



# Ride with the Wild Ones

BY NICOLE CHESLOCK

I was ready for adventure – not the adrenaline-fueled whitewater rafting kind of Sierra adventure, but instead a taste of the “Old West,” a getaway to a bygone era and chance to connect with the past.

After hearing about a two-day trip on horseback surrounded by panoramic views and rugged landscape, I was hooked. Eager to soak in the allure of the American West, I gladly turned off my cellphone for 48 hours to experience a weekend trail ride with the Wild Horse Sanctuary in Shingletown.

#### *A chance to ride with Mustangs*

Located in the hills leading to Mount Lassen, the Sanctuary’s 5,000 acres include volcanic rock outcroppings, towering oaks and prairie grasses. Nearly 300 wild horses and burros roam free among other wildlife.

I relied on a brief introduction (I practiced a couple of “Whoas” while pulling back on the reins) and had faith that Pathfinder, my horse for the trail ride, would safely lead the way. Less than twenty minutes after leaving the corral, our group of eleven, including two volunteer guides, were on a trail worn into the ground by the rescued wild horses.

We passed between tall shrubs and over wild grasses and within minutes spotted a wild herd grazing a few hundred feet away and headed in their direction for a closer look. We watched as the stallion moved in to create a protective border between his mares and our group. After snapping a few pictures, we were off. Next sighting - a nearby family of burros. We saw a jack rabbit leaping as the Sanctuary’s dog named Prince bounded about. Over the next hour and a half we saw diverse herds of the magnificent wild horses – shiny coats the color of espresso, chestnut and milk chocolate with a few grey and black sprinkled in. Nearly every herd we encountered included a pony or two. All of the horses looked robust, healthy.

Before stopping for lunch under the shade of oak trees, a surprising hum from live power lines at least fifty feet above us was a reminder of the modern era. After lunch we began the climb to base camp. Loose rocks covered parts of the trail, the more adept riders maneuvered

Experience the spirit of the American West at the Wild Horse Sanctuary where nearly 300 horses roam free among mighty oaks, pine trees, native grasses and Manzanita  
photo by Katey Barrett



Two dozen of the horses that live on the Wild Horse Sanctuary are trained and suitable for the riding public. Proceeds from the Sanctuary's guided trail rides represent 50 percent of the organization's operating budget, and the funds support feed for the horses. In addition to a hearty barbecue dinner cooked over an open flame and homemade morning biscuits served with scrambled eggs, potatoes and gravy for a fulfilling breakfast, the trip offers friends, couples and families a chance to slow down, take in the scenery of the western landscape and simply be immersed in a quieter time.

**Rustic cabins and a magnificent outdoor fire pit are a welcome sight after a day riding** photo by Nicole Cheslock



around low tree limbs and we all kicked back upon arriving at base camp - an ideal place for relaxing. Cold beers and homemade margaritas greeted us. We saw quail, heard owls and watched as different herds came to camp for fresh hay and to step into Vernal Lake.

With frontier style sleeping cabins, a gorgeous huge fire pit where the evening's meal was grilled and a full kitchen cabin complete with wood burning stove, the volunteer guides and their families prepared meals for the group.

**Truckee resident Anne-Marie Giese gets acquainted with horse at the corral where riders meet their horses** photo by Nicole Cheslock  
**(left) A pathfinder is one who leads the way on a trail; for Native Americans, pathfinder has spiritual meaning — one who chooses the path and defines the kind of year a tribe will have**





### *Honoring the Mustangs*

“We’ve come a long way and it’s because people care,” explains Dianne Nelson, who rescued 80 horses in the late 1970s, and incorporated and founded the Wild Horse Sanctuary in its current location in 1983, thirty years ago. “We have a great team of volunteers. Together it is amazing what we can accomplish.”

The trail ride season begins in early May and ends in mid-October. The Wild Horse Sanctuary does more than offer a refuge for mustangs. Nelson and her volunteers offer a chance to experience living history.

If nothing is done to protect the wild horses, conservationists warn they will no longer exist. Just last fall The Atlantic published Andrew Cohen’s “Are We Leading Our Wild Horses to Slaughter?” where he explains, “The horses cost us practically nothing when they are left alone in the wild. They cost a fortune to trap and hold. And they are being rounded up at a rate much greater than the rate they can be adopted out, even to genuine horse lovers who have the time and space to give them a home. Today in America, there are perhaps 20,000 more wild horses in domestic pens than there are out on the rangeland.”

“To the people of America, Mustangs represent the kind of freedom we were founded on,” declared Wild Horse Annie, who led the movement to legislate the protection, management and control of free-roaming horses and burros on public lands more than fifty years ago.

The Sanctuary and other harbors for wild horses and burros help but the number of horses in the wild continue to exceed the number of adoptions.

One way to experience a little piece of a bygone era is tapping your inner cowgirl or cowboy during one of the sanctuary’s many summer trail rides. <sup>SH</sup>

**Mare and foal walk through field of wildflowers at Wild Horse Sanctuary** photo by Katey Barrett



### Wild Horse Sanctuary

5796 Wilson Hill Road, Shingletown, CA

Trail Rides are offered Aug. 31-Sept. 2, Sept. 7-8, Sept. 14-15, Sept. 21-22, Oct. 5-6 and Oct. 12-14. The cost is \$535 per person for three-day trips, \$435 per person for two-day trips.

More information is available at [www.wildhorsesanctuary.org](http://www.wildhorsesanctuary.org) or (530) 474-5770

### *Pathfinder's Story*

Twenty years ago Dianne Nelson, the co-founder of the Wild Horse Sanctuary, received a call from her daughter Tara. A scrappy looking black mare named Asia that Tara had picked up in Paso Robles a few years back was leaning against a horse trailer just outside her home, about two miles from the Sanctuary's base camp. Asia had brought her dark chestnut progeny, a little pony, to safety before dying in front of Tara.

Dianne drove home with the orphan in her lap and bottle-fed him to health. What would they name Asia's colt? Asia Minor and Asia's Gift were a couple of the names that emerged from a name the foal contest but it was "Pathfinder," a name submitted by a Native American woman from Los Angeles that stuck. Not just because a pathfinder is one who leads the way on a trail but also because Pathfinder has spiritual meaning: one who chooses the path and defines the kind of year a tribe will have. Each horse at the sanctuary has his or her own story and collectively they represent the freedom of the American West.

**Two stallions square off at the Wild Horse Sanctuary** photo by Katey Barrett