canyon, the stench of rotting flesh greeted her long before she saw the partial body of a horse jutting out of the canyon wall above. Initially she believed the miners had unearthed a contemporary horse. Beyond the smell, it had all the characteristics of a contemporary horse—solid hooves and a brown coat with a



Grullo band stallion challenges a rival atop the Pryor Mountains. Photo by The Cloud Foundation



Pryor wild horse mares with their foals graze in the fog.
Photo by The Cloud Foundation

So what, you may say. Well, *here's what*: *Equus lambei* is the link between our contemporary wild horse (currently roaming in remnant herds across 10 western states), and the horses that died out as recently as 7,600 years ago. Both are caballoid type horses—*Equus Caballus*, the modern horse. The Yukon Horse confirms that the horses that died out on this continent are virtually the same as the ones that returned with the Spanish Conquistadors in the early 1500s and eventually escaped to reclaim their freedom.

Only 15 miles away from the Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Range sits the Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area, where I often talked with their longtime biologist, Jim Stabler. I remember one conversation we had about a year before he retired. “There is only one species that is **more native** than the wild horse,” Jim said with a wry smile. “The Pronghorn. It never died

out, and it never migrated between continents.” Jim and I talked about the other hooved animals that are considered American natives: bighorn sheep, deer, bison, mountain goats and elk. All of them came from Asia, traveling east across the Bering Land Bridge that, at several times during the Pleistocene ice ages, connected what is now Alaska with Asia. The horse, on the other hand, migrated in the opposite direction, traveling west from North America to Asia. Hence, Jim’s conclusion that the horse is really “more native” than our other wild hooved mammals—except, of course, the *stay at home* pronghorn.

All of this unequivocal science begs one big question: why do our government agencies still classify the wild horse as a non-native, exotic species? I believe this misclassification has everything to do with politics and nothing to do with science.



Pronghorn antelope buck.
Photo by Ginger Kathrens



Bighorn Sheep ram at the edge of the Bighorn Canyon--- Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area
Photo by Makendra Silverman



Cloud's daughter, Dancer, in the fog.
Photo by The Cloud Foundation

Why do our government agencies still classify the wild horse as a non-native, exotic species?

A growing number of scientists are acknowledging the mustang as a returned native species, not the least of whom is the Curator of the Division of Vertebrate Zoology at the American Museum of Natural History, Ross MacPhee, PhD. He states, "The contemporary wild horse in the United States is recently derived from lines domesticated in Europe and Asia. But those lines themselves go much further back in time, and converge on populations that lived in North America during the latter part of the Pleistocene (2.5M to 10k years ago)." Dr. MacPhee refers to this re-introduction as, biologically speaking, "a non-event: horses were merely returned to part of their former native range, where they have since prospered because ecologically they never left."

In 2009, while filming a television series about horses, I had the rare privilege of traveling to the Yukon where I visited with Ruth Gotthardt. She showed me the pelt of the Yukon horse at the Beringia Interpretive Center in Whitehorse. And best of all, I walked with Lee Olynyk along Last Chance Creek, in the very canyon where he found the missing link—the ancient horse that connects our mustangs of today with their distant, nearly look-a-like cousins, and proves their *nativeness* beyond a shadow of a doubt.

Wild horses today are severely endangered. Only a few thousand remain on western ranges. Without acceptance of their native status, could they go extinct ... again? 

About the author:

Emmy Award-winning filmmaker and Cloud Foundation Executive Director, Ginger Kathrens, has been documenting the Pryor herd since 1994, the year before Cloud was born. Her groundbreaking work in interpreting the complex world of wild horses has been compared to that of Jane Goodall's study of Chimpanzees. Kathrens' books and films about Cloud and the Pryor Wild Horses are available for a donation to www.thecloudfoundation.org.

Ginger Kathrens
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