

Wild horses with wings

In one of the most ambitious bids to save a large animal from extinction, the world's last wild horse is returning to its native steppe. **Julian Cribb** reports.



Khomiin Tal, February 2005. The Przewalski horses of Claudia Feh's 2004 herd have quickly settled into their new home, enjoying the wide open spaces of the Mongolian steppe.

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Like the mythical steed Pegasus, Claudia Feh's wild horses have winged their way across the world to alight in the Mongolian pastures they vanished from a quarter of a century ago.

In one of the most remarkable reintroductions of a locally extinct species, the Swiss-born ecologist has now transported two consignments of Przewalski horses – regarded as the most ancient equine line still extant – from France to Mongolia as part of a plan by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) to restore the world's last wild horse to its native habitat.

As a teenager who loved horses, Claudia Feh was inspired to devote her life to studying and protecting wild horses by beautiful 17 000-year-old images of horses that adorn the Lascaux Caves in France.

The Przewalski horse is the last survivor of the great Ice Age herds that once roamed the grasslands of Eurasia, when human hunters took the animals to the

edge of extinction. It was recognised as a distinct species in 1879 when a Russian Pole, Colonel Nikolai Przewalski, visited Mongolia on a scientific expedition. The Colonel's greatest achievement turned out to be saving the last wild horse from obscurity: He identified animal skins and bones brought to him as different to both the domestic horse and famous Mongol pony. They belonged to the only wild horse to escape extinction. His find aroused huge interest among European collectors of rare wildlife, but the Przewalski horse proved particularly difficult to catch, transport and domesticate.

Mongolians regard the horse as man's messenger to the gods, and the takh (their name for the Przewalski) has sacred status reaching back thousands of years. Originally native to many countries, including Poland and southern Russia, the last horse vanished from the wild in Mongolia in 1969.

Today, over 1500 Przewalski horses, the descendants



The 17 000-year-old horses depicted in the Paleolithic images that adorn the Lascaux Caves in France look strikingly similar to Przewalski horses.

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it has long forgotten about these horses in the wild.

In the early 1990s, having acquired 11 genetically compatible horses from European zoos, Feh took the pioneering – and to many experts, risky – decision to let them live together freely, mate naturally and form their own social groups. It is well known that in captive communities adult stallions may fight to the death and display other aggressive behaviour, such as killing foals. Having devoted 6000 hours to studying free-living horses, Feh concluded this anti-social behaviour would disappear in the wild, improving the horses' chances of survival.

Her gamble paid off. 'Our stallions have established a natural dominance hierarchy,' she explains, 'and, while they ritualise fighting, real fighting is no longer a serious problem'. Infanticide, she adds, disappeared completely in the second generation. Yet she readily

Le Villaret, France. Feh's expertise in equid behaviour helped her create the first natural herd of Przewalski horses. She spent nearly two decades observing France's semi-wild Camargue horses.

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of just 13 captured individuals, are alive, almost all in zoos. Australia has around 50 Przewalskis in three interbreeding herds located at Western Plains Zoo in NSW, Werribee Open Range Zoo in Victoria and Monarto Zoological Park in South Australia. These contributed seven animals to the early attempts to re-establish wild Mongolian herds, and remain an important genetic reservoir for the world herd and for future possible releases.

For over a decade Claudia Feh ran the only truly wild herd of Przewalskis (*Equus ferus przewalskii*) in the rugged uplands of Le Villaret, a 400-hectare tract of land in remote Causse Méjan, in southern France. This high-altitude area was carefully selected for its resemblance to the harsh Mongolian steppe. Feh has now taken the momentous step of reintroducing the horse into the wilds of Mongolia and trying to restore their habitat. In the process, she hopes, humanity will re-learn something





September 2004. Return to the wild. Soon after they were released following their long flight from France, two of the 12 horses of Claudia Feh's first shipment of Przewalski horses to Mongolia race free at Khomiin Tal.

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21 August 2005. Local villagers and the team from France prepare to release the 11 Przewalski horses of the second shipment after their journey from France to Khomiin Tal. The return of the Przewalski horse is of major importance to Mongolians for whom it is sacred. They believe the horse is man's messenger to the gods.

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admits that many people in the equine community remain sceptical: 'they have to see for themselves in order to be persuaded,' she adds.

Despite never having been in Asia before, the horses have adapted quickly to their new surrounds. 'They are fat,' Feh laughs, 'more so than in France. We hope they breed and we may see the first foals towards the end of May or June (2006)'. The newcomers adjusted quickly, cantering round the whole 13 000 hectare buffer zone they occupy next to the Khar Us Nuur National Park in the first 48 hours. 'They went everywhere!' Feh recounts with delight.

The truly distinctive feature of Feh's plan is to use the horse as the flagship species for an even more ambitious conservation project, the Wild Horse Mesh.

The aims of the Wild Horse Mesh are to protect and restore the habitat of the steppe grasslands together with all their endangered plants, birds and animals – as

Two horses from Claudia Feh's group of a dozen Przewalskis, brought from France in September 2004, engage in what she describes as 'ritualised fighting' at Khomiin Tal.

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Khomiin Tal, Mongolia. Feh and her Mongolian team prepare the reintroduction of horses, and the creation of a learning centre which will allow local people and scientists to explore topics with foreign experts.

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well as the traditional culture and way of life of the nomad families. For this imaginative project Claudia Feh received a global accolade when she was chosen as an outstanding Laureate of the Rolex Awards for Enterprise.

A key element of the Wild Horse Mesh is the knowledge exchange between the people of the Mongolian grasslands and conservation scientists. The first meeting involved most of the local population of 50 nomad families, and the enthusiasm of these locals was immensely encouraging. The meeting was held in a community hall and former school – the only solid buildings in the area – which were saved at the last moment from demolition through Feh's Rolex grant.

'We presented them with information about biodiversity, evolution and extinction and asked them to tell us about the birds, animals and plants of the local steppe,' Feh recounts. 'There was, naturally, some



Above: Khomiin Tal, Mongolia. The horse is central to Mongolian culture, and local knowledge of these animals is wide-ranging.

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Left: Le Villaret, France. Today, there are about 1500 Przewalski horses, most of them living in zoos around the world.

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caution to begin with, but we were very careful to share knowledge, not to teach. They participated especially when the discussion turned to pastoralism, the condition of the pasture and animals, and the effect this has on the survival of the people.'

The nomads have been suffering heavy losses to their flocks during the harsh winters, which they attributed to drought. However it soon became clear that the main contributor is pasture decline due to grazing pressure – the same factor which imperils the future of the wild horse as well as the herds of ibex, argali, Mongolian gazelle, black-tailed gazelle and the critically endangered saïga antelope. 'The nomads have a very sensitive eye for nature and they have noticed the dwindling in gazelle numbers,' Feh says.

The project's network has built a fence around the 135 square-kilometre release site, and the nomads are already noting the differences in vegetation cover and composition. They have also agreed to keep their domestic ponies out of the reintroduction area to avoid cross-breeding.

By sharing knowledge and insights between the nomads and scientists, Feh hopes that over time a system of management for the region will emerge which will meet both the needs of its people and distinctive wildlife. In this, Feh says, the Wild Horse Mesh and its central buildings provide a community focus that, without the project, would otherwise have disappeared, like the horse itself.

Feh's project is also collaborating with two other Przewalski reintroductions in Mongolia – one near Ulaan Baatar and one in the south-west, in the Gobi National



Park. Here the project is sharing, in particular, the experiences from the unique fusion of people, wildlife and landscape expressed in the Wild Horse Mesh.

A nucleus wild herd of 37 horses also remain in France. Along with the Australian herd and others like it round the world, these offer a genetic reservoir – one already well adapted to life in the wild – in case of emergency. If all goes well, the French herd will be maintained for possible reintroductions elsewhere.

For the horses – which have highly developed social behaviour – learning to live together and how to cooperate, despite competition, will be decisive in the success of the reintroduction program. And this is equally true for the people, Feh says.

'Cooperation is my favourite subject,' she says. 'It's one of the driving forces of evolution, yet it is largely neglected in favour of studies on competition.'