



Mato Towanjilla (Bear of the Heavens)

I named my little Medicine Hat Paint, Mato Towanjilla, bear of the heavens in the Lakota language. But we all just called him Sky Bear or “Sky” for short. Ann Evans, my longtime friend and next-door neighbor, called to say Sky was ill and I rushed from Colorado Springs to my ranch where we began leading him around, keeping him moving, hoping a likely intestinal issue would resolve. (Photo Left: Christoph Stopka)

It was evening before our vet could get there. He shined his headlights on Sky while I held him for his examination and treatment. He gave him a 50-50 chance to overcome a likely blockage. After the vet left, we closed Sky up in the small round pen in front of my barn with water and hay and salt. The rest of his family were in the big round pen attached to the barn with a good look at the small corral where Sky rested. They were eerily quiet.

When I got up early the next morning to check on him, I dreaded what I might find. I never imagined what I found. Sky was missing! He had broken out of the round pen. Tracks led to the west toward the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. I searched. Ann Evans searched. Our neighbors next to Ann’s land came to search this forested area on my western border.



We hiked and hiked but never saw fresh tracks except those on the road. Then our neighbors Dan, Marsha, and their daughter Madison called Ann to say they had found Sky’s body on their place. They are very kind to allow our horses to graze on their acreage next to Ann’s property, which connects to my ranch.

Sky had clearly traveled west into the area where we focused our search. But, at some point, he must have doubled back, heading past his brother, Flint, and his friends in the big round pen. He continued through Ann’s ranch to the neighbor’s acreage. Ann was on her way to an eye appointment in Denver when she let me know that they had discovered Sky’s body. Within minutes I was walking in the beautiful grove of cottonwoods where he lay. The ground around him was undisturbed. It appears he quietly laid down and went to sleep. His body cavity had been opened and his organs eaten. Only a bear would have had the strength to

do this. But, strangely, the bear had not contorted his body or rolled it over which is typical scavenging behavior. He lay as if asleep on his side. The bear scat in the area around Sky confirmed it was a bear who had feasted on his body.

Although we all mourn the death of this gentle soul, how fitting that a bear came to make use of the “bear of the heavens.” Several hours later Mission Wolf came to pick up his body to take to their wolf preserve in the southern part of the valley. It comforts me that he will help to feed another revered animal of the Lakota people.

I returned to the big round pen and let Sky’s friends out. They began trailing away. Only



Sky's brother, Flint, stayed near the barn. He called for Sky. By force of personality, not size, Flint is the band leader. One of his jobs is to make sure the family stays together, a family that up to now had always included Sky. When no answer came, Flint hesitated, then trotted to catch up to the band.

Sky's value in death will never equal the value he brought to us during his 25-year life. He was born in Wyoming near Devil's Tower on the Brislaw's 3,000 acre Cayuse Ranch. The Brislaw family is famed for reviving the Spanish mustangs of the Conquistadors. Sky's mother was a paint and his stylish father, Azore, a grulla. Sky was a lovely combination of both.



The grullo medicine hat paint was barely a year old when I traveled to the Brislaw's. I brought him to live with his brother, Flint, on my ranch at the base of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains.

My cousins Martha and Loren Roush, great horse people, came to visit when Sky was a yearling, admiring his remarkable color and markings.



Sky was easy to train and we had fun riding together on the Rainbow Trail and the lakes above the trail.

His only really big outing came when he, along with Flint, Trace, Cloud's sisters Mahogany and Smokey joined with other horses and their advocates in the Pryor Mountains. We called it our "Spirit Ride," an attempt to prevent the largest removal of horses (including our Freedom Family) in the history of this spectacular wild horse range. (Right; Sue De Laurentis/Flint, Donna Moore/Sky, Susan Sutherland/Smokey-not pictured Ann Evans/Mahogany, Ginger Kathrens/Trace)



Donna Moore rode an excited Sky. She said he side-passed all the way to the spectacular Dryhead Overlook!



There was no doubt who Sky's special human was. My great niece, Chelsea, first rode him when she was three (with some help from her mother, my niece, Julie)--then all by herself!

As a teenager and as an adult, Chelsea would come visit and rush out to see Sky, literally vaulting onto his back. Sky always knew that his special person had arrived.



It is hard to imagine the ranch without Sky Bear. I feel his gentle soul and sweet spirit everywhere. Look up. Maybe you will see Mato Towanjilla in the night sky—the bear of the heavens.

(left below and lower right, Chelsea and her sister Leah)











Sky Bear 1995-2020