

# RUN WILD, RUN FREE?

A war over the round-ups of wild horses is raging on the prairies of the American West. On the front line is Madeleine Pickens, who grew up in England and is now the wife of a Texas billionaire. She is on the side of the mustangs in a row that is dividing the country. By **Britt Collins**

PA PHOTOS On the run: wild horses being rounded up by helicopter and pursued into holding pens. Campaigner Madeleine Pickens condemns the practice as 'brutal'



**I**N THE PRAIRIES OF THE AMERICAN WEST, a war over the fate of its iconic wild horses is dividing the country. On one side is the US Bureau of Land Management (BLM), which deems the number of wild mustangs to be out of control and in need of culling. On the other is a growing band of Americans – from celebrities to pressure groups – who disagree both with the premise, and the cruel methods of control. And one of their champions cuts a very unlikely figure. Madeleine Pickens, the glamorous British wife of Texas billionaire oilman T Boone Pickens, has come to the desert highlands of Nevada to witness one of the controversial helicopter round-ups.

Immaculately coiffed, she steps out of a private helicopter, pushing her blind 18-year-old dog Ollie in a pram across muddy fields, followed by a television crew, an entourage of assistants, equine consultants, her photographer and three helicopter pilots. It's an arresting sight. But her mission is to rescue America's wild horses.

A former air hostess, Pickens, born of an English father, is now an American, a businesswoman, a philanthropist – and an animal-lover *non pareil*. After the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, for instance, her husband gave \$7 million to aid the people of New Orleans, but Madeleine wanted to help the animal victims after seeing television images of terrified abandoned pets.

"Seeing these scared, desperate little faces was crushing. I said to Boone: 'Sweetheart, what would you do?' Then, all of a sudden, it hit me. 'Why don't we just get an airplane and airlift them out?'" They did, chartering several commercial jets to fly 800 abandoned animals to Californian shelters.

This year finds her in the centre of land disputes, political wrangling and legal challenges with her own answer to the wild horse round-ups – simply buy a million-acre preserve for them. The refuge she has her eye on extends from Nevada to California. Whatever the answer, the mere fact of the round-ups is deeply distressing. Days after returning from Gerlach, a sleepy mountain town outside Reno, where she joined thousands of activists to witness one of the largest round-ups in the nation's history, she is emotionally charged, as so many are. Well-known names as Paul McCartney, Viggo Mortensen, Sheryl Crowe and Robert Redford have taken up their cause.

"It was devastating watching these poor, terrified animals being chased by helicopters. Your heart breaks for them," says Pickens, 63, who lives in Dallas and has a ranch in Texas and a home in San Diego, California. "A dozen horses died in the helicopter stampede in the Calico Mountains. Most of the American people don't know about this. If they saw what was going on and that their history was being taken away from them, they'd be outraged. Horses helped blaze our trails, fought our battles; they're a national treasure. How can we just abandon them?"

Over the past decade, mustangs roaming free on federal land in Nevada, Montana and other western states have become a financial burden for the agency.

## The wild horses of the West helped blaze our trails and fought our battles; they're a national treasure'

Madeleine Pickens at one of the round-up of mustangs. A dozen died in one stampede



Corporate ranchers complain that the mustang numbers are out of control and that the horses have become pests and steal food from cattle. So the BLM has started capturing thousands.

The round-ups are reminiscent of the Wild West. The terrified horses are chased by helicopters and wranglers on horseback and often run themselves to the point of exhaustion, injury and death. Foals are often aborted or separated from their mothers and trampled in the chaos. The captured horses are then corralled.

Overall, the scheme has resulted in 33,000 mustangs being caught, with about 26,000 left to roam. Some are released, but only after the mares have been given

contraceptives and males castrated. What happens to the rest, especially the older ones, is not clear – and with feeding and housing bills for the horses rising, the future for them looks grim. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar has said it costs \$50 million a year to warehouse them in long-term corrals.

A fortunate few are tamed and adopted, while others get bought at auction by horse brokers. Activists say they end up in slaughterhouses overseas.\*

For example, as of April 15, 2010, 79 horses captured in a recent Calico Mountains round-up have died – some from injuries as a result of the capture – such as a foal which literally ran its hooves off. In addition, at least 40 mares suffered miscarriages during and after

the gather. The US media called it one of "the deadliest operations in the history of the programme". The BLM insists "the percentage that died due to the gather itself was still low".

The wild-horse advocates, however, don't see it that way. They are outraged over the deaths and are demanding an independent investigation. Wild horses are the last untamed symbols of the Old West and considered by many to be the beating heart and soul of America. Many think the agency entrusted with protecting them has forgotten that their wildness is what makes them so precious. Planning documents obtained by a request under the Freedom of Information Act even suggest a mass cull has been considered, including a proposal to offer vets counselling to cope with the number of animals that would have to be put down.

Pickens is clear that the round-ups are: "brutal and with a plain lack of compassion for living creatures. It's a beautiful sight to see these magnificent wild animals running and then they're chased into a chute and the metal gate slams behind them like prisoners. We can't let these animals be trapped and thrown into a world of sadness and horror and slaughter. That's got to end."

The BLM says thinning the herd is necessary because the horses are starving and the overpopulation is upsetting the natural ecological balance. "The fact is right now we have three to five times the population of wild horses that the range can sustain," says Bob Abbey, director of the BLM, which has been overseeing the round-ups. "If it were up to them [the animal-rights advocates], we'd be allowing the horses to starve to death, which is no way to honour an American icon."

"It's a complete lie," protests Pickens. "I didn't see any starving horses out there – they were in good condition. After the round-ups, I witnessed at least 20 mares being put down. Some were apparently old. If true, it invalidates their argument that these horses are starving. If the forage was that bad, how did they survive that long?"

Those captured face a murky future in the BLM's Adopt-a-Horse programme. "The dilemma for me is to help the horses that have already been caught," Pickens says of the 35,000-plus mustangs that the government considered for euthanasia. "They're crammed in holding areas on private ranches in the middle of nowhere. So yet more people are in business making money off the taxpayer."

"These corrals consist of a few metal fences and they stuff these traumatised animals in there. It's like putting 10 people in a small room and expecting them to live there, defecate there and eat there. They give them plenty of food and water, but they can barely move and have to live in squalid conditions without any protection from the elements. I want to put them back on the range where they belong."

She envisions the creation of a rambling wilderness preserve as an opportunity to recapture the Wild West on a grand scale – "like a Yellowstone Park, where people can come from all over the world with their families, camping in teepees and log cabins, telling stories over bonfires and watching the wild horses." ►



Mustangs are rounded up using helicopters, while...

...horses, young and old, are herded on to lorries



**Born free: Madeleine Pickens with some of her own horses on one of her properties in America**

◀ In turn, she has critics – who say she is taking the horses from the American people and bailing out the BLM from their accountability.

“I don’t want to take the horses off the land, but the government’s created one holy mess with the animals they’ve gathered. They have nowhere to put them. I’m proposing a solution that benefits everyone, where the horses can return to the range and everyone will be happy. If the government wants to take over my plan, it’s fine with me. The only thing is it will cost the public 10 times as much.”

And the region’s powerful cattlemen – whom activists accuse of being behind the BLM’s activities as they want to free more land for themselves – speculate that her idea is a well-disguised land-grab of the oil-rich state. “There’s nothing in it for me,” she says, exasperated. “I only want to save these horses. Like any war, the bad guys sit back like a bunch of coyotes and figure out how to circle you and tear you apart.”

PICKENS HAS AN EXOTIC BACKGROUND. Born Madeleine Baker in Iraq to an English Army father and a Lebanese mother, she had a global upbringing, growing up and studying in London and Paris. Her adventurous spirit took her round the world, first as a model and later as flight attendant, before arriving in the States in her twenties in 1969.

It was the romance of America that she picked up as a child watching John Wayne movies that drew her there. “I thought ‘that’s where I’m headed’, riding into the sunset with some handsome cowboy. It’s so dreamy – the wide-open spaces, the wild horses, the ravens, the blue skies and silence – it takes your breath away.”

Her first husband was Gulfstream Aerospace founder Allen Paulson. With him she bred world-class thoroughbred racehorses, but later discovered many died in slaughterhouses. “I was disgusted. As a result, my husband, Boone, and I have fought horse slaughter and, just a few years ago, we helped close the last equine slaughterhouse in the United States.”

In 2005, four years after Paulson died, she met and married T Boone Pickens – a giant character in the JR Ewing mould – who fired her already strong sense of

moral responsibility. “We bonded over animals. He had this wonderful papillon dog named Murdoch. Boone’s so supportive and has given me confidence to do the things that are dear to me. He always says, ‘If it’s the right thing, do it.’”

A former corporate raider who redefined himself as an environmental crusader, T Boone Pickens, 82, features regularly in lists of the most influential and wealthy (117th richest in America) – and he has appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine.

A wheeling-dealing Texas wildcat, he is also one of the most complex characters in capitalism and, as his wife describes, “straight out of the movies”.

She didn’t have to work hard to convince her animal-loving husband – known for his deep-pocketed largesse – to help. The couple share their homes with rescued racehorses, dogs, cats and assorted wildlife.

Pickens doesn’t just write out cheques, she’s not afraid of getting her hands dirty, too – despite the permanently flawless hair-do. Wayne Pacelle, president of the Humane Society of the United States, remembers seeing her in khakis, loading crates on the sweltering tarmac during her New Orleans rescue. “She has an incredible energy,” says Pacelle.

Pickens is now working with Ken Salazar and negotiating to buy or lease parcels of land to create her sanctuary. She knows it will take some persuasion to convince ranchers that cattle and large numbers of wild horses can live side by side.

The many pressure groups in the US are gaining some ground politically, though time is fast slipping away. A new law named the Restore Our American Mustangs Act (ROAM) which would outlaw the sale and slaughter of wild horses, has been passed by Congress, though its progress now appears to have stalled. The American Wild Horse Preservation Campaign has a large petition and other campaigns calling on President Obama directly to act.

Telling a story about how her father hitchhiked for hundreds of miles to collect the woman of his dreams, her mother, while he was in the British Army in Cairo, she says: “I realised my father never let a boundary get in the way, and learnt you have to follow your heart. It may be a sad journey getting there, but we will prevail.

“We’ve become a rich, powerful nation and in the process we’ve lost so much,” says Pickens, her accent slipping into a Texas twang. “We’re entrenched in silly stuff – celebrity culture – and our politics are murky and driven by money and lobbying. We’re forgetting our children and our national heritage.

“But the purpose of life is to have a purpose. After this, I’m sure there’ll be plenty of other projects, because I enjoy fixing things and changing lives.” ■

*For more information and action points, see The American Wild Horse Preservation Campaign, [wildhorsepreservation.com](http://wildhorsepreservation.com), [thecloudfoundation.org](http://thecloudfoundation.org), [madeleinepickens.com](http://madeleinepickens.com) and [www.blm.gov](http://www.blm.gov)*

*\*The US Humane Society says that in 2007, 106,093 horses were slaughtered in Canada and Mexico, and more than 133,000 across US borders in 2008*