

## A Wild Encounter

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Social media highlighted the plight of America's "wild," or feral, horses for me. They are disappearing at an alarming rate, and humans are to blame. My connection with animals has always been strong, but lately, I feel their pain as if it were my own. The horses live on public land a short distance from Phoenix, Arizona. They roam the Tonto National Forest and nearby Reservation land. I wanted to see these magnificent creatures with my own eyes, so I booked a short trip to the area.

I left my hotel room at 5:15 A.M. At 6:45, I started walking on a trail by the Lower Salt River. There was a chill in the air. The rushing water soothed me, and the calls of birds lifted my spirit. I walked softly on the earth to minimize unnecessary noise. The next thing I knew, I found myself face-to-face with two beautiful horses. My breath caught in my throat as adrenaline coursed through my body. I noted both excitement and fear as I evaluated our proximity. I backed away slowly, never averting my gaze. They acknowledged me and returned to nibbling the forage, seemingly unbothered by my presence. I was delighted that these two beings chose to stay near me.

The band consisted of a mature stallion and a colt. When a young male horse is between two and three years of age, it is driven out of its maternal band by the alpha stallion to prevent the youngster from challenging the leader for the mares in his herd. Once colts are on their own, they typically join a bachelor herd to learn how to fight. The colt was unsure about me. He positioned himself behind the stallion and grazed behind bushes, using them as protection.

Everything slowed down. My breath and movement were thoughtful to avoid frightening the horses. I felt tremendous gratitude as I soaked in their bodies' details and behaviors. I was with them on the trail for an hour before the stallion led them over the embankment into the river. A staple of their diet was the eelgrass that grew in the river. I reveled in watching them snorkel for the tasty, nutritious food as the sun warmed my back. The stallion blew air out of his nose as he plunged his head into the water, and I could hear the bubbles he created.

I found eight horses in the river munching away at my next stop. I couldn't believe my luck. Everything about the day was exhilarating, and love swelled in my heart for the horses. At that moment, I decided to return the following day. What nature offered was far more compelling than anything I might experience at the Wellness Center.

The next day, at sunrise, I was at the site where I found the bachelor herd. I padded along the trail, drinking in the sounds and sights. I came to the end without citing a horse or fresh scat. I pondered the

chance that I would not find them but settled into a non-resistance by noticing every tiny detail of my surroundings. About halfway back, I nearly bumped into the stallion who was horizontal across the trail, munching on the leaves of a tree. He looked at me, and I saw a flash of annoyance on his face. I stepped back to give him space. The colt was nearby, tucked behind a bush.

I felt blessed to see them again. I couldn't believe my luck or manifestation. I immediately dropped into my body. I noticed the sensations—a cool tingling in my fingers. I felt energy surge down my legs and became aware of the soles of my feet standing firmly on the ground. I brought my attention to my heart and began sending gratitude to the stallion. I told him he was beautiful and thanked him for allowing me to see him again. I told him I appreciated his tolerance of the colt and that he was a good teacher. I radiated love to him and imagined this energy wrapping around him. I was thoroughly absorbed and lost in my experience.

Suddenly, I felt something. I looked over my right shoulder and was stunned to find the young horse standing approximately 12 feet behind me. The expression on the colt's face was one of curiosity. His ears were forward, head low and reaching out to me. I felt he wanted to touch me with his muzzle. I quickly realized this was not a good idea. I drew on my knowledge of horse body language. I faced him and raised my hands, palms facing out to halt his advance. No luck. I raised my arms higher and put more energy behind a "stop" motion. His advance continued. He was closer than I was comfortable with. I made myself bigger, leaned toward the colt, and made a "STOP!" gesture while making a noise with my mouth. He halted and backed away.

I was instantly back in my body and aware of my heart pounding. A thought flashed through my mind that this meant the colt could smell my fear. My body was releasing cortisol, and horses can smell these hormones. I took a deep breath in and settled myself. The youngster sauntered to the stallion, and they greeted each other. He started a brief spar with his leader, ending with the stallion nipping his leg as he retreated. I sensed frustration in the colt. I moved his feet, and so had the stallion. He walked up to a concrete picnic table. He put his muzzle on the table and lifted his right front leg. For a moment, I thought he would put his hoof on the bench, but he thought better of it. He pawed the ground and turned to me.

I saw something different on the colt's face. It was confidence mixed with determination. He advanced toward me and intended to move my feet. Initially, I stood my ground. I told him to "stop" with my arms and hands. He didn't believe me. His stride was purposeful, his eyes locked on mine, his head was higher, and his ears were alert. I backed away from him while holding his gaze, hoping he would realize I wasn't a threat. The youngster gained power in each step—the thought of the stallion getting involved shot through my mind. I needed to make the next action count. I raised my energy significantly. My palms faced him, and I pumped my arms firmly as I leaned toward him. At the same time, I made sharp "SHHHHH" noise with my mouth. The colt spun away from me with a few canter strides and positioned

himself behind a tree. He peered out from behind it, and we stared at each other. He licked and chewed, which told me he was processing our encounter.

I exhaled audibly and shook the tension out of my body as I retreated to sit on a nearby branch. I looked at the youngster and said, "Good boy. Thank you for listening. You're a good boy." I exhaled again. He received my message and gingerly repositioned himself on my side of the tree. He cocked his hind leg and licked and chewed several times. He lowered his head and appeared to doze off for several minutes. The interaction was exciting for both of us, and our bodies were flooded with stress hormones. We needed time to de-escalate. I sat on the tree limb and showed this beautiful boy appreciation. As quickly as he entered the relaxed state, he jolted into a mild panic when he realized the stallion was no longer in sight. Similar to how I became lost in my experience with the stallion, he had become consumed by our interaction.

He stepped forward purposely and looked left and right. I thought he might whinny. Instead, he took off in a trot and barreled down the embankment into the river where the stallion was chowing on eelgrass. His leader appeared unphased by the commotion. The stallion knew the youngster must find his way. The colt was testing his skills, and this was a game of "Can I Move Your Feet?" Two things stand out upon reflection. One was the innocent look on the young horse's face as he approached me for the first time. I love that the shift in my energy allowed him to become curious instead of scared. Second, I am grateful to know enough horse body language to avoid an undesirable interaction with these beautiful animals.

I will forever hold these two beautiful souls and my wild encounter with the colt in my heart.

By Diane R. Jones