$0 for the first 4 weeks* **SUBSCRIBE**

Stallion named Chase in a race to save Ojibwa horse breed

Efforts to bolster lineage is a labour of love, living lesson in reconciliation

By: **Eva Wasney**
Posted: 5:40 PM CDT Friday, Aug. 9, 2024

Post Share Print Email Read Later

There’s a lot of expectation riding on Chase’s visit to Manitoba.

The petite black stallion is a rare breed several times over. He’s one of fewer than 200 Ojibwa horses left in the world and one of about two dozen stallions charged with keeping the endangered lineage alive.

And at 16 years old, time is of the essence. No pressure.

Standing in a paddock at Sagehill Stables, however, the affable little horse doesn’t seem fazed by the burden of legacy. He’s more concerned with the treats in his caretaker’s pocket.

Chase — whose full name is Babaaminizhikawaad or “He Chases Them Around” — arrived at the riding stable south of Winnipeg last summer from his home at Grey Raven Ranch, located on Seine River First Nation in northwestern Ontario. The goal is to breed him with compatible local mares and collect his semen for future use.

RUTH BONNEVILLE / FREE PRESS
Sagehill Stables owner Gwen Donohoe was keen to support the conservation effort behind Chase's presence after meeting several Ojibwa horses at nearby Aurora Farm.

Sagehill owner Gwen Donohoe was keen to support the conservation effort after meeting several Ojibwa horses at nearby Aurora Farm.

"We wanted the business to help in some way with reconciliation. This opportunity came up and we decided to give it a try," she says.

Taking on Chase was not without its challenges.

There are so few Ojibwa stallions because the hormone-driven intact males require special facilities and handling, making them harder to keep for the average stable or rider when compared to a gelding.

The intelligent breed is also a renowned escape artist. A new pen with double fencing had to be built for Chase, far from Sagehill's female lesson horses. Donohoe also needed to find dedicated caretakers to tend to the new resident during his stay.

Michelle McConomy raised her hand without a second thought.

RUTH BONNEVILLE / FREE PRESS

Michelle McConomy and her father, Bob McConomy are helping to look after Chase, a 16-year-old Ojibwe stallion at Winnipeg's Sagehill Stables.

"I just found it a fascinating story," says the elementary teacher, who first learned about the dwindling breed during a classroom workshop.

At Sagehill, Chase's presence has opened the door to insightful conversations about colonization with day campers and riding students.

"As a teacher I feel like we do a good job of focusing on Indigenous culture and history, so kids have that base and then this is a new (chapter) they get to learn about," McConomy says.

She and her dad, Bob McConomy, started taking riding lessons at Sagehill during the pandemic and quickly got more involved in the barn community. The father-daughter duo each lease horses and participate in stable programming on top of feeding, watering, exercising and grooming Chase and his pen pal, Rocky, on a regular basis.

"I just feel really good working with the horses," Bob says, adding his approach to horsemanship has shifted as he's learned more about Ojibwa horse history.

“It’s a partnership.”

RUTH BONNEVILLE / FREE PRESS

At Sagehill Stables, Chase's presence has opened the door to insightful conversations about colonization with day campers, riding students and Michelle McConomy, who volunteered to be the valuable stallion's caretaker.

Caretaker, instead of owner, is a deliberate word choice among Ojibwa horse stewards meant to denote the mutually beneficial relationship between the animals and Indigenous communities.

Also known as Lac La Croix ponies and regarded as spirit animals, the helpful horses historically roamed free alongside human settlements in Ontario and Minnesota. They were rounded up as needed and occasionally offered food and shelter but were otherwise left to forage in the surrounding forests.

As North America was colonized by European settlers, the horses and their caretakers were removed from their traditional lands. The introduction of vehicles and government policy — which deemed the semi-feral horses invasive pests — further led to the decline of the breed.

By 1977, there were only four mares left on Lac La Croix First Nation (now called Gakijiwanong Anishinaabe Nation), which were slated to be destroyed by Canadian authorities.

The horses were saved by a small group of advocates and shuttled across the border under cover of darkness and later crossbred with Spanish mustangs — a breed with similar characteristics — thus beginning a decades-long project among small, independent breeders and family farms to bring the Ojibwa horse back from the brink.

SPIRIT HORSE RETURNS

Jodi Contin first learned about Ojibwa horses during an outreach program for a chamber music festival in Ontario. The endangered breed would go on to change the trajectory of her life and career.

Contin is an Anishinaabe hand drummer from Wasauksing First Nation. In 2019, the artistic director of Parry Sound's annual Festival of Sound introduced her

Saving an endangered animal isn't easy.

"The problem with being one of the rarest horse breeds on Earth is that the genetic diversity narrows considerably," says Kimberlee Campbell, a horse breeder and Chase's full-time caretaker.

"In a very tight gene pool, you can end up with only the recessive genes they may carry."

Campbell, a semi-retired Harvard languages professor, has been working with Ojibwa horses since 2011 after falling in love with the breed's fine features and easy going temperament.

Generally standing under 14 hands (1.4 metres) high at

to Ken MacDonald, a French horn player from Manitoba. The pair were tasked with creating an educational music presentation that combined their very different personal stories and instruments.

CLICK TO READ MORE

the shoulders, the horses come in a variety of dark solid colours and are equipped with small, hard hooves, fuzzy ears and a special nose flap to protect from the cold.

Campbell also sees the preservation of the Indigenous breed as an act of resistance.

“It’s a way to push back against everything that’s been taken from Indigenous people on this continent,” she says.

Through Grey Raven Ranch in Ontario, she and longtime partner Darcy Whitecrow have been helping increase the breed’s numbers and educating the public about the Ojibwa horse story through meet-and-greets and a children’s book, titled *Runs with the Stars*.

Campbell has had Chase for a decade, during which time he’s sired 10 offspring (including a few unplanned oopsie babies; he’s an escape artist, remember?). She’s sent him off to stud with other Ontario breeders, but he’s now too closely related to the breedable mares in that province. Hence the move to Manitoba.

“I had nobody to breed Chase to and he has to be used,” she says.

The small breeding pool in North America is closely managed by the Ojibwe Horse Society. While the work is a lot like horse matchmaking, Trevor Kirczenow's job as breed registrar is a decidedly unromantic combination of DNA testing and spreadsheet keeping.

"I had nobody to breed Chase to and he has to be used."

–Kimberlee Campbell

"In the last few years we've had an average of a dozen new Ojibwa horse foals total in the entire breed — the numbers are really tiny," says Kirczenow, a health researcher and former Manitoba Liberal candidate who keeps a small farm near Dugald.

"It's really important to track all of them; I try to track things to do with their health and I try really hard to connect different caretakers and breeders with each other. At this point, every single stallion in the breed is incredibly important in terms of their genetics."

His own horse, Asemaa'kwe, is one of a handful of mares in Manitoba deemed genetically

suitable matches for Chase. Kirczenow is excited to have Chase in the province for both his breeding and public-awareness potential.

With about 10 breeders nationwide, the society is in dire need of more caretakers.

While stallions have a wild and unpredictable reputation, Chase doesn't fit that mould. The calm, human-oriented horse has been involved in equine-assisted therapy and learning programs at Grey Raven Ranch and Sagehill.

"They're just a friendly, outgoing horse that needs to be kept with us."

–Kimberlee Campbell

"I hope that meeting a horse like Chase would encourage some (local breeders) to think about if it might be possible for them. If they would consider supporting the Ojibwa horse breed even just a little bit, it would make a huge difference," Kirczenow says.

Campbell agrees. “We need to get more people owning these horses. They can be trained for a lot of disciplines and they’re just a friendly, outgoing horse that needs to be kept with us,” she says.

For those who would like to help, but don’t have the resources to take on a horse, Michelle McConomy has launched a GoFundMe campaign aimed at raising $3,000 to cover the veterinary costs associated with breeding Chase and collecting and freezing his semen. Excess proceeds will be donated to the Ojibwe Horse Society.

eva.wasney@winnipegfreepress.com

X: @evawasney

Winnipeg Free Press | Newsletter

Business Weekly

MONDAY MORNINGS

The latest local business news and a lookahead to the coming week.

SIGN UP FOR BUSINESS WEEKLY

Eva Wasney
Reporter

Eva Wasney has been a reporter with the *Free Press* Arts & Life department since 2019. **Read more about Eva**.

Every piece of reporting Eva produces is reviewed by an editing team before it is posted online or published in print — part of the *Free Press*'s tradition, since 1872, of producing reliable independent journalism. Read more about ***Free Press*'s history and mandate**, and **learn how our newsroom operates**.

Our newsroom depends on a growing audience of readers to power our journalism. If you are not a paid reader, please consider **becoming a subscriber**.

Post Share Print Email Read Later

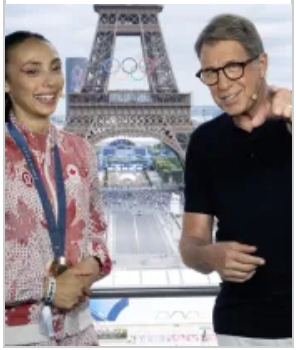
REPORT ERROR SUBMIT A TIP

The Free Press is certified by

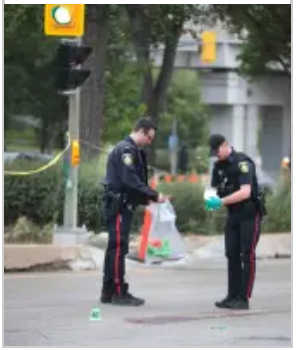
jti Journalism Trust Initiative

MORE STORIES

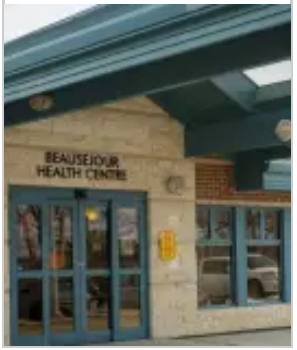
Great Scott! Retiring broadcaster Russell expecting emotional finale in Paris



Winnipeg police zero in on vehicle in deadly hit-and-run at The Forks



Rural, northern Manitoba communities struggle with staff shortages, ER closures



Winnipeggers rally to draw attention to violence in Bangladesh

MMF opens doors to new Dauphin pharmacy

‘Key stakeholders, key players’

Links

Replica E-Edition

Front Page

Arts & Life

Business

Canada

Local

Opinion

Sports

World

Reader Bridge

WFP Events

Free Press 101: How we practise journalism

Advertising

About Us

Archives

Betting

Free Press Community Review

Classifieds

Contests

FP Features

Guides

Homes

Newsletters

Obituaries

Podcasts

Puzzles

Photo and Book Store

Become a Free Press Patron

Privacy Policy

Contact Us

Advertising Contact

Send a Letter to the Editor

Staff biographies

Submit a News Tip

Subscribe to Newsletters

My Account

Log Out

Grid View

List View

Compact View

Text Size

©2024 Winnipeg Free Press