

HOW ONE GIRL HELPED SAVE 250 HORSES

Ten year-old Michele Miller was upset. She read in the newspaper that the 250 wild horses on Canada's Sable Island were to be sold for dog food.

Canadians protested. Newspaper cartoonists made fun of Canada's Prime Minister. Men and women wrote letters, telling the government to leave the horses where they were.

Michele wrote to the Prime Minister, too.

Dark-haired Michele from Weston, Ontario, loved horses. She worried about the horses on Sable Island. "You are not using the territory they are on," she pointed out in her letter, "so why not leave them alone? If the rest of the world acted like they do, there would not be war, diseases, and the world would be much better off."

Michele had a dog, and a cat called Tinky. "My dog and many others do not like horse meat," she wrote.

It was this letter that made the Prime Minister change Canadian government policy and leave the wild horses on Sable Island. Michele's letter and one from the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) were the only two letters the Prime Minister read.

A crescent-shaped sandbar, only one mile wide and twenty-six miles long, Sable Island lies isolated in the Atlantic Ocean, 180 miles southeast of Halifax, Nova Scotia. It is Canada's newest national park.

Winter storms can be cruel here. Ocean waves pound the pink-colored sandy beach on every side. Dried brown beach grass lies flat in the path of howling wind. Rain and sleet pelt down on the stocky horses that huddle in small circles, their rumps to the wind. Misshapen icicles quickly form on their long shaggy manes and forelocks. The horses take shelter behind tall rippled sand dunes, some as high as eighty-two feet, but the shifting sand offers little protection from fierce gales.

The previous winter had been especially hard. Many of the horses did not survive the cold. So the Canadian government decided to put them up for sale and hope that the horses found a better place to live. But Canadians were afraid that the horses would end up as dog food. Now, thanks to Michele's letter, the wild horses not only roam free on the island, but are also protected.

Where did these horses come from? Nobody really knows. Horses have galloped up and down the island for up to 400 years. People may have brought the horses' ancestors from Boston or Nova Scotia years ago. Perhaps they escaped from some of the ships that used to be wrecked on hidden sandbars on the shores before there were modern navigational aids.

A mix of colors – dark brown, chestnut, black, ginger, with splashes of white – Sable Island horses are different from other horses. Years ago, they

adapted to the special island conditions. They developed short legs and muscular shoulders, good for running on uneven ground and sand.

In August, if the land is dry, they dig water holes in the sand with their front hooves, to find fresh water. In late fall, they grow a thick wooly coat, long tousled forelocks and mane, long hair on their lower jaw, and a long low tail, all to help keep them warm in winter.

It's not always cold on Sable Island. Even in the winter, it's generally warmer there than in Nova Scotia on the mainland. One-third of the year – about 120 days - the Island is shrouded in fog “as thick as milk.” Other times, the sun shines brightly in a clear blue sky beating down on the island. That can be very uncomfortable for the horses, as there is no shade from trees. There is only one small stunted forty year-old low-lying pine.

There is other vegetation, though, and usually the horses find lots to eat. In the summer and fall, the island is a riot of color. Hardy plants such as blue iris, white and yellow daisies, yellow goldenrod, wild red roses, wild strawberries, pink-flowering cranberries and blueberries mix with the green beach grass, fleshy sandwort and blue-tinted fescue grass that the horses prefer.

The horses aren't alone. They share the island with small light-colored Harbour Seals and thousands of large dark Grey Seals. Every year about 50,000 Grey Seals are born on the island beaches, making this the largest Grey Seal colony in the world.

Hundreds of different kinds of birds visit Sable Island. There are little Ruby-throated Hummingbirds and large stately white Great Egrets. The tiny grey Ipswich Savannah Sparrow nests only on Sable Island. More black-capped white Common Terns are here than anywhere else in Canada. Large white and black Great Black-backed Gulls soar and swoop over the island, while grey and white Herring Gulls swim and dive. Both are attracted to the variety of fish near the shore.

A small science station houses a few men and women who study atmospheric conditions such as climate change, collect weather data, and research plants and animals.

But Sable Island is noted for the horses that still run free, thanks to a young girl's letter.

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