

GHOST RIDERS

Wild horses rule the Ghost Forest of Alberta, Canada, descendants of ancient domesticated animals. Eleanor O'Hanlon saddled up to ride with them and discover their rich social lives.

Photos by JAMES ANDERSON



Rewilded horses form groups of females and young led by a herd matriarch and a dominant stallion – here, the black stallion with a flowing mane behind the central chestnut horse.

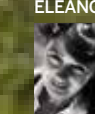
We may see wild horses any time now," Maureen Enns says. At that moment her chestnut mare, Hope, stops suddenly, ears pricked. I halt my gelding, Amigo, and we listen. Nothing stirs in the dappled green shade between the aspens, but Hope has clearly sensed something that we can't.

I hear a breathy 'huuf'. Among wild herds, that audible exhalation is a signal by the lead horse: *move*. Hope's tension slackens immediately and she walks forward without prompting, her long strides leading us still deeper into the forest. I follow on Amigo as the mare steps surely between beds of sphagnum moss and fallen aspens. We wind through dense stands of spruce and pine, so thickly clad with lichens that the trees glow grey-white among the shadows. They're visible reminders of the name given to this area of mixed marshland, lake and boreal forest on the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains in southern Alberta: the Ghost Forest.

"Hope is my teacher in the language of wild horses," Maureen had told me earlier. Raised among wild herds, the mare still responds to their cues. "One day, she stopped suddenly on the trail," Maureen recalls. "I trust her, so I froze, too. Then I saw the black hairs of a horse's tail flick briefly into the light. Wild horses had been there all along, standing very still in the shadows, and Hope was responding to the stallion's signal to the herd – an instruction to freeze."

THE AUTHOR

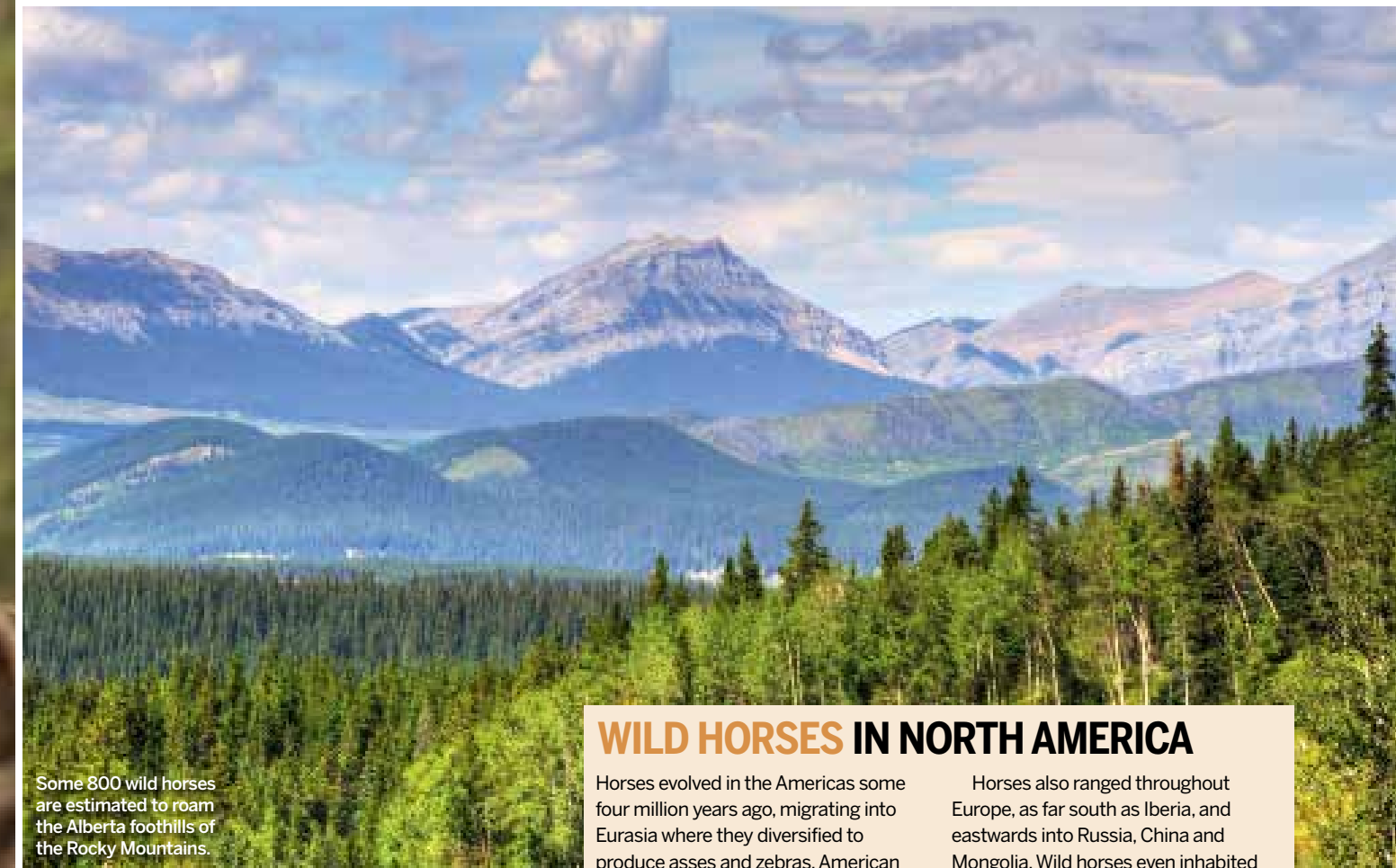
ELEANOR O'HANLON is a writer whose articles have appeared in magazines in Europe and North America. Her book *Eyes of the Wild* is out now.



Most foals are born in spring, and stay close to a mare of their family group when moving between feeding grounds.



Some 800 wild horses are estimated to roam the Alberta foothills of the Rocky Mountains.



THE STALLION'S FACE AND SIDES ARE SCORED WITH SCARS FROM BATTLES WITH STUDS EAGER TO CLAIM ONE OF HIS MARES FOR THEMSELVES.

That moment demonstrated how the wild horses of the Ghost Forest had learned to protect themselves by hiding like deer, standing motionless in the forest where tree trunks break up the animals' outlines. Such adaptations have helped the horses to survive for over 100 years in a habitat where they could avoid human contact, sharing their range instead with wolves, cougars and grizzly bears as well as other herbivores such as deer, moose and elk.

That moment sparked a determination in Maureen to learn more about these remarkable animals. She began to study them on horseback and on foot, installing a network of remote cameras to minimise the disturbance.

A wildlife artist whose work flows from her intense engagement with the natural world, Maureen has spent years in a remote part of Kamchatka, in the Russian Far East. There she raised orphan brown bear cubs, learning how to communicate with the bears directly so that she could live among them without fear. Maureen had believed that living in such wilderness for so long instilled in her an

open mind. Yet when she first came into contact with the wild horses, she realised that she saw these free-roaming creatures as domestic animals. "But as I watch the wild herds, I keep seeing things that completely shatter that preconception," she added.

When I first spoke to Maureen, she described the horses' rich social lives, the careful education of youngsters by the adults, the empathy and care she had witnessed among the wild herds. Seven years of study have convinced her that these horses are not simply domestic escapees – they have truly 'rewilded'.

I've loved horses all my life – and thought I knew them – but talking to Maureen exposed my limited understanding. So when she invited me to ride with her among the wild herd, I leapt at the opportunity.

MANE ATTRACTION

We glimpse them first through gaps between the aspens – glossy, dark-brown bodies on the marshland down by the lake. Six stallions are grazing among the sedges, their summer coats gleaming in the sunshine. They are sleek, muscled, fit – in the Darwinian sense, their beauty sculpted by natural selection. In this harsh mountain land, they face predators and winter temperatures plunging below -30°C .

As they approach sexual maturity – at about two years old – young males are driven from the family herd and join other stallions in bachelor bands, remaining with their male peers till they are mature enough to attract a mate and start a family of their own. Bachelor bands have a definite social structure. Young studs may spar playfully, testing

one another's strength and determination, but they cluster around a leader whose authority they recognise.

Isn't it dangerous to ride a mare around wild stallions? "I know from experience that I couldn't be safer," Maureen avers. "These wild stallions have been raised by the herd and taught to respect the mares. They may approach and look, but they won't come near if they're not invited."

We ride on through aspen stands and grassy clearings to a second lake set among sedge meadows, dwarf birch and bog willow. The forested slopes beyond rise to the snow-covered peaks and turrets of the Rockies, filling the horizon.

A family band of mares, foals, colts and fillies grazes at the far end of the lake. The head stallion feeds slightly apart from the group; he is lean, ribs distinct, his black face and sides scored with white scars from battles with other studs eager to claim one of his mares for themselves.

A solitary stallion, a glossy bay, grazes alone some 20m along the shore. The family's patriarch has positioned himself between this potential rival and his family, the mares and foals together behind him. Hidden among the trees, where we can watch without disturbing the horses, we prepare to dismount and tie up our mounts.

PRIMAL TEAM

As we stand quietly in the shadows, a wolf materialises from the trees. Maureen gasps as the lone, dark-grey predator stalks towards the horses. I focus my binoculars on the black stallion, expecting a tense encounter as he prepares to defend his family. But the wolf looks as relaxed as if it were out for a gentle afternoon stroll by

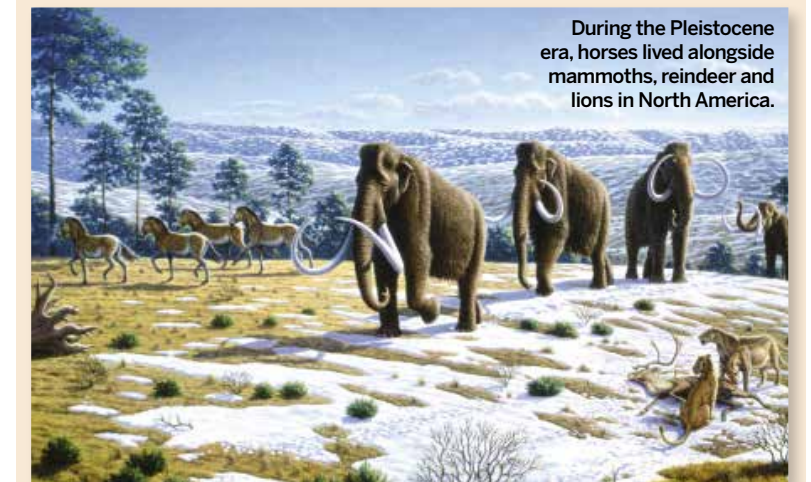
WILD HORSES IN NORTH AMERICA

Horses evolved in the Americas some four million years ago, migrating into Eurasia where they diversified to produce asses and zebras. American populations fluctuated with climatic shifts, sometimes becoming extinct and being restored by migrations across the land bridge linking Asia with modern-day Alaska. The fossil of an ancestral species *Equus lambei*, dated to 700,000BC, was found in the Yukon.

During the last glacial period, at least two subspecies of the modern horse *Equus caballus* grazed North America, alongside a variety of large mammals including the woolly mammoth. They died out about 11,000 years ago.

Horses also ranged throughout Europe, as far south as Iberia, and eastwards into Russia, China and Mongolia. Wild horses even inhabited the harsh tundra regions of northern Siberia, from the Yamal Peninsula to the Kolyma River in the far east.

Today, wild horses are recognised as native European wildlife, making a valuable contribution to ecological diversity and the rewilding of European landscapes. Konik horses, representatives of an ancient breed, have been released in the Netherlands, and the Rewilding Europe project released a group of Andalusian Retuerta horses in Spain in 2012.



During the Pleistocene era, horses lived alongside mammoths, reindeer and lions in North America.

The stallion's 'flehmen' grimace exposes the vomeronasal gland, enhancing the detection of female hormones and, thus, mares in oestrus.





The lead stallion nuzzles one of the mares in his harem, maintaining the band's cohesion.



Colts are driven from their group by the dominant stallion – witness the tuft of tail hairs in the older male's teeth.



Females (such as this filly) may leave the natal group of their own accord when they first come into oestrus at two or three years old.



THE INFORMATION

ALBERTA The eastern edge of the Rocky Mountains is an area of wild beauty, home to Canada's most iconic species.

THE NAVIGATOR



Jasper National Park

Extending north along the Rockies from Banff National Park, Jasper NP is home to about 200 woodland caribou, a rare subspecies – Alberta as a whole has a population of approximately 7,000.

Banff National Park

Canada's first (and the world's third) national park is a byword for magnificent mountain scenery. It's a hotspot for some of North America's most iconic mammals, including elk, caribou, and grizzly and black bears.

NOW YOU DO IT

GETTING THERE

► Airlines with direct flights from Heathrow to Calgary include **Air Canada** (0871 220 1111; www.aircanada.com) and **British Airways** (0844 493 0787; www.britishairways.com). Fares start at about £800 return.

interests and abilities. 00 1 403 949 3329; www.packtrips.ca
► **Sierra West Cabins & Ranch Vacations** is a working ranch offering riding and cattle drives. 00 1 403 628 2431; <http://sierrawestcabins.com>



GETTING AROUND

► The **Banff Airporter** bus serves Cochrane, Canmore and Banff from Calgary Airport. 00 1 403 762 3330; www.banffairporter.com

RIDING AND ACCOMMODATION

► **Wild Deuce** offers wilderness riding and trains horses according to the social bonds of the wild herds. 00 1 780 679 8451; <http://wilddeuce.com>
► **Moose Mountain Horseback Adventures** runs trips into the high country around the Ghost Forest, tailored to guests'

FURTHER READING

► **Online guide to Alberta** Practical tips, weather, wildlife and camp sites. www.travelalberta.co.uk
► **Western Canada** by Matthew Gardner and Alison Bigg (Footprint, ISBN 9781907263255).
► **Wild Horses, Wild Wolves: Legends at Risk at the Foot of the Canadian Rockies** (above) by Maureen Enns (Rocky Mountain Books, ISBN 9781927330234).

ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN HORSES AND WOLVES WERE COMMON ACROSS THE AMERICAN PLAINS FOR HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF YEARS.

the lake, and neither stallion – nor the mares or foals – shows any sign of anxiety.

"Incredible," Maureen mutters. "I'm so glad you're seeing this." She's witnessed this kind of easy co-existence between wolves and wild horses before. The wolves den in the forest above the lake, and Maureen has often watched the pups at play. A remote camera even caught images of a young wolf making advances towards a stallion, as though inviting it to come and play.

In seven years of research, Maureen has found horse hair in wolf scat only once, suggesting that the wolves prey mainly on deer, leaving the horse herds, with their strong social bonds and powerful lead stallions, well alone. The horses' main threat, she says, comes from cougars.

The wolf breaks into a buoyant trot, and vanishes into the dwarf birch bushes. The bay stallion raises his head from the sedges and decides to make his move. Visibly aroused, his smooth coat shining, the young stud is a magnificent sight as he paces towards the mares. The scarred black stallion looks less

impressive, but his response to this challenge is decisive. He lunges at the bay stud fiercely, forcing him to back off.

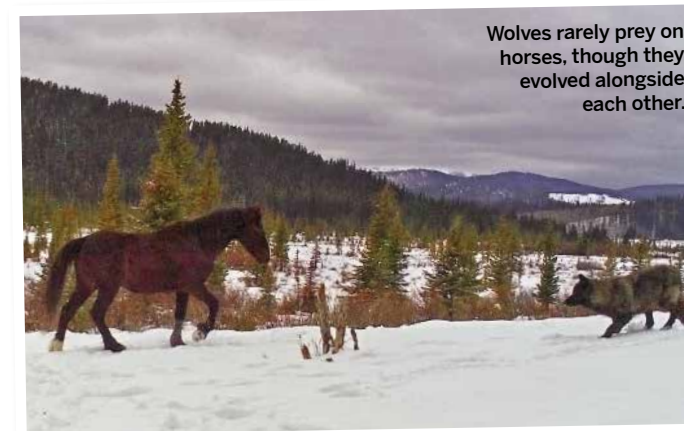
Encounters with wolves, like the one I witnessed, were common across the plains and steppe-tundra of North America for hundreds of thousands of years. It's often forgotten that modern horses co-evolved with the landscape, climate and wildlife of North America until about 11,000 years ago when, under pressure from human hunting and the rapidly changing climate, they vanished.

With the disappearance of the land bridge that had connected Alaska with northern Siberia, the continent could no longer be repopulated by horses from Eurasia, as had occurred after several previous extinctions. So horses were absent from the Americas till domesticated animals arrived with the Spanish conquistadors in the early 16th century. Some of those escaped, and others were deliberately turned loose. They spread across the continent with extraordinary speed and, within 150 years, several million horses roamed free across western North America.

CHALLENGING THE NEIGH-SAYERS

Today, some 33,000 horses roam public lands in the western USA, with a few thousand more in Canada, Alberta, British Columbia and on Sable Island, off the coast of Nova Scotia. Are these free-roaming herds truly wild? Or are they merely domestic escapees with no ecological niche or genuine connection to other species?

These are highly charged questions, and the answers are critical in determining how horses and their habitats are treated. Federal and state management agencies regard



Wolves rarely prey on horses, though they evolved alongside each other.

Cougar: Michael Durham/NPL; horse & wolf: Maureen Enns

horses as an intrusive, feral species and manage them accordingly. In the USA, wild horses are regularly removed from the range, many spending the rest of their lives in holding facilities. Canadian wild horses, too, have little real protection. The forests where they live may be clear-felled, the horses captured and sent for slaughter for meat.

Indeed, the Ghost Forest itself is under imminent threat: a great swath has been selected for clear-felling. If the horses lose their habitat, they will become more vulnerable to capture and slaughter – unless they can be given protection as part of the natural heritage of Alberta. This has already been accorded the wild horses of Sable Island, which were given the status of 'native wildlife' in 2012.

Her years of study have convinced Maureen that

the horses of the Ghost Forest deserve similar recognition. They are part of the ecological community, and their intelligence and power have been honed by the many challenges they face.

We leave the forest through the clearing above the lake, where the band of six bachelor stallions is still grazing. This time they spot us and, drawn by Maureen's elegant mare, they break into a canter and approach. The graceful motion of a horse is one of the wonders of the natural world, and these wild individuals move with a fluid, harmonious ease that is breathtakingly beautiful.

"Keep Amigo close to Hope," Maureen says, as the stallions enter the clearing and trot a half-circle behind us. If these were domestic stallions running loose, we would now be in real danger. They would

crowd and jostle the mare, trapping us in a melee of kicks and squeals. I tense, fearing Amigo might panic and bolt.

The energy of the horses' compulsion and the rapid rhythm of their strides fill the clearing. They halt for a moment to watch us through the tree trunks, then keep pace as we urge our horses forward, but never intrude on our space.

And that's how I see them last: all poised alertness, their dark heads raised, as they watch us from the aspen trees – wild creatures, fully at home in their own world, living free from the pressures of the human will. 🐾

FIND OUT MORE

See more dramatic photos of wild horses by James Anderson at www.discoverwildlife.com/wildlife-nature-photography/galleries