



Australian Brumby Alliance (ABA)

Brumby Resource Information-2.3

www.australianbrumbyalliance.org.au

The Sentient Brumby and Family Bonds

"There is nothing more beautiful than a wild stallion standing guard over his herd. Nothing more touching than the love of a graceful mare for her foal. If we lose the brumbies we lose part of our heritage. Australia is already in danger of forfeiting so much of our past – do not let losing our wild horses be part of this."

Jill Mather, author of horse books: www.jillmatherbooks.com.au

This ABA information paper offers insight into the private lives and sentient behaviours in Brumbies that people have observed over the years and the Brumby's powers of conscious perception, sensitivities and subsequent variety in how they choose to respond to each event.

Brumbies *feel* for their mob members and are perceptive about all they observe within the group and their surrounds, and conscious of how they will respond to various actions.

The mob's family dynamics are complex and individuals show a range of emotions such as: love, affection, happiness, curiosity, gratitude, anxiety, fear, grief, hostility and suffering.

Individuals are very capable of showing emotion or sensitivity and will routinely demonstrate their capacity to experience, and respond to, the sense of touch from another wild horse.

Take time to observe a mare and her foal to see how their interaction can be sensitive, warm, tender, caring, understanding, empathetic, responsive, receptive, intuitive and thoughtful.

Brumbies can retain the memory of earlier experiences; and after surviving the horrors of aerial or ground shooting, for example, experience; suspicion, fear, anxiety, sorrow and distrust, apprehension and a sense of foreboding.

Sentience can be defined as *the capacity to have feelings, including pain, distress, suffering and pleasure [Ref1]. And as being able to perceive or feel things [ref2].*

We must be acutely realistic about the fact that brutally managed interventions are very capable of leaving lasting, sad, painful feelings which surviving Brumbies have to live with. It is essential that only the most humane removal methods are applied, and that selection must never be based on the cost or duration of the removal program selected.

Our stewardship of wild animals should continue to seek a balance of nature - but only ever upon a fulcrum of empathy. “*Empathy For The Enemy*”, by Australian wildlife scientist Clive Marks.

Days in the Lives of Wild Brumby Family Mobs

Reunited?

In 2008 a chestnut yearling (Pumpkin) arrived in poor health to a Brumby sanctuary and despite care will never be really sound again and remains supported by the sanctuaries Sponsorship program. Three weeks later (Molly) with foal arrived with her mob stallion and mares. Molly was gentled and rehomed, but years later was rescued from a Qld abattoir. This time Molly went into sponsorship as she was too traumatised and frightened to place on.

In time, Molly joined the sanctuary’s main mob which included Pumpkin. The two horses instantly bonded and the usually greedy, pushy Pumpkin, readily shared her hay with Molly. Checking their files, similarities noticed. Both came from the same area in Guy Fawkes ... Pumpkin's N.P. file stated that she was on her own, having lost her mob. As the two horses bonded quickly and strongly and are never apart and acted as if they knew each other, is it possible, that Pumpkin is Molly's previous foal ?? Or was one of Molly's mob ??

Mahatma Gandhi said that “The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated.”

The ‘Mid-Wife’ Brumby

Having just dropped some hay near two Brumby mares in the bush of a large property, Meg sat down to watch them for a while. Suddenly one mare name ‘Jade’ stopped feeding and lay down looking like she was getting ready to foal. Not far away was another mare ‘Myra’ who was enjoying the hay and relaxing with her one day old foal. Meg thought it better to just sit still and leave Jade to get along with foaling in peace. Jade was taking longer than average in her efforts to push the foal out, but eventually she succeeded. Out came Jade’s foal with the berth sac still around the foal. Jade began looking from side to side and seeming to not have the energy to reach the foal and break the berth sac open for her foal to breath. As Jade’s kept struggling, her anxiety and concern increased. Meg was in a quandary - should she approach Jade and break the sac, risking frightening the mare or trust Jade to handle this herself.

The next moment, Meg saw Myra and her one day old foal walk over to Jade, then so gently touch her nose, then walk round to Jade’s foal still in its birth sac. Myra then broke the birth sac to release the foal to take its first breath. Myra then quietly walked back to Jade’s head and blew gently into her nostrils, as if to say, it’s OK Jade, I’ve freed your foal, so just relax, rest and get your strength back, and be the great Mum I know you will be.

Valued qualities in sentient beings (human/animal) include the ability to care for another above itself, ability to enjoy the experiencing of running down a challenging slope, exuberance of a sunny day and a partners affection. I have seen all these in Australian horses living in wild family mobs. A brumbies survival depends on sentient family bonds to overcome external threats.

The Secret Lives of Horses [Wendy Williams 2015]



In Brief

Scientists have long studied the best ways to train and treat domesticated horses, but they largely ignored the behaviour of free-ranging horses. Recent research has begun to fill that gap. Observations from long-term studies of wild horses show that the conventional, male-centric view of their power dynamics is wrong. In fact, females often call the shots, employing tactics such as cooperation and persistence to get their way.

Wild at Heart: Untamed horses roam free in the Pryor Mountains of Montana Lisa Dearing

Mares vs. stallions

Wild horses, in contrast, live year-round in small groups, or bands, of three to 10 individuals. Closely allied mares and their young offspring form the core of the band.

Members of a horse band are not simply group animals with gang-like mentalities.

Family ties

Researchers have found that, as with humans, individual bonds within bands may be more important than group identity. These bonds are sometimes based on family ties, but often they are just based on individual preference. These preferences can and do change: friendships come and go, foals grow up and depart to live elsewhere, male-female relationships sometimes work out and sometimes don't. As a result, the social lives of horses are nothing if not tumultuous. Indeed, long-term observation of these animals in the wild is like following a soap opera. There is a constant undercurrent of arguing, of jockeying for position and power, of battling over personal space, of loyalty and betrayal.

Who is in Charge?

The latest studies of behaviour under natural conditions show that these power dynamics are more complicated than previously thought. The conventional view, as described in a recent National Academy of Sciences report, is that "a harem, also known as a band, consists of a dominant stallion, subordinate adult males and females, and offspring." At first glance, this assessment would seem to be true: what people notice when watching wild horses is the uproar created by the stallions. But research by Jason Ransom of Colorado State University and others has shown that this male-centric view is wrong. Far from being subordinate, mares frequently initiate the band's activities with stallions quite often little more than hangers-on.

Ransom once watched a band of mares that stopped grazing and began heading for water, unnoticed by the stallion. When he looked up and saw his mares leaving, he panicked and ran after them, like a little boy calling out, 'Hey, where's everybody going?'" The mares ignored him. Whether the stallion caught up or not didn't appear to concern them.

Extra Marital Mob affairs

Mares also sometimes have stallion preferences. They can resist males they don't like with surprising persistence, even when that male has established himself as the band's stallion. Joel Berger of the University of Montana studied the behaviour of two non-related mares that had spent several years together. The pair joined a band that was then taken over by a new stallion that asserted himself by attempting to copulate with them forcibly on numerous occasions.

The mares refused his attentions and repeatedly aided one another by kicking and biting the stallion as he tried to mate. It's long been known that female elephants cooperate, but before ethologists began systematically studying free-roaming horses, few people suspected that cooperating mares were capable not only of waging such a fight—but of winning it.

Fending off unwanted suitors is not the only means by which mare's rebel. For years Laura Lagos and Felipe Bárcena, both at the University of Santiago de Compostela in Spain, have been studying the behaviour of Garranos, free-roaming horses that live rough, tough lives in the rugged hills of north-western Spain and northern Portugal, where they are under constant threat from wolves. In the course of their work, Lagos and Bárcena catalogued the behaviour of a pair of mares in one band that were strongly bonded with each other and that often stood just a bit apart from the rest of the band.

At breeding time, the mares went together to visit the stallion of another band. Lagos watched one of the mares consort with this stallion rather than with the stallion from her own band. Then the mares returned to their original group. When the second mare was ready to breed, the duo again deserted their original band and its stallion to consort with the other stallion. Then, again, they returned to their original group. This was not an anomaly. The mares did the same thing the following year. “They prefer their own territory, but the stallion of the other band,” she told me.

Persistence prevails

Ransom tells of High Tail, a plain-Jane mare with a sagging back and poor coat who is part of a population of wild horses that roam the Pryor Mountains in the American West. With her glory days clearly over, you probably wouldn't give her a second glance, yet Ransom's data showed that this mare had had a rich and varied life that involved several of long-term male associates of her choosing.

Ransom first saw High Tail in 2003. The mare was passing her days in the company of Sam, a stallion born in 1991. Ransom thinks the two probably encountered each other during the wanderings of their youth. They stayed together for years. Eventually other mares joined them, forming a band. Research shows that roughly half the time mares and stallions bond in this peaceful fashion. There's no need for a stallion to “conquer” the mare; she is often a more than willing partner.

Until scientists applied ethological research techniques to horses, few observers believed mares to be capable of such subtle deceit. It turns out that, unlike stallions, mares do not need to have huge fights to get what they want. Instead they use the *technique of persistence*.

Sitting Bull tries to join

Shortly after Ransom began following High Tail and Sam's band, he noticed a second young stallion hanging around nearby. Sam did not welcome this new stallion, dubbed “Sitting Bull.” The more Sitting Bull tried to become part of the group, the more Sam fought him off. Sam spent a good deal of energy trying to drive away the younger stallion but to no avail.

The scientific literature contains accounts of satellite stallions learning how to cooperate with the lead stallion and thus gradually gaining the ability, on a limited basis, to mate with some mares, but this was not the case with Sam and Sitting Bull. The two fought continuously, but Sitting Bull stayed near, biding his time.

Sitting Bull takes over

His chance came in 2004. Horses that live at the base of the Pryor Mountains constantly face the challenge of finding freshwater. High Tail's band often descended the steep walls of the Bighorn Canyon gorge to drink their fill.

One day they went down as a group, but Sam would not allow Sitting Bull to come along. Distant heavy rains broke out and a flash flood inundated the gorge, cutting off the animals' escape route for about two weeks they were isolated.

Realizing that the situation was dire, people intervened and helped them escape. Sam had lost his muscular physique and was easy pickings for Sitting Bull, who had hung around above the gorge. When the horses came up, Sitting Bull "just swooped right in and drove Sam off,"

Why do humans usually try to destroy what they dislike, instead of valuing its positives and find a constructive balance - **Anonymous**

Dealing with change

Most of the band accepted the young stallion. Not High Tail. At every opportunity she left her band and headed off in search of her long time mate, Sam. Each time she left, Sitting Bull chased her back, snaking his head and baring his teeth to threaten her with injury. To avoid being bitten, she complied and returned to the band, but the next time Sitting Bull failed to pay attention, High Tail took off again. This went on for many weeks until the younger stallion gave up chasing her. "From then on it was just Sam and High Tail," Ransom says.

High Tail stayed with Sam until he died in 2010. (Because of the stress of constant fighting with other males, stallions often live much shorter lives than mares.) After Sam's death, High Tail went with a stallion dubbed 'Admiral' - eventually Admiral fell out of favour with her.

We saw High Tail one afternoon that July. She was with two other horses. One was a mare from her original band, an animal she had known for years. The other was Sitting Bull. Rejected by High Tail in her younger years, he was now one of her boon companions.

Primate Field researchers long ago discovered the ebb and flow of alliances within primate troops, but until recently no one has watched horses in the wild closely enough to understand that they, too, behave this way.

When Ransom was asked if he thought there were any hard and fast rules about horse behaviour in the wild, he replied "They rarely choose to be alone".

Help from an unexpected quarter

Little Gray, a recently born foal, finds himself left behind when his mob's stallion defeats a batchelor stallion rival and victoriously drives his mob away. Alone in the world Little Gray is left to defend himself against wind, rain and thunder. Little Gray edges closer to the batchelor still standing nearby. The batchelor not only allows him to stay close, but then to the observer's amazement, the batchelor gently pushes Little Gray in front of him. This strange duo follow the length of the valley then move in the direction of the crest, behind which is his mother's family mob. The mob stallion sees Little Gray and brings him home and the batchelor leaves. Little Gray, reunited with mom enjoys her warm milk and her comforting presence.

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References

Ref1

The **Universal Declaration on Animal Welfare** [www.udaw.org]: is an agreement among people and nations to recognize that animals are sentient and can suffer, to respect their welfare needs and to end animal cruelty - for good.

Ref2

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sentience>

Adjective - able to perceive or feel things. Synonyms: [feeling](#), capable of feeling, [living](#), [live](#); *sentience* is the ability to experience sensations (known in philosophy of mind as "qualia")

Other references include;

<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/sentient>

1. having the power of perception by the senses; conscious.
2. characterized by sensation and consciousness.

<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sentience>

feeling or sensation as distinguished from perception and thought

<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/sentience>

Sentience - The quality or state of being sentient; consciousness. 2. Feeling as distinguished from perception or thought.

The Secret Lives of Horses <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-secret-lives-of-horses/> -

Long-term observations of wild equines reveal a host of unexpected behaviours – 15 September 2015
By Wendy Williams. Adapted from *The Horse: The Epic History of Our Noble Companion*, by Wendy Williams, by arrangement with Scientific American/Farrar, Straus & Giroux, LLC (US), HarperCollins (Canada), Oneworld (UK). Copyright © 2015 by Wendy Williams. Also noted is;

Wendy Williams is a journalist and equestrian based in Mashpee, Mass. She has written for the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal* & *Audubon*, among other publications. *The Horse* is her 6th book.

<http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-secret-lives-of-horses/>

Little Gray is an excerpt from *Mustangs: Wild Horses of the West* by Marie-Luce Hubert and Jean-Louie Klein (Firefly Books 2007). Hubert and Klein spent 5 years observing, researching and photographing wild horses in Dakota, Nevada, Oregon and Wyoming; *The Story of Little Gray* is an account from their observations of Mustang behaviour.

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