

## Love What You Love Podcast

### Episode 47: Wild Horses with Heather Hellyer

#### September 7, 2021

Welcome to *Love What You Love*; I'm Julie Rose. I'm insatiably curious about people and the world around us, and absolutely in love with passion and unselfconscious enthusiasm. Every other week I geek out with someone about the thing that they love, and then I share it with you.

Welcome back! Or, Welcome! I'm so excited that episode 50 is coming up soon! It's just incredible. If you have any questions about the show so far, if you want an update on any of our guests, have ideas or suggestions, or any questions for me, drop me an email at [LoveWhatYouLove@gmail.com](mailto:LoveWhatYouLove@gmail.com) or DM me on Instagram [@LoveWhatYouLovePod](https://www.instagram.com/LoveWhatYouLovePod).

Also, I would love to know what you think about *Love What You Love* and about your podcast listening habits in general. I would really appreciate it if you could take five minutes to complete a really quick survey at [bit.ly/LWYL2021survey](https://bit.ly/LWYL2021survey). I will, of course, put a link to that in the show notes. For every survey response, I will make a donation to the Humane Society, so don't let the critters down. The survey will be open until September 21st.

Okay, let's get onto this week's show. It goes without saying that the pandemic has fundamentally changed our lives, often in pretty horrible ways. Sometimes in beautiful ways, and for a few, in transcendent and transformative ways.

Heather Hellyer and her husband were on a long RV trip when the pandemic hit and national parks closed down. Looking for something to do, Heather found a nearby herd of wild horses, and a deep, consuming passion was born. Heather chatted with me from her RV in Cody, Wyoming, and we talk wild horses' and burros' importance in the ecosystem, the decimation of herd management areas, why you might want to rethink eating that hamburger, which organizations are doing the best work in saving wild horses and burros, where her heart is most at peace, and so much more.

So find out why Heather loves wild horses and why you might learn to love them, too.

---

**Julie:** Hey, Heather! Thank you so much for joining me today.

**Heather:** Thank you for having me.

**Julie:** I'm very excited to talk with you. I just finished reading a book called *You Belong Here Now* by my friend Dianna, and a big part of that book is wild horses. And she said, "You've got to talk with Heather about wild horses!" And I said, "Yes I do! Absolutely!"

So, you go around the country and photograph wild horses. When did you get started with that and what started it?

**Heather:** Yes, so about 18 months ago, my husband and I set out on a full-time RV trip. We had sold our house and purchased a motorhome, and the intent was to visit as many national parks as we could. Right about the time we left on our trip is about the time the country started shutting down due to the pandemic. And we were sitting in Cortez, Colorado, right across the street from Mesa Verde National Park, waiting for it to reopen.

I like to photograph, so I googled 'things to do around Cortez, Colorado' and one of the things that came up was the Spring Creek Basin wild horse herd. So, I made the

70-mile drive out there, and found some horses, and photographed them, and instantly fell in love.

What started out as a trip to visit our national parks then turned into a trip to “how many wild horse herds can I go find and photograph?” And that was when I started immersing myself into the wild horse and burro situation in our country.

**Julie:** So maybe you can tell our listeners a little bit about that situation. What’s going on there?

**Heather:** Wild horses have been in our country for hundreds of years. They were brought over by the Spanish way back when; they’ve been released into the wild by the Spanish, by ranchers, by people who just didn’t want them hundreds of years ago. Many people would consider the wild horses to be feral. Sure, the ones that they initially let go might’ve been feral, but when an animal is born in the wild it is then considered to be a wild animal. So, the wild horse herds all consist of wild animals that were born in the wild and that are living free in the wild.

1972, some new legislation came about that was really placed into action by a woman named Velma Johnston, aka Wild Horse Annie. And she started a letter-writing campaign, using school children, to send in thousands of letters to the government and to President Nixon. It took years, and years, and years but they finally got new legislation enacted in 1972 which is called the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1972. And when Richard Nixon signed this act, he used Henry David Thoreau’s quote, which is, “We need the tonic of wildness.” So, he understood when he signed that act that we needed wild horses in this country. This country was created on the backs of wild horses and they needed to be protected.

And at that time, the task of protecting the land that the horses were on and the horses themselves was given to the Bureau of Land Management, which I will be calling the BLM throughout our conversation. So, at that time when that act was signed, there were actually 339 herd management areas, known as HMAs, that were spread out across 53.8 million acres of our public lands here in the West. Today, there are less than 170 of those herd management areas on less than 26.9 million acres. So, cut in half and reducing every year.

So, the BLM, the Bureau of Land Management conducts roundups of our wild horses and zeros out these herd management areas every year. In fact, there are currently seven listed on the BLM website that are zeroed out and there are 43 of the HMAs that have less than 50 horses on them, which is not a genetically viable number, so those herds will be left to, sort of, fizzle out on their own, for lack of a better word.

**Julie:** So, why is this happening even with this law passed back in 1972?

**Heather:** Right, so the number one main reason is cattle and cattle ranchers, followed by mining, natural gas, and oil. These industries are allowed to go into the herd management areas and use the land for their own purposes; cattle probably being the number one worst enemy of wild horses. There’s so many different stories out there about, you know, “Who’s more destructive, cattle or horses?” I can tell you it’s cattle just from what I’ve seen when I go out. And the ranchers, basically, they just want the land, and the food, and the water for themselves.

So, for the most part, it is the ranchers who are working with the BLM and saying, “We want these horses removed so that we can have the land for our cattle.” And 100% of

the time, when wild horses are removed from an area, they are replaced with cattle and sheep. And not just a few cattle and sheep, but thousands of cattle and sheep.

**Julie:** And when horses are removed, are they relocated? Or are they *removed*?

**Heather:** So, they are removed. Generally what happens is... The Bureau of Land Management has two ways of rounding up our wild horses and burros. I should include burros in this because they're part of the act and they're just as important. So, they will do either a bait-and-trap removal where they put up a pen and they pull the horses in using water or food. The gate closes behind them, and they gather up the horses that way. That is generally done in an area where there's just a few horses or in an area that may be too dangerous to chase them with a helicopter.

So, helicopters are the number one way the Bureau of Land Management likes to round up our horses and burros. They will go out to an area, set up a trap with, sort of, a funnel fencing that leads into a corral, and the helicopter will go out and search for the horses, and then chase them for miles and sometimes hours over terrain to get them into this trap. And that is how the majority of our wild horses are rounded up.

Once they're rounded up, the stallions are separated from their family bands. The mares with young foals are separated and horses of a better age are separated; a more adoptable age of, say, between three and ten. And they're separated, and they're all shipped off in stock trailers in different directions to different holding areas where the stallions are gelded so they can no longer reproduce. The mares with the young foals are kept until the foals are old enough to wean, which the BLM considers to be somewhere between four and six months, and then they are separated.

They are freeze-branded on their necks. The freeze brand includes the date of the roundup and where they were rounded up from. And they are microchipped now so the BLM can, supposedly, try to keep track of the horses. And then they're given their shots, and their wormers, and so forth.

Many of the horses are then put up for adoption, and some will be adopted out by people who want to train the horses. There's several programs that will adopt them; TIP Programs, mustang makeover programs, people in general who have spent time with a certain herd will then try to go adopt their favorite horses from that herd. Horses that are paint colors, interesting colors, those horses are, obviously, adopted first.

What people would call a plain brown horse, they don't tend to get adopted as often because they're not considered as flashy and colorful, so those horses will sometimes go through many auctions, being shipped all over the country. And if they don't get adopted, they're considered a three-striker, and they're put into a long-term holding pen where they will live out the rest of their lives.

And more often than not, that long-term holding pen is not a green, grassy pasture over hundreds of acres. It's literally a corral where the horses will just... I read recently that there was a rancher in Utah who had put in a bid to become a long-term holding pen and he was going to put 1,000 horses on 20 acres.

**Julie:** Oh my god!

**Heather:** Those horses will never be able to run again with freedom. Their manes will never flow in the wind. They're never going to see their family bands that they were last with on the range and torn apart from ever again. So, once the stallions are gelded, the geldings are then all kept together. They are never reunited with mares or foals ever

again. So when you see a long-term holding pasture, chances are it's either a bunch of geldings now living together or a bunch of mares now living together.

**Julie:** When we look at the environment when there's a herd of wild horses versus, you know, cattle or sheep, are there ecological benefits to keeping the horses on the land?

**Heather:** Absolutely. I can go out to a wild horse herd management area, and I've been to over 27 now, and every single one of those herd management areas has had cattle on it or sheep. And I can be driving down the road and immediately tell where the cattle have been dropped off. And when I say dropped off, the rancher will take their cattle or sheep out in a trailer and drop them off with a water trough. So, cattle and sheep tend to stay close to that water trough, and you can just see the decimation.

The native plants and grasses have been either eaten or trampled right down to the ground so that all that is left is dirt. The native sagebrush or the trees have been damaged and often there's just broken branches or broken bushes all over the ground. And where the water trough was sitting will just be a huge, big circle of dirt. Not just where the trough itself was sitting, but all around it because the cattle stay near their trough most of the day. So, it's quite obvious to see.

If you go out to an HMA where there's wild horses, in an area where the cattle or sheep have not been dropped off, you will see grasses. There will be a water pond, and even within the water pond area, there will be grasses nearby because horses tend to go to their water pond twice a day; generally in the morning and in the afternoon some time. They will go in, have a quick drink for a minute or two, perhaps say hi to each other, which I've seen bands do, and then go back out on the range again.

So, they're not trampling an area down to a certain point. And wild horses, HMAs I go out to, you can see these well-worn paths that the horses have used for decades. They're deep, they're in the ground, but they will use those paths to travel from one area to another so they are not trampling everything in between.

**Julie:** So how is it that these ranchers and other folks can get onto BLM land? Do they pay fees? How are they getting around the law?

**Heather:** So, they do pay fees. They pay \$1.35 a month for a cow-calf pair or five sheep. \$1.35; that is it. So, they are not required to... In the West, they are not required to keep the cattle on their own property, whereas on the East Coast, where things are far more lush and green, ranchers keep their cattle on their own property and feed them there. But in the ten Western states, the ranchers pay \$1.35 a month to put their cattle or five sheep out on our public lands.

**Julie:** So these are public lands that are being turned over and decimated for pennies.

**Heather:** Absolutely, yep. And decimated is a good word and turned over is a good word. So, the Bureau of Land Management, quite obviously, has verbal agreements in place with ranchers... And you know, there are grazing permits, so the ranchers do need to have a permit to go out and do this, and they are allocated so many cattle or sheep when they take them out. But nobody's actually out there counting them. So, we estimate there's far more than the number of cattle and sheep that are allowed in these areas.

Also, these areas... You know, wild horses are quite amazing. You can go out to a herd management area, and look around, and think to yourself, "What are these horses eating?" because there's not much green grass. I mean, they've been designated to, really, desert type areas that will get some monsoonal rains, they may get a bit of snow

in the winter, but it is amazing to go out and see these horses who are surviving on these desert grasses, who are healthy and robust. They are not skinny. They are not dropping dead from starvation or lack of water. They are healthy and thriving on lands.

Cattle eat ten times more forage per day than horses do. So, I have been out to many herd management areas and just public lands where horses are not, and I've seen cattle grazing in the desert. There are cattle that are dying with their stomachs filled with sand. I've seen dead cattle laying out in these areas. There's just a huge difference between what the horses can do and what the cattle can do.

Horses, if you go out and sit with wild horses while they're grazing, you can hear them nipping off the grasses. You can hear the grasses tearing and they're eating. Whereas cattle, and especially sheep, tend to pull up the entire plant by the root in many cases. And that's one reason why they're far more destructive. Cattle also drink three times more water per day than horses do.

So, one thing that will happen is that the ranchers will take their cattle and sheep out earlier in the year when the water ponds are full and the cattle will just decimate the water ponds. They'll drink them down to practically nothing. And I've seen cattle in water ponds pooping and peeing, for lack of better words. Horses don't do that. Horses don't make their water dirty by peeing in it. It's just such a big difference between the two animals.

**Julie:** This is primarily a Western thing just because there's more open, available land?

**Heather:** That is correct. This is primarily a Western thing. There are no BLM-managed herds on the East Coast, it's just your ten Western states.

**Julie:** Okay, and it's a uniquely American thing, right?

**Heather:** Australia has the brumbies, which are also facing their own plight, and there are some... Kudos to England because they are actually rewilding some of their horses. So, there are some smaller, you know, wild pony and horse herds in England. And England and some other countries in Europe have learned that wild horses are extremely beneficial when it comes to fighting wildfires. They can keep the forage down to a level where it prevents the forest fires from getting so big.

Cattle, on the other hand, promote and encourage the growth of something called cheatgrass, which they will not eat past a certain point. The cheatgrass grows really big, sort of like a tumbleweed-type plant, and then it dries out and becomes extremely flammable.

**Julie:** And it's got to be terrible for the topsoil, too.

**Heather:** Absolutely. [laughs] That's something else I find often when I go out and I take photos and videos of. A cow pie, cow manure... when cows go, it splats into a big pile, and they keep talking as they go, generally. So you end up with this long line of manure. And those cow pies, once they dry, it's hard like concrete. It's really hard to break them up. I can stomp on one with my foot and it will not break up very easily. And if I turned it over, there's nothing growing underneath it. It's just simply dirt.

Horses, on the other hand, their manure is individual pieces in a pile, and it's much more airy, and it actually can act as a benefit to the land, and I can see grasses and things growing out from under it.

**Julie:** Let's go back to that first experience you had near Mesa Verde. What did you see, what were you feeling, and what was the thunderbolt moment for you when you were out doing that?

**Heather:** So, I have always loved horses. I had horses for a while, way back when. I'd done drawings of horses when I was little. I mean, horses have always been on my mind. But when I drove out into the middle of nowhere, by myself, looking for these horses, I went through the first fence line and there was actually a sign at this HMA, if I remember correctly, that said "Wild Horse Area" or something to that effect. Many of them don't have those signs so you don't actually know if you're there or not. But this one did, and I drove, and drove, and drove... I found these really large horse manure piles along the road, and because I was new to wild horses... Just 18 months ago, I had no idea what these huge piles of horse manure were in the road. I actually wondered if somebody wasn't raking it up and putting it into piles for some reason. When in fact, they're actually called stud piles.

So, wild horse stallions, whenever they cross these piles, will add to the top of the pile to let the other stallions know that they've been there. So, that was intriguing. But I kept driving and driving down these dusty roads, and the first horse that I saw was this old, tri-colored stallion, and he was standing near a really old corral that had mostly fallen down. He had a branch stuck in his hair, his hair was all tangled, he had mud on his body. These are things you can't see in domestic horses. So, to go out and see these wild horses who are truly wild... They've never been touched by the human hand, they've never had a brush, their manes are just... Their manes are really what gets me. They get these weeds tangled up in their manes.

They get what some people call fairy knots or wind knots, where the mane just tangles itself and becomes wrapped up, and oftentimes it looks like an ombré hair color job because... if they've got black and white or brown and white manes, you've got these different colors that are wound up in these knots that can be really long. I've seen some mares with wind knots down to their knees. They're just gorgeous. Just to see that wildness... Knowing I can't get close to them is fine, but just being able to see that they're actually living truly wild and free, that was what really got into me.

**Julie:** So what is it about the wildness and seeing them in that way that appealed to you so much?

**Heather:** I often say it is still just the difference between a wild horse and a domestic horse, because if you drive by a pasture of domestic horses, you know, they're feeding and they're resting. Feeding, and resting, feeding, and resting. But when you go out to spend time with wild horses... The third herd that I went and saw after that was Sand Wash Basin. But the herd that really got me shortly thereafter was the McCullough Peaks herd here in Cody, Wyoming, where I'm at right now.

My husband and I went out and found a water hole. And we would go out at the time that the horses would come to the water hole. And it's so interesting because these different bands will come in... You might see a larger herd of horses. It's still not one big band. There's generally several small bands within a herd of horses, and a band will consist of a stallion and his mares, perhaps their foals if they have any, and then maybe older, two-or-three-year-old colts and fillies if they still have them, and then perhaps a lieutenant stallion or two, which helps the primary stallion protect his band.

These bands will all come in from different directions, and they have a pecking order at the water hole. So, certain bands get to go in and drink first, and then they'll move away and the other bands will come in. But the horses will leave their bands and go over and greet other bands. I can only assume... I've seen horses that appear to be brothers, or you know, mom and daughter, who will go over and greet each other, and then go back to their respective band. But then it's the action between the stallions that really pulls people in.

So, those photographs that you see of the horses rearing at each other and kicking at each other, those are the ones that draw you in. Sometimes they're doing it playfully, just to play and hone up their skills, and other times they're doing it to protect their band from a stallion who wants to steal a mare. Just sitting there and watching all of that action, knowing that is something you can never see in a domestic horse situation, that is, to me, one of the true definitions of wildness.

**Julie:** Are the horses in these BLM herds... Are they all the same type of horse?

**Heather:** So, when the Spanish brought horses over many, many years ago, they brought horses with Spanish ancestry in them. And there are still some herds out there today that are still, you know, direct Spanish ancestry. So, the Sulphur herd in Utah have very distinct markings of stripings of their legs and a dorsal stripe down their backs, and they're just gorgeous. They're not palomino but they're sort of a light palomino color but with a black mane and tail, a black dorsal stripe, black stripes on those legs.

In Arizona there is a herd called the Cerbat herd, and they are more of a chestnutty, bright-red color, but very distinct facial features and very distinct body types. So, some of them still have that direct DNA. Other herds are made up of all sorts of horses; horses that the ranchers and the military let go hundreds of years ago, so it could be Standardbreds, or drafts, or... And they're sort of all mingled in together.

**Julie:** In terms of burros, are those herds also near the wild horses? Are they completely different types of areas? What's going on with the burros?

**Heather:** Usually, the burros have their own herd management areas. I'm honestly not 100% sure if there's anywhere they're actually shared. In Utah, there's two that are right next to each other but separated by a fence line. The Sinbad burro herd and the Muddy Creek wild horse herd, both of which are being decimated by the Bureau of Land Management. In fact, the Bureau of Land Management recently announced that they are going to go out and finish zeroing out the Sinbad burro herd.

Burros are also extremely important to an ecosystem. In many ways as a beaver is important to an ecosystem, helping to create ponds and water sources for wildlife and plants, so do burros. They will dig wells with their feet, providing water to other wildlife and to the nearby plant life. So, they're essential.

I did go out to see those two herds earlier this year, and I drove all around the Sinbad burro HMA a couple of times, and at most found eight to nine burros. There were cattle troughs out there from the ranchers going out that were empty. So, the Bureau of Land Management and the cattle ranchers will provide water to the cattle when they're out there if the ponds are all dried up, but once those cattle are removed and shipped to slaughter, then the water troughs are turned off, and they literally will pull the plug on them and empty them out, just so the burros and horses cannot use them.

**Julie:** And the burros, are they more the result of, like, being let go after mining operations, like Gold Rush kind of stuff?

**Heather:** Very well could be. I'll be honest with you, I'm not quite as familiar with the burro situation. But 100% that makes sense. I mean, they've been out there living wild and free for hundreds of years just as the wild horses have and they've created the same type of tight family bonds that the wild horses do.

**Julie:** So you said that the drive to protect wild horses culminated in this 1972 law. What was the drive behind that? Was there something going on that caused her to want to save all these wild horses?

**Heather:** Absolutely. Velma Johnston, aka Wild Horse Annie, was driving down a highway in Nevada one day, I believe, and she had a stock trailer in front of her that had blood coming out of it. And she discovered that it was filled with wild horses.

**Julie:** Oh my god.

**Heather:** So, the moment she saw that, she got involved in the situation. Back in those days, back in the '50s and '60s, people could go out and round up wild horses using any means necessary, using any amount of cruelty necessary. They would round them up and more than likely those horses were being slaughtered in this country for dog food. So, that was when she got involved.

It just goes to show you... and also goes to show you just how long we've been in this fight. I mean, I think she's the first person to really bring awareness to the issue. Look how many decades now that we've been in this fight.

**Julie:** Wild horses have been here as long as this country has been a country. Have they always been subject to these kinds of roundups?

**Heather:** I would have to say yes, just in different manners. The way that they would round them up before the 1970s was just in a cruel way where, you know, they'd go out and they'd lasso them, and do it that way. These days, with the way they're being chased by the helicopters, it's just no different. But these horses have never had a break. Remember at the beginning I told you there were 339 HMAs back in 1972 and now there's less than 170. So, horse herds are subject to roundups every year. Not every herd every year, but there's never a year that goes by when these herds are not being decimated to very low numbers or zeroed out altogether.

**Julie:** Is there a reason they're not protected? For a long time, wolves were looked at as predatory and "we don't want them killing our herds," but now wolves are being more protected. Is there a reason that horses aren't getting afforded that same protection?

**Heather:** It's the same reason the wolves actually got delisted from the protected species or Endangered Species Act a couple years ago, right? And wolves are now being decimated in Montana, Idaho, Washington, Oregon, Wyoming. It all comes down to money, and quite frankly, all comes down to the cattle industry. Whole packs of wolves are being killed when the ranchers will graze their cattle on public lands, and a cow will get killed by a wolf pack. The cattle rancher will then go to the Bureau of Land Management and say, "My cattle are being killed. I don't want to take any other means to protect them. I need you to go out and shoot the wolf pack." So, they'll do that. They'll go out with a helicopter and their guns and they'll shoot the wolf pack from the

air just like they did with... They recently killed two or three three-month-old wolf pups in the state of Oregon, I think it was, from the air.

So, it's the same thing with the horses. The number one reason that we are losing our wild horses and burros, and our wildlife, is because of the cattle industry. It is a selfish, greedy need that the ranchers want all the land, and the forage, and the water for themselves. So, my passion with wild horses and burros and needing to protect them also spreads to trying to protect our public lands from the decimation of the cattle and trying to protect our wildlife. Because when you go out to an HMA, there's so little other wildlife out there where cattle have been present. We're losing our elk populations, our deer populations. All of the predator animals, the coyotes, the wolves, the mountain lions, are all being killed where cattle are kept so that the cattle are not in danger.

These ranchers could do other things to help protect their cattle, and I'll say that burros are actually one of them. Burros are an extremely protective animal, and if these ranchers would just add two or three burros to their cattle herd, the burros would actually help protect the cattle herd from predators. They can put up fencing and put things on the fencing that will deter the wolves, but they choose not to. So, the number one reason our wildlife, and our horses, and our burros are rounded up consistently, every year, year after year, is because the ranchers want the land for themselves.

Or maybe the oil industry will come in and the BLM will use that as an excuse to remove the wild horses. I went to a herd management area in Wyoming called Muskrat Basin. There were oil wells everywhere. There were major roads put in through the land so the trucks for the oil and the ranchers could get in and out. Very few wild horses, but cattle everywhere.

There's no reason why the wild horses can't live at an HMA where there's natural gas lines, which there are in almost every HMA, and where there's oil wells. No reason why they can't stay out there. They don't bother those things at all. And for them to say that the horses are in the way is just, quite frankly, ridiculous, because every time they remove the horses they're replaced with cattle, and thousands more cattle than horses that were out there.

**Julie:** Has this become your full-time thing?

**Heather:** You know, honestly, it has. I mean, I knew before 18 months ago that there were wild horses somewhere, but I didn't know anything about it. And in the last 18 months I have immersed myself in this so much, and I have learned so much, that yes, I mean, I pretty much... Every day I'm doing something. Whether it's making graphics, asking people to contact President Biden or Secretary of the Interior Haaland. I'm encouraging people to request phone meetings with their senators and congresspeople, which are a really useful way to help get your point across.

Everybody thinks that all of our legislators and people in government know what is going on in our public lands, and I guarantee you that most of them do not know what is actually going on out here. And I often say, if I could rent a couple school busses and put every senator and congressperson in those school busses, and take them out, and show them what is going on, I would do that in a second.

So yeah, I spend my time encouraging people to take action. I do photography while I'm out there. I've started a photography page, but it's not my primary focus. My

primary focus is to use the photographs to help bring attention to these gorgeous animals.

And again, just going out there and watching these tight family bands they have, going to a herd management area... I visited one in Utah called Conger, which, ironically enough, the Bureau of Land Management recently held a trail ride and they labeled it as "Come take a ride and see our wild horses." Yet, the Conger herd is set to be rounded up again the first week of August. So, it's on the schedule. And these are beautiful, gorgeous horses. They've got these silver-white paints out there that are just absolutely stunning.

And when I saw that poster I said to myself, "What are they going to do when they've rounded up and removed all the wild horses from Conger?" which by the way, there were cattle grazing out there when I was there. Are they going to say, "Come on a trail ride where wild horses used to be"? Honestly? I mean... It just doesn't make any sense to me.

Human beings, they really do want to go see wildlife. Look how many people visit Yellowstone every year because there are animals at Yellowstone that are very difficult to see in other places. That's why Yellowstone is so busy. Sure, the geysers and everything are great, but the other thing people want to see when they go there are the bison, and the grizzly bears, and the black bears, and the elk, you know? So, we need this wildness.

We don't want, in another couple generations from now, our children and grandchildren saying, "Look, there's wildlife..." and that wildlife is cattle. That's where we're headed. If we don't start protecting this land, and protecting our wildlife, and protecting our wild horses - which truly are icons of the American West; look how much they've done for us - we're going to lose that.

**Julie:** Just from a psychological or spiritual point of view, what do wild horses represent? What is it about them that... I mean, besides the benefits to the land and just doing the right thing, what do they represent for you?

**Heather:** I can go out and... either looking for a new herd or going back out to a herd I've already visited, and I can be out there for eight or ten hours, and I'm not tired, I'm not hungry, I'm not thirsty. Nothing hurts, and my heart is at peace. I don't know what it is about the wild horses, but I think many of us wild horse photographers and people who work so hard for them, we all just sort of get that there really is just something truly calming... Even with all the action that sometimes goes on between the bands, there's just something truly calming about being out there with them.

If you go out and look for bears, you might find a bear, or maybe a female bear with a couple cubs, but you'll never find a group of bears hanging out together, and the dynamics between wild horses is just so much more interesting than it is even with, say, a herd of elk (which, I treasure when I see a herd of elk). But watching the horses actually interacting with each other, and even if you see two younger, bachelor stallions who don't have bands of their own, the bonds that those two horses share is just something else. I've seen where just two bachelor stallions, or even a mare and her two-or-three-year-old daughter, they're never more than ten feet from each other. They graze near each other; they rest their heads on each other.

And to go out and spend time with these horses... I don't know if you've heard about the Onaqui herd that was just rounded up about a month ago. I was out there visiting

them for the first time and I wish I had been able to get out there before then, but I was out there probably a month before they were rounded up. And I've got these fantastic pictures of these horses who are just so closely knit with each other, and to watch them, look at them, and know that just a few weeks after I left that they were going to be chased by a helicopter into a trap, separated from each other, never to see each other again, would just bring tears.

And I know I'm not the only one, but I would just go out there and whisper to them, "When you hear the helicopters, run for the hills." And that's how protective we feel about these horses. It might be slightly different if these horses needed to be removed because they were actually starving to death, which they're not. And maybe if the bands were removed as a whole and taken to a new location to still continue living together, then it might be different. We might possibly agree with what is happening to a certain extent. But just knowing that these...

The Onaqui have got this beautiful photo of this mare with her tiny little foal. It was a tiny little foal at the time; couldn't have been more than a week old. I cannot remember her name at the moment and shame on me for that, but she took her head and, you know, kept it bent over the foal's head. You could tell just how much she loved that little foal. And I found out yesterday that not only was she rounded up, but she was not part of some of the horses that were returned to the range.

What that tells me is that right now she's standing in a holding pen with this cute little foal, and when that foal becomes four to six months old, the BLM is going to rip that foal away from her and she's never going to see that foal again. So, thinking about those tight bonds is just so heartbreaking and it's what we fight for.

**Julie:** So what organizations are doing the best work around this subject?

**Heather:** I'm going to be honest with you here, and some people might get a little upset with me for saying this, but there are so many wild horse organizations out there. Some of them entered the fray with the best of intentions, but unfortunately, money has... The amount of donations they take in has sort of swayed them a little bit from doing what's best for the horses. Wild Horse Education is a good one. They like to bring lots of really good lawsuits, and they have managed to get some really positive things done with abuse towards the horses during the roundups.

Honestly, I focus more of my attention toward some sanctuaries because at the moment it's just going to be a really difficult job to get enough of us to pull together as a cohesive force to stop these roundups from actually happening. People need to go outside of their comfort zones and actually handwrite letters and make phone calls.

A lot of people look at these senators or congresspeople and think, "Oh my goodness, I could never call and speak with that person." But you know what? They're just a person. Being a senator or congressperson is just their job. It's just like a Hollywood star. Would I have a problem calling up, I don't know, Brad Pitt or Leonardo DiCaprio, and having a discussion with them about wild horses and how they could help? Absolutely not. But so many people are intimidated by it that they just have a hard time coming out of their shell and taking those extra steps. So, until we can actually get, you know, the law changed or get the BLM to actually follow the law and protect these horses instead of decimating them, the sanctuaries are sort of the saviors of the horses right now.

So, Skydog Ranch in Oregon, they rescue wild horses who are not only sitting in auction pens who may be headed for slaughter, which is a whole other story, but they've also been fortunate to be able to reunite several wild horse bands who got shipped off in different directions, perhaps were adopted by somebody, but then were able to get in touch with that person, or that person got in touch with them, and they've been able to reunite bands together so they will now live out their family band life at Skydog Sanctuary.

Evanescent Mustang Rescue, kudos to them. They are boots on the ground nearly every day, pulling our wild horses from auction pens so they are not sold to a kill buyer and shipped to slaughter in either Mexico or Canada.

And then one of my other favorites is the Serengeti Foundation. They have two wild horse rescue sanctuaries. One of them is actually right next door to the Spring Creek Basin herd in Colorado, the first one I visited, called Disappointment Valley Sanctuary. And the other one is called Engler Canyon Ranch in southern Colorado. They've got something like 20,000 acres; 10,000 of which are fenced and they were able to pull in, I think, nearly 140 wild horses. Initially, they took a group of about 100 who were considered three-strikers, those so-called plain brown horses that nobody wanted, and they opened up the doors to the trailer and they let 'em go.

Those horses are rewilded on 10,000 acres. So, they're currently looking for donations to finish fencing the other 10,000 acres so they can, you know, maybe not only help rescue some Onaqui family bands together but also continue to help us pull those wild horses who are ending up in auction pens.

**Julie:** The thing that people can do to really make a difference is contacting their members of congress.

**Heather:** Absolutely! And there's so many members of congress who are interested in this. Jan Schakowsky of Illinois is the one who has reintroduced the SAFE Act to try and get all domestic wild horses, burros, and mules from being shipped to slaughter. So, you know, she's a horse lover. And there's so many more representatives this year who have introduced or become part of legislation to not only get the transport of horses for slaughter stopped, but there was also recent legislation introduced... and I apologize, I cannot remember her name right now, but a congresswoman introduced it and she asked that the horses be protected, and if they need to be removed from the range they're at because the BLM claims lack of forage or water, that those horses be rewilded into a more suitable area. So, not separated from each other; not stuck in long-term holding pens for the rest of their lives, but rewilded to a more suitable area.

When you call your congressperson or your senator and actually ask for a phone meeting, and have a conversation with that person, even if it's only 10 or 15 minutes, you're actually representing 5,000 of your fellow constituents, and how powerful is that?

**Julie:** Now, is there, like, a clearinghouse that shows all the different bits of legislation that are in process?

**Heather:** I do have a website. It is [SaveOurWildHorses.net](http://SaveOurWildHorses.net). I'm also @SaveOurWildHorses on Facebook. I have tried to put as much information on there as I can, and it's really geared towards helping people to contact... I've got all the contact information on there. All the senators' phone numbers, their mailing addresses, and you can actually

just click and go straight to the contact screen for their website and write your message on there and send it if that's what you're most comfortable with.

And I have... When a new action comes up, such as recently we were trying to keep the Menendez Amendment into the infrastructure bill. I'll put up an Immediate Action Item that says, "Please call your senator today and ask them to support the Menendez Amendment." And it can just be a really short, brief message, or leaving your message on a voicemail. Staff members are usually more than happy to talk to you, and they'll just simply ask you for your zip code to confirm that you live in that person's area, and then they'll ask you what your message is. You just tell them; they write it down and then thank you.

So, it's really quick to just take two minutes out of your day to help make your voice heard. And it's something that is not only important to the wild horses, and the burros, and the wildlife, and our public lands, but it's just important to this country to just keep these lands free and wild.

**Julie:** Well Heather, thank you so much for taking so much time to educate me and our listeners about this and sharing so much passion. Who knew that the pandemic would turn into something like this? It's been great to talk to you.

**Heather:** Thank you so much for helping to bring awareness to it. We do find that, more often than not, the public just doesn't know what's going on. And one of the goals of so many of us is just to help bring that awareness and at least ask them to take a look at it.

---

*[clip of country-acoustic cover of "Wild Horses" by The Sundays]*

You can find Heather at [SaveOurWildHorses.net](http://SaveOurWildHorses.net) and on Instagram [@SaveOurWildHorses](https://www.instagram.com/SaveOurWildHorses). You'll find links to both of those in the show notes of course, along with links to Heather's favorite nonprofits and mine too. Such huge thanks to Heather for sharing her passion with us today.

Just a reminder that you can find this podcast on Instagram [@LoveWhatYouLovePod](https://www.instagram.com/LoveWhatYouLovePod), on Twitter, [@WhatYouLovePod](https://twitter.com/WhatYouLovePod), and the website is [LoveWhatYouLovePod.com](http://LoveWhatYouLovePod.com).

All of the transcripts for *Love What You Love* are available for everyone on the website. Thanks to Emily White, transcription magician and proprietress of The Wordary. If you need transcripts, reach out to her at [Emily@TheWordary.com](mailto:Emily@TheWordary.com). The music for *Love What You Love* is called "Inspiring Hope" by Pink-Sounds. A link to that artist is included in the show notes.

As always, thank you so, so much for listening. Let's hang out again soon.

### **Links:**

Find Heather on [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/SaveOurWildHorses), [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/SaveOurWildHorses), on [SaveOurWildHorses.net](http://SaveOurWildHorses.net) and [HeatherHellyerPhotography.com](http://HeatherHellyerPhotography.com)

### **Resources:**

[Bureau of Land Management](https://www.blm.gov/)

[Herd Management Areas](https://www.blm.gov/learn/management-areas)

[Wild and Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act of 1971](https://www.blm.gov/learn/wild-and-free-roaming-horse-and-burro-act-of-1971)

[You Belong Here Now by Dianna Rostad](#)

["Wild Horses" by The Sundays](#)

**Heather's Favorite Nonprofits:**

[Evanescent Mustang Rescue](#)

[Fundraiser for Engler Canyon Ranch in Colorado](#)

[Serengeti Foundation](#)

**My Favorite Nonprofits:**

[Everytown for Gun Safety](#)

[Humane Society of Silicon Valley](#)

[Southern Poverty Law Center](#)

[Town Cats of Morgan Hill](#)

[World Central Kitchen](#)

We're on [Patreon](#)

Hang out with me on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#)

Check out my books at [JulieKRose.com](#)

LWYL Music: [Inspiring Hope by Pink-Sounds](#)

Transcribed by Emily White: [Emily@TheWordary.com](#)