

POINT REYES NATIONAL SEASHORE ASSOCIATION

Voices ^{at the} Seashore



A New Moon *at the* Morgan Horse Ranch

Come along for the ride to learn about the history of the Morgan Horse Ranch and its plans to involve visitors in up-close-and-personal encounters with these magnificent animals and the splendid rangers who care for them.

BY ELLEN GREENBLATT



The Morgan Horse Ranch glimmers on a sunny Seashore day, and the fence built in 2022 fits right in.

*H*orses have fascinated humans for at least as long as we have historical records. Our ancestors made lively cave paintings of horses at Pech-Merle in France 25,000 years ago, but you don't have to go back in time or travel far to see the power horses have on people. At Point Reyes National Seashore, the Morgan Horse Ranch herd not only delights visitors, it is crucial to visitor safety and as support to rangers in emergencies, helping them to reach areas inaccessible to motor vehicles.

Since the horses are some of the Seashore's best ambassadors, a new plan to revitalize the Morgan Horse Ranch, their home just up the hill from the Bear Valley Visitor Center, is taking shape.

Continued next page



Lead Ranger Julie Byerly, Ranger Sierra Frisbie, and Ranger Bonnie Phillips (left to right).

Horses as a Point of Connection

Recently, the newest addition to the Point Reyes Mounted Patrol, Ranger Sierra Frisbie, has brought her education and interpretive background to invite the public to get involved with the Ranch and the Morgans. Sierra's own background makes her a natural for her position. She has a lifelong connection with horses, and, like Morgan horses, she has roots in Vermont. After a couple years of seasonal interpretation work on the East Coast, Sierra found herself in California through a unique opportunity at Yosemite. Although Mounted Patrol Rangers had historically been part of the Law Enforcement division in national parks, her assignment to a remote area of Yosemite when she was already an Interpretive Ranger resulted in her ongoing career as a Mounted Interpretive Ranger.

All this led Sierra to Point Reyes and the Morgan Horse Ranch, where she engages in what she calls “intentional inviting,” hosting school groups, both from local schools and from schools where students might not have had much exposure or experience in wild places. Sierra has started hosting monthly Saturday Open Houses at the Ranch so that kids and their adults can immerse themselves in the natural world alongside the horses. Honcho, Mira, Knight Hawk, Gentry, and Moon, the Ranch's resident horses, provide a great opportunity for visitor engagement, particularly with youth. And that's the idea—the Morgan Horse Ranch becomes a great gateway to interacting with nature. They also serve as a bridge for park law enforcement officers to have positive interactions with the public, which in turn builds trust.

Continued next page



Honcho and the late Elvis help Ranger Paul Forward build connections with youth at Drakes Beach.

“What’s really fun about encountering people while I’m on horseback is that horses are a natural ice-breaker,” says Ranger Sierra. Horses make connecting with people and chatting with them about their experience easy. In general, “animals break down awkwardness.” Although rangers wear uniforms and look official, horses are “great way to break down walls, invite people in, invite people to have a conversation.”

Hard as it is to imagine, the evolution and survival of the Morgan Horse Ranch itself has not been certain in recent years. No one expects the Ranch to return to its 1970s and 1980s role as a full-time breeding program of 30-40 horses, training and sending horses to other parks. Because of the cost of maintaining any part of the program, one plan had been to allow the legacy horses, the horses already there, to live out their lives at the Morgan Horse Ranch and let the program end there. But the value of horses to community engagement is clear, so now the task has become how best to revitalize the Ranch.



Meet Moon, the Morgan Horse Ranch’s newest herd member!

Herd Health

The recent loss of a beloved horse friend, Elvis, a great beginner horse for training new rangers on horsemanship, left the herd weaker as a whole. Elvis died suddenly and unexpectedly on New Year’s Day 2023. Julie Byerly, one of the three rangers based at the Morgan Horse Ranch, sadly observed, “Losing Elvis was devastating as he was always so solid, we thought he would outlast us all!” As a result, Julie added, until a recent anonymous gift, we thought we would have just three active horses: Knight Hawk (8), Gentry (8) and Mira (20) because, at 28, Honcho is enjoying retirement. But Moon, a 10-year-old gelding from Nebraska has recently joined the herd and is

Continued next page

already settling in and starting his training with Rangers. Julie notes, “We will be honoring the history of the Ranch (and Elvis) as Moon becomes fully integrated into the herd, but as you well know, horses are expensive!!” Ever resourceful, Julie has an idea that would address the immediate and ongoing needs of the Ranch, including the planned 2024 rehab of the Ranch barn: “If we had a lifetime endowment, that would be amazing as we work again with a four-horse mounted unit.... We are also hoping to be able to acquire a new four-horse trailer with a tack room, so that we can haul the horses safely to public events” like the Butter and Eggs Parade, the Fairfax Fair, or Western Weekend and National Night Out.

High costs have made running the ranch difficult in recent years, and funding challenges meant the loss of the Ranch Manager position. But Julie noted that the Rangers’ “dedication, drive, and love of the program” means that she, Ranger Bonnie Phillips, and Ranger Sierra “have worked together to not only keep the Ranch going, but to help it grow and thrive.”

Elvis, the beloved Horse King, might be gone, but his Kingdom, the Morgan Horse Ranch, including the addition of our new Moon, will continue to flourish with the help of rangers—and all of you at PRNSA.

Ellen Greenblatt is an enthusiastic supporter of PRNSA and an on-the-ground volunteer at Point Reyes National Seashore, where she is both a Winter Wildlife Docent and a Trail Patrol Rover.



Lead Ranger Julie Byerly, Knight Hawk (horse), Ranger Sierra Frisbie, Gentry (horse), and Ranger Bonnie Phillips (left to right).



Photo © Anela Kopshever, NPS

Ranger Sierra Frisbie celebrates with Honcho on his 27th birthday.