

SIDETRACK



Courtesy Chuck Haspels

Whimbrel

**BIRDING FESTIVAL:** Registration is open for the 12th Annual Ute Mountain-Mesa Verde Birding Festival, which will be held May 11-15.

Twenty-five tours will take festival participants to birding hotspots throughout the Four Corners area. Adhering to tradition, the popular raptor/owl tours are first on the festival's schedule for Wednesday afternoon and evening.

An overnight tour to Vermilion Cliffs in Arizona, a nesting site for the condors, returns for this year's festival May 12 and May 13.

The festival's full registration fee covers the welcome reception and bird art show, all lectures, the social hours and the banquet. Single-day registrations are accepted, too. Separate fees apply to each of the festival tours, which are led by expert birders.

Tour registrations, whether submitted online, by phone, or by mail, are filled on a first-come basis. Except for the condor tour and Bluebird Trail tours, which car pool, participants travel in vans provided by various community agencies and organizations. Tour fees include snacks, water and sack lunch — or a catered meal if listed. Walk-in registrations may be available as space allows.

A grant by Colorado Parks and Wildlife allows the UMMV Birding Festival to sponsor two free birding activities, beginning birding and the family-oriented nature outing. (Pre-registration is required for both.)

Visit [utemountainmesaverdebirdingfestival.com](http://utemountainmesaverdebirdingfestival.com) for complete 2016 Birding Festival details or to register online. For additional information, contact the Cortez Cultural Center at (970) 565-1151, ext. 14.

A discount for early registers ends March 24. Registration continues through festival dates as space allows. The Ute Mountain-Mesa Verde Birding Festival is an annual fundraiser event for the Cortez Cultural Center, a nonprofit organization.

**TRIPS TO CHACO:** The National Park Foundation is making it easier



Clockwise: A herd of rescue horses grazes on hay on Wild Horse Mesa near San Luis, Colorado; A herd of wild horses stands outside Barnes' house waiting for hay, Jan. 10; A lone horse roams as part of a herd of brothers walks through a field of snow-covered shrubs; A herd of brothers makes its way to Barnes' truck for some fresh hay; Judy Barnes calls a herd of horses from a snowy road at the Wild Horse Mesa at Melby Ranch, Jan. 10.

# Wild Horse Mesa

## Judy Barnes' quest to protect a herd of mustangs

STORY BY CODY HOOKS THE TAOS NEWS • PHOTOS BY KATHARINE EGLI THE TAOS NEWS

It was a Sunday morning in January, and a little white pickup truck reached the entrance of Melby Ranch, five miles north of the New Mexico state line. The truck got new tires three days before, which it needs on the snowy drive to the top of what was once called San Pedro Mesa. Now it bears the

name of its most populous and notable residents, the free-roaming mustangs of Wild Horse Mesa.

Wild Horse Mesa rises above the flats of the San Luis Valley and the century-old Sanchez Reservoir. Dirt roads lattice the landscape nearly devoid of people — about 15 live on the mesa year-round.

Judy Barnes is one of them. The horses brought her.

Barnes is their caretaker, but also their advocate in the face of horse rustlers and the highway. She runs the nonprofit Spirit of the Wild Horse, and through it, she raises enough money and support to make sure the 150 horses are protected in their *ad-hoc* sanctuary on the mesa.

At first, Barnes came to the mesa on weekends. "We'd just sit and make friends," she said. Then she decided she'd move in. That was 10 years ago. "Once I did, it's amazing the connection I made with these horses. They are wild, but they don't act like it with me," she said.

The weekend Barnes moved to the mesa, a stallion left an injured mare in her yard. Barnes started calling her Boots. "She was my special girl," she said.

"She'd hang out with a band of horses occasionally, but Boots would go on walks with me and ... yeah, I'd go out there in the field and sit and talk with her," Barnes said.

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## HORSES

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Barnes starts to laugh as she tells the story of a big rattler sprawled out on a rock. Boots wasn't fond of the snake being so close to Barnes' bare feet, so she nudged Judy out of the way, reared back and took the snake out with one stomp. Last year, Boots birthed a foal and died not long after. For Barnes, it was as bad as losing a kid.

### Shades of wild

Nearly all of the 140 horses on the mesa are a rusty brown with some signature mark — blazes, diamonds or stars on the forehead, or pink snips between the nostrils.

She may know them all by face and name, but among the horses Barnes calls her friends, there are shades of wild.

Mustangs are an American icon, but their history of getting here is unsavory at best. They came with Spanish conquistadors who set out to colonize a continent for the royals back home. The horses went feral and are now as much of a fixture of the American imagination and Southwestern ecosystem as any hawk or lizard.

Of the five bands that live in her yard, two are headed by the 4-year-old favored sons of an older stallion. Instead of banishing the boys to Joaquin and his band of bachelors, the stallion gave them bands of their own. Family politics are alive and well on the mesa.

The horses are self-sufficient, but Barnes supplements their diet with hay when the snow is heavy. "As soon as the grass starts coming in, I'm off duty," she says.

Another part of her mission is keeping the horses off the highway, where head-on collisions are routine.

Barnes asked the state of Colorado to reduce the speed limit around the mesa. When cars and trucks were taking out 10 horses a year and the state didn't reduce the speed limit, Barnes emailed photo after photo of the vehicular fatalities. It wasn't long thereafter that road crews installed flashing road signs on both sides of the highway to warn drivers of the horses.

She guesses about five horses die every year now. "It's helped considerably."

### Chase to Mexico

Zooming vehicles aren't the only human danger the horses face.

In the dark of the night about three years ago, a posse of horse thieves rounded up Barnes' favorite band — One-Eye Jack Black and his 14 mares and 13 foals — stuffed them in trailers and headed to the slaughterhouses in Mexico.



A herd of rescued horses comes to meet Barnes at her truck.

"That was a traumatic one," Barnes said.

"The babies are separated out for their skins — purses and belts. The adults are killed for meat to be sent overseas," Barnes lamented.

When Barnes figured out what happened, she raced to the border for a chase that lasted five days and hundreds and hundreds of miles.

"We went from port to port to port asking and looking for the horses," she said.

The reception was a mixed bag that favored vitriol over virtue.

"You could tell who was lying. All I was doing was pushing buttons and making them angry," she said. A friend — a man — was with her for the week-long chase. She didn't love the idea, "but I knew I had to let the man talk ... at least at the border."

Barnes eventually called it off. If she wasn't able to find Jack, she should get back to the horses left on the mesa.

What happened to Jack wasn't a one-off.

From 2009-2012, Tom Davis, who lives in neighboring Conejos County, bought more than 1,700 wild horses from the Bureau of Land Management, the agency charged with managing wild mustangs and burros. Against federal protections, those horses ended up in Mexican slaughterhouses.

Scandals like that add fuel to the fire for activists who think the BLM is rounding up mustangs with extinction in mind. They argue the

horses are shafted by industry, namely oil, gas and cattle.

BLM representatives say the country's public lands can only handle 26,715 wild horses and burros, about 30,000 fewer than the population in 2015.

Velma Johnston was a fired-up Nevadan, better known as Wild Horse Annie. She was instrumental in getting Congress to pass her 1959 "Wild Horse Annie Act," a forerunner of the stricter Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971.

Folks like Barnes are following that legacy of protecting the horses come hell or high water. Spirit of the Wild Horse is doing what it can at Wild Horse Mesa. But Barnes isn't stopping there.

On the east side of the Río Grande is a herd of about 200 mustangs. The government in Costilla County leased Spirit of the Wild Horse 400 acres along the river for the Río Grande Wild Horse Preserve.

It'll have primitive campsites with the basic amenities, sans water — fitting the area's rough-and-tumble zeitgeist. Funds still need to be raised, but Barnes thinks the preserve will be open by summer 2017.

As for the horses of Wild Horse Mesa, they still have Barnes as an advocate, friend and neighbor. The horses probably know this about her — she's in it for the long haul.

Judy Barnes can be reached at [spiritofthewildhorse.com](http://spiritofthewildhorse.com), on Facebook or (719)-588-7177. Tours are available.