

Dear ND Legislators:

Thank you for listening to your constituents regarding the horses in TRNP. Please support the SCR 4014.

THEODORE ROOSEVELT NATIONAL PARK HORSE EXPERIENCE
by Syndi (Musland) Miske

I do not recall exactly how old I was the first time I saw the horses at Theodore Roosevelt National Park (TRNP), however, I have had a relationship with them as long as I can remember. My family faithfully vacationed to Medora every summer when I was a child. In my younger years it was extremely difficult to get a close look at the horses because they were so spirited, spooky, and unattainable. As the nature of the round-ups changed the horses became easier to view.

I was the third of four children and every summer we consistently pleaded with our parents to bring our own horses to Medora to ride in the park. As a young child I thought that would be the ultimate vacation. Several decades later, having experienced this, I truly believe this to be the ultimate vacation.

My Dad told us that when he had a reliable enough pickup to make the trip we would take our horses. I secretly hoped that if I had my own horse to ride I would be able to get closer to the horses. Instead of visions of sugar plums in my head the night before Christmas, I had visions of TRNP wild horse manes and tails blowing in the wind. The unique colors of the TRNP horses painted the already beautiful ND landscape. When I was in seventh grade we finally had a vehicle that could withstand the trip carrying a load of saddle horses that far.

Our first trip to TRNP with our own horses was in the late '80's. Many may remember how difficult the '80's were due to drought and high interest rates. It was a tough time for people, especially those raising a family. My little sister and I felt as though we were traveling first class as we nestled in the hay in the gooseneck of our stock trailer traveling 280 miles across the state to Medora. It was in July and quite warm. The vents of the stock trailer afforded a constant flow of air on our youthful skin which was soon to

be sunburnt from hot sun under the spacious ND sky. When our parents stopped to fuel up we would crawl out of the gooseneck of the stock trailer and go for a brief walk. Back in those days we did not have the means to stop and buy a candy bar or refreshment with each stop. We were saving that for when we arrived at our destination, the breathtaking badlands of ND and the Theodore Roosevelt National Park. I remember our discussions as we laid in the hay watching our horses on the drive. We thought we were the luckiest kids alive, and we were! The notion of getting close to the wild horses was almost too much excitement to contain. It was a good six hour drive to Medora and we were too excited to fall asleep. The trip home was different. We were so fulfilled and exhausted from long hours of riding in the July heat we were able to nap some of the time. The heavy iron of the trailer gooseneck was warm to lay on, the musty smell of hay and manure pleasant. We did not have to worry about being crowded in the single cab pick up that was pulling the trailer. On the way home, not as much horse hay was left, but it was still enough to provide an itchy and luxurious cushion.

Since we had been spying on these horses for years on family trips, we knew that it would be best to unload our horses somewhere on the East side of the park. We did just that. The suspense had been building knowing this childhood dream was finally coming to fruition. We found out quickly that even with a trusty saddle horse it was still a challenge to get very close to the wild and free swift footed prairie beauties. Our hearts thumped with anticipation as we knew that over one of the next hills we would likely see some wild horses. We peered from atop the butte down on a herd of wild horses. We carefully walked our horses down the clay colored badland terrain to get closer.

The moment I had been longing for had finally come. Initially, I remember hearing one of the grayish-white band stallions snort as he danced around his harem trotting with his head held high and nodding disagreeably as if sensing danger. His back athletically arched and tail held high while blowing in the wind. Other bands in the meadow keenly picked up on the cue and became uneasy. The leader in each band circled, snorted, and commanded his harem to move out. Before we knew it they were galloping across the meadow and trailing up the rugged badland trails winding up and down in single file motion. The movement so swift and expertly

calculated in the unforgiving dangerous terrain. I remember thinking to myself how amazing it would be to ride one of these sure-footed steeds. From that point on I could not get enough of seeing the TRNP horses. It was like a cat and mouse game. Just as we would get to a point to see the horses they would be working their way over the next hill. Witnessing the trails the horses used and riding them in years to come further maximized our visitor experience. This was their home and they knew it well, navigating through areas which at first seemed impossible to climb.

I had never seen anything as majestic the TRNP horses and to this day I stand firm on that analysis. By the time I was a college student I had traveled to several other states and also to Europe. I remember giving a speech in college about my favorite place. That place was in the TRNP watching the wild horses. I was mesmerized by these amazing creatures. Words could not express the sense of peace seeing them gave me. The horses nostalgic and graceful movements were unlike the domestic horses I had been around. To this day when I see the wild horses feelings of warmth and excitement encompass me as memories flood back reminding me of the special family time we shared searching for, finding, and observing the wild horses. Approximately forty years from the first time I remember seeing the wild horses, I still get just as excited each time. My husband and son will readily attest to that! As an adult I have been able to share the love, thrill, and passion that I have for the horses with my nieces, nephews, friends, and family. Seeing others witness their healing presence and magic warms my heart as well. They are a unique ND treasure that is timeless and keeps on giving despite the time of the year. This is further evident to me as I notice people from around the world comment on our beloved TRNP horses on social media.

As a college student I was able to attend the TRNP horse sales in Dickinson after the horses were rounded up and culled. I recall my younger sister missed a day of high school to attend the sale with me. She bought a weanling filly that strongly resembled the 2022 filly named Cricket. She trained this filly to ride and our Dad trained her to pull a buggy. Years later that very mare was part of the magnificent team that carried me over the ND prairie at my parent's pasture on the ranch to the site of our wedding on my wedding day. Her reliable, strong, and quiet disposition made her perfect for the task. Time and time again, the TRNP horses have

blessed me. It is my dream for these horses to continue to bless others for years to come.