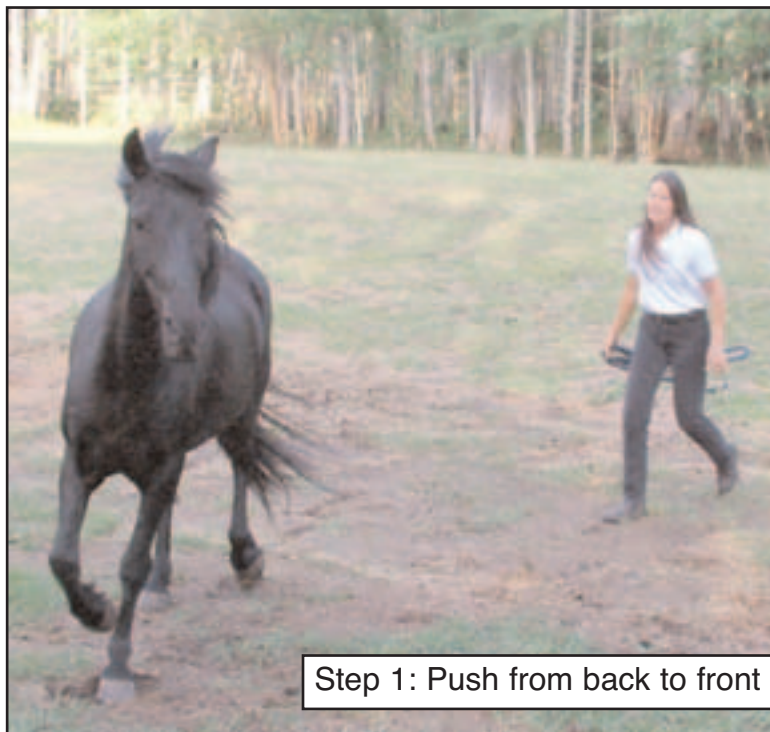


# Ask the Alpha Mare



Email your questions and/or comments for Alpha Mare to [alphamare@telus.net](mailto:alphamare@telus.net). Your feedback is welcome, and could be featured in an upcoming Alpha Mare column in *Horses All!*

by Kathryn Kincannon



Step 1: Push from back to front

All photos show Kathryn Kincannon (a.k.a. Alpha Mare) catching her husband's mustang "Peek-a-Boo" at their ranch near Edmonton.

Above: Step 1: Push from back to front until the horse gives you a bow (this might take a few minutes).

Dear Alpha Mare,  
After many years of owning and enjoying domesticated horses (Arabs primarily), my husband and I became aware of a 12-year-old, wild Mustang that is up for adoption. His only human handling has been to be gelded (ouch!) and we are told he is extremely skittish and wary of any and every human being.

Knowing all of this, I feel I am ready for a new challenge and would like to do my best to give this horse a good home.

My main concern is that we have our horses on a large 20-acre pasture, and we want to be sure that once we introduce him to our herd, we will be able to catch him! We've been told this is one of his least favourite activities. We would be grateful for any advice.

Crazy for a Mustang

Dear Crazy,

Actually, you're not crazy. You're smart. Hats off to you for recognizing that these wild horses are, truly, a breed apart. Think wolf versus golden retriever. Think cheetah versus house cat. Their motto may very well be "Run now, think later," and they have honed their "flight" self-preservation instincts to the max.

Every shape and movement means a lot to them. And since they subconsciously know we, as a species, are a bit buffoonish in our swaggering sense of superiority, they have a healthy distrust and, indeed, dislike for anything that smells and moves like, well, us!

My husband Chris "inherited" a true wild Mustang from Nevada years ago when someone had adopted it and simply lost the patience to work with it. "Peek-a-

Boo" is now 14 and has been with Chris since it was two years old. I can tell you that this wonderful miniature-Friesian-looking horse is more aware and ultra-sensitive than any in our herd.

To this day, if your angles of approach aren't *completely* user-friendly, he will turn his cute little Spanish Barb hind end and trot away. If he stands still to "allow" your approach, he stays a bit braced in anticipation of a wrong move.

Every single time, he will check in and see if you've gone back to being who you really are: a meat-eater on the prowl. And when he sees, yet again, that you know how to act like prey and move according to his rules, he relaxes, exhales,

Should you rise to his challenge that you be the best balanced predator/prey you can be, I can promise you this horse will be your greatest teacher, and along the path to enlightenment, your greatest frustration.

It will help if you can remember that, contrary to many domestic horses, Mustangs would just as soon be loners.

In fact, their druthers would put them on the scruffiest of desert prairies with horrid weather, no shelter and minimal edible ground cover over a million-dollar barn with the best hay and grain to be found. It would be foolhardy to believe otherwise.

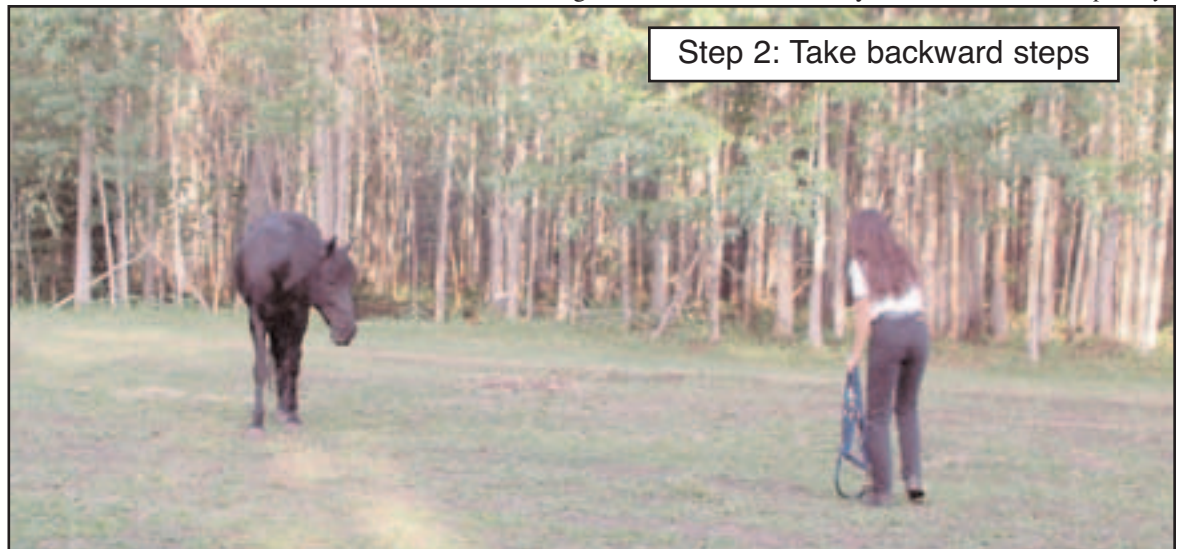
That said, when it comes to catching your wild gelding, first and most critical is the need for you to turn off *all* your predatory moves and instincts. Learn to move like a horse, with arcs and bends in your body to their body, not ramrod straight with a beeline

than Kung Fu approach will win over the heart of this hypersensitive animal.

If you have a catch pen, such as a round pen or a small paddock, to hold him in for the first few days, this would be optimum. You can then go in and out of this small pen with him, and know he will observe you sharper than a hawk.

Don't expect him to let you walk up and touch him. Even with all the right moves, he will watch you and watch you and he may allow you to begin moving in closer to him. Or not. When he does, the likelihood of him letting you reach out and touch him is pretty slim. Such horses know how to sidle and lean away from an outstretched touch. So best not to even try.

Instead, spend the first few days moving around him in Zen-like sweeping circles that always respect his head and neck area. In fact, you'd be wise to *completely*



Step 2: Take backward steps

Step 2: Take backward steps in front of the horse to draw him towards you.

drops his head, and is very kind and sweet. But he *never* takes it for granted. Never.

You are in for an awakening in terms of where these feral horses are coming from and what they really need from us in order to develop an "okay-ness" with cohabitating with two-legged predators.

to their head.

Think "catching" as in catching a ball (backing up and absorbing or drawing it into you) rather than "capturing" as in reaching out to nab a butterfly on the wing. Then develop a seventh-sense awareness for your own pushing, blocking, and drawing movements around him. That T'ai Chi rather

ignore his head and neck altogether. Be aware of the rest of his body instead, from the shoulders back.

Be aware of where his body is positioned in respect to you. And only put "pushing" pressure towards him if he shows you disrespectful gestures.

For example, if he is standing with his hip cocked towards you



Step 3: Approach slowly to the shoulder

Step 3: Approach slowly (think T'ai Chi) to the shoulder, with the halter in your outside hand (ie. away from the head).

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Step 4: Scratch his withers with praise



Step 4: Praise him by scratching his withers to let him know he's a good boy.

and his head out and away from you (very likely as he will certainly be head shy), you should walk slowly and lightly towards his hip to move it away. When it swings away (and it will), the front end will come towards you (biomechanics of movement). When this cause-and-effect takes place, immediately back away from him to "draw" him in towards you.

Know that this may take repetition, as the truth is, he doesn't trust you ... yet. He will need to test your consistency over and over again before he believes that you actually know that you are talking to him, body to body, being to being.

And then he will test your consistency some more because while pushing the body and drawing the head are the key, he will require that you prove your fluency in order to turn the lock and open the magic kingdom of trust and acceptance.

Also be aware that he will be very sensitive to any kind of "push" coming from you in your body, so make sure when you walk towards him, that your frame

is not "up and on," but relaxed and toned down.

If you go in like a cowboy ready to show him who's boss, you'll have a cowering, lathered up mess on your hands in no time. And he will never trust you. With Mustangs, the trust takes a long time. A long time. Once you have it, though, you can count on it. It's rock solid, loyal and true.

The good news is that you can now take this newfound ability to "draw in" the horses in the rest of your herd. You will be amazed at how quickly they respond to and appreciate it.

Horses who see humans push their hips and draw in their heads don't mind being caught. In fact, in our herd, all we do is walk out to the paddock, make sure our core is aimed only at the hip of whatever horse we plan to bring in.

That horse will then swing its hind end away and bring its front end toward us. We take a step back, it drops its head, usually blows and sighs, and then walks right up to us, very politely.

There's no drama. No chase

Step 5: When he's relaxed, put on his halter



Step 5: When you feel him relax, then drop his head into the halter, keeping your core folded away so that there is no "push" to the head. (If he senses such a push, he will be out of there in a heartbeat!)

scene. No carrots or grain. Just the appreciation of one body knowing how to move another with care and consideration. Be the shepherds to your high-strung "sheep." It works like a charm.

### Kathryn

*Kathryn travels extensively with her husband, Chris Irwin, as a trainer and coach conducting clinics and "Train the Trainer" sessions throughout North America. They are currently developing Riversong Ranch Equestrian Retreat on the shores of the McLeod River just west of Edmonton.*

*If you have a question that you'd like Kathryn to answer in a future column, please email her at [alphamare@telus.net](mailto:alphamare@telus.net)*

Step 6: Ta da! Happy day!



Step 6: Big blows and exhales – happy day!

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