



# Trauma to Trust

STORY BY ANNA I. SOCHOCKY

*Marvel, a blue-eyed wild stallion, faced life in a holding pen and an uncertain future. Instead, he went to camp...Mustang Camp.*

The 22-mile gravel road leading to Mustang Camp follows the oldest parts of the historic Santa Fe trail and snakes its way along a dry riverbed. Pitted ruts 8-inches deep carved by flash floods, snow drifts or oil and gas trucks often make the road inaccessible.

"Call when you leave the pavement, and check your odometer," says Mustang Camp's founder and director Patricia Irick. "Go north at the cell tower, then follow the main drainage down Largo Canyon. If you get stuck, we'll come and find you."

Deep in the bowels of Largo Canyon, each twist and turn of the road to Mustang Camp offers glimpses of remote northwestern New Mexico public lands and evidence of more than 1,500 archeological sites, including petroglyphs carved by the ancient Anasazi. Most importantly, the road to Mustang Camp paves the way for hundreds of wild horses to transition to a life with people.



**ABOVE:** Prince Leopold, part of a bachelor band in Carson National Forest, New Mexico, learns to trust people at Mustang Camp under Irick's watchful eye.

**RIGHT:** Horses arriving at Mustang Camp quickly accept their surroundings, never testing fences or avoiding people.







## ROADS LEAD TO LARGO CANYON

Before founding Mustang Camp, Irick honed her Mustang taming and training skills at the U.S. Forest Service wild horse pens in Farmington, New Mexico.

“I lived there for six months and trained horses around the clock,” Irick says. “It was the most exciting time of my life. Nobody would bother me late at night. I trained horses until 2 a.m. I was so on fire about the whole thing, and we got all the horses adopted.”

The next spring, the USFS allowed Irick to start taking horses to her home, about 40 miles from the wild horse territories. The U.S. Forest Service closed the facility in Farmington and temporarily moved their pens to Mustang Camp, but their funding for wild horse trapping and training dried up in 2012. Irick then teamed up with Mustang Heritage Foundation and their trainer incentive program.

“I started developing my education program using MHF animals and having students here at Mustang Camp, which

went well for a few years,” Irick says. “I had a bunch of students scheduled for the summer of 2017, and then in April, the Mustang Heritage Foundation called me up and said they were out of funding for their program as of [the next day]. My plan suddenly fell apart. I had to figure out how to get wild horses elsewhere for students to train.”

Mustang Camp started taking in horses from American Indian tribes, other rescues and the New Mexico Livestock Board. In the fall, they became a licensed rescue facility. In 2018, a wild horse sanctuary asked Mustang Camp to take 50 horses, 31 of which were stallions — more than could be handled at the facility in Largo Canyon. They temporally relocated to a bigger facility.

“In Milan, we had rented the old livestock auction barn and its pens,” Irick says. “We’d invested a lot in getting it fixed up for horses. Then, we got a notice from planning and zoning that they wanted a hearing. They didn’t want us to show up. I said, ‘Well, tomorrow, 50 horses are arriving.’”

**ABOVE:** Marvel, the first wild horse captured in Mesa Verde National Park in 2019, was a foal and was the first horse transported to Mustang Camp from the park.

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Not to be deterred, Irick tamed around 65 horses at that facility before returning to the 14 acres in Largo Canyon, where the organization continues to seek safe futures for wild horses and burros. Meanwhile, pushing the boundaries of taming and training wild horses by employing 21st century science and training technology.

## A MISSION ROOTED IN TRUST

The mission of Mustang Camp is to reduce the suffering of captive horses by using humane taming and training practices, train people to train animals using minimally coercive techniques, and find suitable homes for adoption.

“A horse’s trust level will be impacted by everything the trainer does,” Irick says. “The old saying is, ‘You never get a second chance to make a first impression,’ so let’s set the animal up to have a positive expectation of people.”

Natural horsemanship trainers apply a pressure and release method to motivate a desired action by the horse. Irick acknowledges the skill of many natural horsemanship trainers, but she cautions that emphasizing pressure to exact a result interferes with a horse’s understanding.

“A good pressure trainer can look pretty benign, but behind it, there must be something the animal finds annoying or threatening,” Irick says. “That isn’t always necessary. We can motivate with something the horse likes.”

The educational element of Mustang Camp’s mission provides in-depth training videos on the organization’s YouTube channel as well as a complete program of basic horsemanship, principles of training and an exploration of the plight of Mustangs in the Western United States. The training curriculum buoys interest and understanding about Mustangs and wild horses in general. Mustang Camp also provides free classes to equine rescue personnel across the country.

Mustang Camp acquires feral and wild horses from the Bureau of Land Management, National Parks and tribal lands, among other public and private sources. Partnering with other New Mexico horse rescues and the New Mexico Livestock Board, Mustang Camp aims to provide care and training resulting in horses that can be successfully adopted after learning to trust people.

**BOTTOM LEFT:** A bird’s-eye view of Mustang Camp and Largo Canyon showcases the expansive 14-acre property and training facility. **BOTTOM TOP RIGHT:** Pagosa’s comfort with the trail grew under Bell enough to be adopted by rider Rebecca Ludeman pictured in this photo.

**BOTTOM RIGHT CORNER:** Renowned for his work with low stress cattle management, wild horses and horsemanship clinics, Tim McGaffic, pictured with Krystal Lamb, wildlife biologist, orchestrated the nontraumatic capture of the horses at Mesa Verde. Humane bait-and-trap gathering approaches build trust with the horses.







## STEPS TO SUCCESS

A wild horse displays a low threshold for flight and anxiety around people. A trained and accessible horse is more likely to be adopted. Potential adoptees must demonstrate their ability to be caught, haltered, led, groomed, tied, trailered and ready for saddle training. An animal whose hooves cannot be handled is likely to either be neglected or pose a danger to the farrier or veterinarian. Mustang Camp animals have their first trim, from Irick herself, prior to leaving for their new homes.

Irick says there are two fundamental questions for any horse trainer: What can this horse do now? What do I want this horse to be able to do?

When you figure out the answers, you break down the path between the two into a set of steps. Mustang Camp breaks down the path between wild and tame into a 26-step program. The 26 tasks are organized

into four basic zones, each with a central and related goal. In the first zone, horses play games to foster relaxed engagement with the trainer. In the second zone, the horse learns to touch and be touched. In zone three, the training introduces elements of pressure and release in a non-coercive way. Finally, in zone four, the animal gains all the basic skills needed to be a potential adoptee.

Fostering a foundation of trust between the horse and a person is at the core of Irick's training methods.

"I'm trying to set an animal's attitude," Irick says. "Everything a horse trainer intentionally does is to instill desirable habits. You could teach them habits through positive reinforcement or negative reinforcement. I think it's faster to get good habits with positive reinforcement."

On average, each wild horse requires about 45 training days to be ready for adoption. Mustang Camp adopts animals for

six months. During that time, Irick schedules a series of calls with the adopter to check the horse's condition. Adopters send updates and photos, and they can always call to get help with horse or burro problems. At the end of six months, if the animal shows no sign of neglect (including their hooves) Mustang Camp gives the adopter the horse's title. Irick has prepared over 600 horses for adoption using the positive reinforcement 26-step program. Before the pandemic, Mustang Camp readied at least 40 horses for adoption annually, but much fewer during the pandemic. In 2023, they expect to help around 35 equines (13 of which are burros) transition to a life with people.

**ABOVE:** Colorado horse trainer Michelle Bell successfully saddle trained Pagosa, a 3-year-old Mustang from the Mesa Verde herd.



## A BETTER SOLUTION

Wild horses have roamed the salmon-colored sandstone Canyons of the Ancients for more than 200 years. Mesa Verde National Park is a mosaic of dry plains dissected by canyons and mesas spanning more than 52,000 protected acres of the Colorado Plateau. Nine bands of wild Mustangs traverse four landlocked canyons and three mesas, some may be carrying the genetics of horses used by the Conquistadors.

During the summer of 2000, forest fires burned about 40% of the Mesa Verde protected park acreage. The ensuing drought and fire danger curbed access to water, prompting horses to learn how to break into visitor ice machines and bathrooms. Six horses died from dehydration after Park management blocked the horse's access to water sources.

The crisis came to a head in 2014 when Mesa Verde Park's mandate to protect

nearly 5,000 archaeological sites ran afoul with the presence of wild horses, and management finalized plans to remove them from the Park. To assure a positive solution, the National Mustang Association of Colorado stepped in to take possession of all the horses, facilitate the humane gathering of the Mustangs and contract with Mustang Camp to gentle, train and prepare the horses for adoption.

With the bait-and-trap approach employed by the NMACO, the Mustang's first impression of humans is more positive. Volunteers and park employees set up water troughs, refilled daily, and scatter bales of hay around open enclosures. Over time, the horses come to understand people pose no threat. When the gates finally close, their familiarity with helpful humans overrides their instinctive fear. The bait-and-trap approach preserves bands and allows horses to habituate and acclimate to people.

The National Mustang Association of

Colorado's approach sets a precedent for gathering wild horses and demonstrates that a humane and effective method works, and is often preferable, to more traditional methods like the use of helicopters and ATVs. Its partnership with Mustang Camp bypasses the gap between trauma and trust.

**ABOVE:** Mesa Verde wild horses acclimate to water deliveries in the bait-and-trap fenced areas. The National Mustang Association of Colorado, under Tim McGaffic's direction, and the Mesa Verde National Park completed the trap gradually so horses would become accustomed to going in and out before the gate was closed.





## NEW LIFE, NEW JOBS

Colorado horse trainer Michelle Bell saddle trained two Mustang Camp horses from the Mesa Verde herd. Bell agrees with Irick that horses with a good foundation built on trust will be usable and desirable to adopters. Bell argues that clicker training is a great tool to have in your toolbox, especially when dealing with a horse that possesses the human equivalent of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. For horses that have experienced incapacitating trauma, clicker training is a way to help them re-wire their brain.

Bell views her job as helping each horse transition from the 26 steps to understanding gentle pressure and release tactics under saddle.

“I have four Mesa Verde horses here now, and two will go home in about a week,” Bell says. “Pagosa is started under saddle. I’ve been trail-riding him with other horses and can go out in the woods alone with him. Lewis, a 2-year-old buck-

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MICHELLE BELL

skin, is younger. He accepts the saddle and will pony behind another horse.”

However, Bell’s truest joy is a mare she adopted for herself at the last minute. Towaoc, the 6-year-old pregnant bay, had held the position of head mare in the wild. Strong-willed and difficult to load, Towaoc gave birth to her filly, Sage, on April 15 on Bell’s ranch.

“I had been out of town for a week before Sage’s birth and was hoping that Towaoc would wait for me to have her baby,” Bell says. “She did. I saw her the morning after I got home and saw two little hooves emerging. I walked into the barn shelter, and she followed me. I sat in the straw, and she sat beside me. Her baby was born within minutes, practically in my lap.”

**TOP RIGHT:** Rochelle Latka waits while her horse’s condition is checked before given a new mount for the next leg of the race. She won the Vet’s Choice Award at the 2022 Gaucho Derby just a few months prior to running the Mongol Derby.

The National Mustang Association of Colorado anticipates facilitating the gathering of the remaining 40 wild horses in Mesa Verde National Park throughout 2023 and completing the project by mid-2024.

## MARVEL SETS THE STANDARD

Two-year-old stallion Marvel was the first Mesa Verde horse corralled in the food and water-rich round pens in the fall of 2021. The following wet winter made the roads to Mustang Camp even worse than normal. Irick and Marvel spent the winter slogging through the wind and mud. From the onset, however, Marvel was a willing student, and was soon sporting a saddle or driving harness, far exceeding the normal criteria for taming.

The perlino Mustang that once hunted for water in park campgrounds after being expelled from his band caught the eye of Bonnie Anderson at the Four Corners Ag-

ricultural Exposition the following spring.

“I was working at the Agricultural Expo for my county job, and Marvel was there,” Anderson says. “I fell in love with him.”

Anderson had tracked Marvel’s story on Facebook and asked about adopting him.”

Anderson’s role on The National Mustang Association of Colorado board meant she understood the differences in how wild horses are gathered and trained.

“At first, I didn’t know if it was just Marvel and that he was a unique horse,” Anderson says. “However, we’ve rounded up 20 more horses, and they all have the same demeanor as Marvel. I attribute that towards how they were captured and the positive reinforcement training.”

More than 55,000 Mustangs remain in holding facilities nationwide, with more horses rounded up from the wild than being adopted. New thinking about capture, treatment and training continue to emerge and offer hope to the future of wild horses — a future rooted in trust. 🐾

To learn more about Mustang Camp, visit [www.MustangCamp.org](http://www.MustangCamp.org) and [www.MagicMustangTamer.com](http://www.MagicMustangTamer.com).

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BONNIE ANDERSON

**TOP:** Bonnie Anderson adopted Marvel after following his story on Facebook and meeting him at the Four Corners Agricultural Exposition. Anderson later adopted Marvel’s half-brother Merlin.