

**Ep #61: The Lost Horses:
It's Time to Pass the SAFE Act**



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Carol J. Walker

[Freedom for Wild Horses](#) with Carol J. Walker

Ep #61: The Lost Horses: It's Time to Pass the SAFE Act

Carol: Have you ever wondered what you could do to help stop our horses in this country from going to slaughter? If so, then this episode is for you. I'm your host, Carol Walker. And let's get started.

Welcome to the *Freedom For Wild Horses* podcast, the place to find out about wild horses in the American West and what you can do to help them stay wild and free. If you love wildlife, wild horses, and the freedom that they stand for, this show is for you. I'm your host, Carol Walker. Let's get started.

I'm very delighted to have Ashley Avis here today, and she's going to be talking about a new project that she's doing. Ashley has just really been a huge supporter of horses and wild horses. And her film *Black Beauty* and her film *Wild Beauty*, which I think is probably the best film on wild horses dealing with wild horse issues that has ever been done.

And now she is starting a new project, and she's here to tell us about it. And I really think maybe if you could talk a little bit about how *Black Beauty*, then *Wild Beauty*, and now your new project kind of link together, because obviously they do.

Ashley Avis: Thank you, Carol. Thank you for having me and helping to illuminate some of these issues that we're going to talk about. I grew up with horses like we've chatted about before, and I grew up with, like so many of us have, with the great equine novels, the *Black Beauty*'s, the *Black Stallion* novels. And those were the books and the stories that really activated my imagination as a young person. They made me fall in love with not only horses but the natural world and the wonder that we have all around us.

And so flashing forward to my late 20s, early 30s, I was brought aboard to write and direct a reimagining of *Black Beauty*, which was on Disney+, and Kate Winslet voiced Black Beauty. And I really wanted to illuminate the themes that Anna Sewell explored in the novel, which wasn't necessarily a children's book. It was written as an animal welfare plea. She really wanted

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to make change in the 1800s for the horses of her time. And so we very much wanted to honor that in *Black Beauty*.

But it was through that process that I started understanding what wild horses were facing, and I didn't know, despite being a horse person in my youth, what wild horses were going through in our country with the roundups and the incarceration and the catastrophic unfairness that's occurring today. And so that gave way to wanting to create kind of a *Blackfish* for wild horses, a documentary that would illuminate those issues. And so for five years, conception to completion, we created *Wild Beauty*.

And it was going through that process, and one of the last pieces of filming that we did at the very, very end when I was actually in the middle of editing the doc, I told my producing partner and my husband, I said, we really need to explore the slaughter pipeline and those themes in this because it's a huge issue that wild horses obviously are facing. And so it was actually, it was the last piece of filming when we flew to Texas and went undercover into the auction pipeline to get a, you know, a first-hand look at what's going on.

And it was myself, it was my younger brother, and my father, and we all wore button cams that we sewed into our shirts, and we went into some of those auctions and into some of those feed lots with kill buyers to document what's happening. And what people, it's a similar thing with wild horses, even if you're a horse person or an animal lover, so many people don't know. And if they do know, they don't realize how bad it is or how treacherous or how dark, or that slaughter is a for-profit industry and we have these kill buyers that are preying on people to, you know, save the horses, but the horses are caught in the middle.

But as we were basically untangling all of that back in 2021, it became something, leaving Texas and rescuing some horses and knowing how many were left behind, kind of created this hole in my heart. That was the hardest piece of the filming, was that trip to Texas.

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And so flashing forward a few years later, after our documentary has become this tool in classrooms and in Congress for wild horses, we've been to Washington, D. C. We've been fighting for legislation. I was approached about taking on the SAFE Act about seven months ago. And that has now evolved into this campaign we're calling The Lost Horses.

Carol: That's wonderful. So, yes, as you said, a lot of people don't understand that selling your horse is a very treacherous thing because your horse can end up at auction and then bought by a kill buyer and then shipped to Mexico or Canada. And just because in 2007 we no longer have slaughterhouses in the United States, that doesn't mean that horses are not being slaughtered. They are being shipped instead to Canada and Mexico, and it makes it even more horrific for these horses having to go on these journeys before going to these slaughterhouses.

I was seeing that in 2024, there were 20,000 horses that were slaughtered from the U.S. And obviously, that is a huge issue.

Ashley: And we're hearing, we're working closely, and we'll be releasing a list of endorsers soon, but we've been working with a number of major organizations on this campaign and aligning on strategy and aligning on messaging. And teamwork, obviously, that's what I believe, I fiercely believe teamwork is so important. And we've been hearing from our partners that 2025 is on an uptick. We're looking at possibly closer to 25,000 horses being shipped this year, which is not, you know, we're trending in the wrong direction, and it's important to get this messaging out there.

Carol: So, tell me a little bit about your work for the SAFE Act. The SAFE Act is Save America's Forgotten Equines, and it has been in Congress many times before, and it has never been passed. So what are you thinking that this time the strategy will be different and we'll be able to pass it?

Ashley: I think in collaborating with some of these incredible partners who have been fighting for this for so long, where we feel like we can uniquely

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fill in a way that perhaps hasn't been done before, is through very elevated, cinematic, and emotional storytelling. And that's where we want to help and use our skill sets to provide something to not only the equestrian community, but also to the, you know, the larger public.

More people in our country need to know that this is happening because over 80% of Americans consistently oppose horse slaughter. We don't eat horses in our country. Yes, other countries do, but it goes against our values as Americans, with the horse being such an iconic symbol in our country. And so our strategy is multipronged. The Lost Horses is a PSA campaign that we started releasing last week, with Jessica Springsteen, Olympian Jessica Springsteen narrating our first spot.

Carol: And it's a wonderful spot. I, yeah, it's wonderful. It's very moving, very engaging, I think, for horse people.

Ashley: Thank you. I appreciate that. And we, we initially weren't sure, you know, especially after *Wild Beauty*, should we approach this as another documentary? But at the end of the day, I mean, we released, I don't know if I've ever said this, we released *Wild Beauty* earlier than we anticipated because wild horses needed the film to come out.

We could have worked on that for so many more years, but at a certain point, it's like you're creating these things, these assets, these vehicles to make change. They have to be birthed to the world. And so in discussing The Lost Horses and a very early iteration of what this has become, we weren't sure if it should be a feature length documentary, but that would take, it would take too much time.

And ultimately, it is a hard issue to talk about. Any of these issues are hard, but slaughter and the idea of that to get people to pay attention for 60 seconds, to get them to be emotionally engaged and incentivized and angry, but also motivated to take action, to make the click, send the message in their 60 seconds, or to call or to take those additional action

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steps. How do you get people in our world today, who are faced with so much, to look at something for a moment?

And so our strategy was shorter form, which I struggle with as a narrative storyteller, but we decided, I ended up writing these 90-second of what we're calling them vignettes, these 90-second glimpses into the individual life of a horse that can become lost.

So it's the Thoroughbred that thundered down the track, and something happened. There was an injury, he got sold. And through no fault always of the owner, because horses can go through the *Black Beauty* story, and owner number five sends them away. The original owner never knows, and then they're standing trembling in a feedlot in Texas, wondering where everybody went.

So the stories of Thoroughbreds, the stories of ex-show jumpers, of discarded lesson ponies, of donkeys, of wild horses. So each of these very emotional stories is narrated by an equine-loving celebrity. And those megaphones, those voices are so important to get people to look. And they of course end with a call to action to go to, we've built a microsite called losthorses.org that you can send a letter to Congress in 90 seconds.

You can download posters and videos and social media, pre-written social media bits where you can share this campaign. And it's just so easily accessible and makes it something that you can do so quickly to raise your voice because, you know, I know Sandy Sharkey, the photographer, says it well often, you know, one voice times a million makes a difference. And that is obviously so true. And we need collectively to raise our voices for this.

So the PSAs will be released every couple of weeks up until next spring. We're planning a fly-in day in the earlier part of next year that we'll announce soon. And then it's coupled with a lobbying and PR campaign that's also launching.

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Carol: Terrific, terrific. I absolutely think that is a piece that has been missing. And having a really sophisticated message put together that is going to draw people in, I think, is going to make a big difference. And as you've gotten celebrities involved, people get very excited about celebrities being involved for sure. And yeah, this is amazing.

Ashley: Thank you. And I think it's really, it's been really beautiful. All of these issues are hard, and we all want to fight so much to make the change and to get things passed and to see something happen for wild horses, for domestic horses.

And I've felt very, very encouraged at the level of response and outreach on this, because if you've got a platform and you're a good person, I feel like you are indebted in a way to use that to make a difference. And the number of actors and celebrities that have said yes to this, and the different organizations that have come together to say, we might not all agree on every aspect of equine issue or strategy, but let's sit down on a call and let's talk about it. And the people that have come together and the very, very brilliant minds that have come together, it makes me think that perhaps this is hopefully the right time, and we can actually push this through.

Carol: I think, you know, not everybody who loves horses gets involved with wild horse issues, but everybody who's involved with horses can understand that a horse that they have owned could end up at slaughter. And that is true for everyone. And so I think this really should resonate with people in a really deep way, if they think about it.

Ashley: If they do. And it's been, you know, we were, we spent almost a month filming in July and August to capture the components of this campaign. We filmed with show jumpers. We filmed with children and their ponies, all different breeds of horses, to show the world that it's not just, you know, some people errantly think, oh, it's just older horses or the sick horses or the antiquated kind of concept of the glue factory horse that these are the horses that are going to slaughter. It's not a healthy horse. It's

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not, you know, the lesson pony that I had when I was a kid. Of course not. And it was amazing while we were filming to go to show jumping events and to go to barns, and to go to all of these different places, talking to different equestrians from various walks of life.

And just like the wild horse issue, I was just stunned that there was so much either disinformation or just a lack of understanding of how bad it is, and, you know, the response of, well, a horse in my field wouldn't go to slaughter. And it's like, oh no, we've been down there.

And we actually went back to Texas a few weeks ago, and we went undercover again. And with my work on *Wild Beauty*, obviously, it was not as safe this time, given there's a little bit of potential. One of the kill buyers recognized me in the middle of an auction. A little...

Carol: Oh, jeez. That's not good.

Ashley: No, it was... I haven't felt unsafe often, but that was not the best. We ended up leaving that auction around midnight. And we, and he tried to outbid me for me for...

We ended up rescuing five horses. You know, we have a small bandwidth to do something, and we, we ended up rescuing five horses that are coming to California, hopefully next week, to a wonderful adopter who's helping with this campaign. But, in going down there again, being far more versed with the reality of it, because in 2021 when we filmed, it was, you know, it was all brand new. And now, really knowing what's going on, it was so much harder in so many ways, because unless you're a billionaire, how do you save them all?

But it really reinforced some of our ability to really speak to what we've seen and to be able to tell the different breeds because we need everybody. We need the Thoroughbred industry, we need the show jumping industry, we need the Arabians. Obviously, the Quarter Horse Association

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has traditionally lobbied against the SAFE Act. We'd love to open up a conversation with them and hash this out.

We need everybody to come together because if you care about horses, you do not want to see them going across the border to Canada and Mexico. Slaughter is not humane euthanasia. It's often not done in one fell swoop. So many of these horses suffer. Some of them are killed while they're still alive. And I'm trying to be eloquent with my language. This isn't something that should be happening in 2025. It has to stop. So we're hoping, yeah, that's what the campaign represents.

Carol: Well, and of course, the issue isn't just stopping shipping overseas to slaughter, it's stopping the mindset of people who think horses are disposable. And obviously, humane euthanasia is the preferred route to go with a horse. You would never want to subject it to the horrors of slaughter. And so a horse is not a toy or a disposable item. A horse is a living sentient being, and they deserve to be respected and live out their lives as best they can, or as best you can, taking care of them. And so that is a whole mindset that needs to change for sure.

Ashley: It is. And some of the responses, not often, but the idea of, well, a horse is livestock, isn't it? No, our horses in our country are raised as companions, as athletes, as therapy partners. And it's almost like saying, well, I can't take care of my dog, so I'm going to ship my dog to that kind of fate, to be consumed, for human consumption.

I mean, it's inane to me that we could think, and I think it, it does point to either some people just don't want to face it, and it's an easy route to say, either I can't take care of my horse, and that's terrible, or I don't want this horse, or it doesn't match the breeding profile or the confirmation. And loading onto a trailer, hoping it lands in a, you know, in a soft place, in a good home. I mean, I don't think that you can call yourself a lover of horses and an equestrian, a guardian to these incredible beings, and allow that to happen, or say that there's any component of this that is okay.

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Carol: Well, and I am in complete agreement with what you just said, but that's pretty revolutionary for the horse industry. That is not traditionally how the horse industry considers horses. And it's a terrible shame. And growing up as a little girl loving horses, thinking about these horses suffering is just unimaginable.

Ashley: Yeah, it is. And we've been going through, and I'm a so much more of a words person as a writer, but I do feel very bolstered by statistics. And we've been going through a lot of them with what ASPCA has done, the USDA, HSUS, and all these stats that point to just the flaws in some of the thinking, where you get the rebuttal of, well, where are all the horses going to go?

Well, 1.2 American households are equipped and ready to adopt horses in need. And so if we're looking at 20 to 25,000 horses a year, we're not going to have an unwanted horse crisis if we shut down the slaughter pipeline.

Another response we've been getting from certain individuals and certain breeds goes into discussing, will breeding be regulated? You know, that isn't really a conversation. From my perspective, the breeds need to come together, and they need to put together aftercare programs, or there are so many different things that we can do within the different breeds.

And I think the Thoroughbred industry is actually really trying to do that with organizations like Karma or the Thoroughbred Aftercare Alliance. And we've had some really good conversations with those guys about what they are trying to do to give these horses, after they perform or they're athletes to give them a second chance, a second home. And so much of that points to, as you well know, therapy programs or veterans programs and...

Carol: Or even private individuals. I had an off-the-track thoroughbred, and he was such a wonderful partner. And remember when the breeding market crashed? I think it was when the housing market crashed and breeding went way down on the Arabians and the Thoroughbreds, and the Quarter horses. And there were so many less horses at slaughter. And really these

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breeders who breed indiscriminately and then just dump the horses that don't go up to their standards, they need to regulate themselves. And that needs to be done because that's a huge part of how many horses are getting sent to slaughter.

Ashley: When we were down there, it was heartbreaking. I mean, all of it's heartbreaking, but the first horse in one instance that I ended up seeing, she came right up to me and she put her head in my hands and she was a Thoroughbred and she was so sweet and so beautiful and just clearly had been well taken care of until obviously being dumped.

But I turned to my husband and I said, I wonder if she's chipped. And we, we ended up rescuing her, and we got her scanned, and sure enough, and she was dumped where she was, along with several other Thoroughbreds. And we don't have the finances to save everyone. We wish we could.

Carol: No, no one does. You know, to save everybody. Yeah, no.

Ashley: Yeah, but we got her scanned a few days later, and sure enough, she raced 10 times, she never placed. And it just, it makes me sick because I can still, you know, you could still see the eyes of the ones that you give a pat to and you leave behind. And that's what makes this so, so awful.

And so I, but that's also why we needed to go down there and capture that additional footage to get people to realize how bad this is. And for anybody that kind of bucks against the SAFE Act, I just challenge them to go down to a place like Texas. Go to Bowie, go to Cleburne, go to Presidio, and you take a look, go look in the eyes of those horses and watch the trailer pull away, and you tell me that this is okay, because it's not.

Carol: Well, and with wild horses, of course, we had the Adoption Incentive Program where people were being paid \$1,000 per horse, and there was one adoptive family that they made \$52,000 off of these horses. And I'm so glad that we were able to get that program shut down, but mustangs are still being sent to slaughter, and it's heartbreaking because they should be

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out on our public lands. They shouldn't be traveling to Mexico and Canada to be slaughtered.

Ashley: And that was when we, in 2021 when we did our first Texas trip, we showed up at one place and they said, well, there were 40 or 50 wild horses in the pasture, but they all, they're gone. And then we found out that there was, you know, an auction before the auction very early in the morning that was not on the schedule, that wasn't on the pamphlet. And we showed up and, you know, we stuck out like sore thumbs because we just did, we weren't the usual suspects in that auction, but it was watching wild horses go through those shoots and watching them get bid up by kill buyers.

It's such a, and this isn't even the best use of language, but it's such a slap in the face to everything that horses stand for, everything they've given us. I mean, it's just to be rounding up wild horses and flipping them into slaughter is just, we obviously agree on these points, and it's all heartbreaking. It's hard to put one over the other, but the unfairness is just staggering.

Carol: Yeah. Yeah. Well, obviously, the unfairness of a domestic horse who's spent their whole lives being a partner or doing whatever their human wants them to do and then being discarded like trash is just horrific.

Ashley: Yeah. And that's what we're hoping to evoke, and what I think the heartbreaking beauty of the PSAs that are going to be coming out is that you feel that from the horse. I grew up doing a little bit of hunter jumper, not in a super fancy way. I never made it to Wellington. You know, I had my little, my little Quarter Horse, but I've had a lot of conversations with my parents, actually, about the horses that were in my life. And thankfully, my mom knew about the slaughter pipeline when I was a kid, and she didn't ever...

And it wasn't really until we engaged in this campaign that we had some in-depth conversations about how she knew. And obviously, we knew

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where I had three horses during different parts of my life as a kid and a teen. And my mom was always very conscious of following them and where they went.

But it almost feels like, and I know you haven't seen the spots coming out yet, but in writing each of them, it almost feels like kind of tapping into the horses you once loved and the fear that they would have of losing the human they love and transitioning to another owner and then another and another. And that person falls on hard times, or there's something darker and they end up in one of those places.

So I'm hoping... my goal is to evoke that sense of emotional urgency in viewers to take action for the SAFE Act.

Carol: Yeah, that's great. And I know you're also asking people to ask their Congress people to sign on to the SAFE Act. And that, of course, is a very important thing. And just getting it in front of your senators and representatives and saying that, how important the issue is.

People don't think about this, but if you call your representative and your senator's office, it makes an impact. They do see that, and it really is the best way to do it rather than some petition or something because it's much more personal. And they have to consider you as their constituent.

Ashley: Exactly. We've talked about the impact of children in the past, too. We launched around the Onakee roundup in 2021, we launched a campaign called #IStandWithWildHorses. And it originally was just more so for children to write in and to not type a letter, but to actually, in kid writing, kid speech, you know, the parent isn't doing it, and sending in a postcard or a handwritten letter to members of Congress.

And I don't know if I've told you this story, but we did a day with a number of foster youth about a year ago in Topanga, California, and introduced these kids to wild horses. And several of them had never met or touched a horse before. And the transformation of these young people, even just physically

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being so locked up or not being able to make the eye contact or being comfortable speaking.

After an hour, two hours with these horses, suddenly they were open and they were bright, and it was just, it so points to the power of horses and other paths that these horses that are discarded into slaughter could have, and the impact that they could have if they can find that second chapter.

But I had these children and teens write letters to, at the time, Congressman Schiff. And I walked this stack of letters into D.C. because we were there a few days later, and I told his staffer if just please, if he reads just one, read this top one.

And it was a young woman who had lost her family and likened the loss of her mother to the wild horse that she had met. And Congressman, now Senator Schiff, signed on to the helicopter bill, the Wild Horse and Burro Protection Act, a few days later.

And it just, it was such an example, one of many, actually, because we've done that with a number of different types of children from different places. And young people cut through in a different way. I think children cut through in a different way. And those handwritten letters are something that get paid attention to. And we've gotten that response from a number of congressional offices that they, they're very moved by them.

And so we are going to be launching a children's component to this early next year. We haven't determined the timing yet, but a coordinated letter-writing campaign from kids to say, we need to pass the SAFE Act.

Carol: Great. That's wonderful. Anything else you can think of?

Ashley: I think outside of asking people to join this, the collective nature of our voices is going to be what is most powerful. And I know we're all so passionate about these issues, whether it's wild horses or it's Arabians or Thoroughbreds or all horses.

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Obviously, when you're an advocate, there is fatigue, and you do have your days when you get down, and that's very human. But I do think that this is hopefully a moment. There are some huge organizations that are getting behind this. I can't wait to be able to talk to some of the actors that are getting involved, but if you can just please, we're releasing action weeks with each celebrity-voiced video. And we're doing our second one next week for Veterans Day. Dermot Mulroney is, I can say that, he's voicing our veteran spot for us.

During the drop of each one of these celebrity videos, we're asking people that week, send the message, make the call, if you're comfortable making the call, and then please, you know, spread the word, share those videos, and tag people. We're in a social media world. Tag your members of Congress, tag animal-loving celebrities, tag your local papers and your radio stations, and let's just, you know, from now until spring, let's have a coordinated effort where we really try to push this over the mountain for the horses.

Carol: That's great. And on social media, where can people find the campaign?

Ashley: The Wild Beauty Foundation, Instagram, it's at Wild Beauty Spirit. And then we have a microsite that we have launched, losthorses.org, which is strictly about this campaign. And it has information, it has talking points for your members of Congress if you're doing lobbying on your own or if you're making those calls. It has a social media toolkit with pre-written social media posts or stories. We have downloadable posters that align with the branding of the campaign, so everybody knows what it is. And then obviously the videos that you can share.

Carol: That sounds wonderful. Thank you so much, Ashley. And thank you for the work that you're doing and your passion for horses. It really makes a difference.

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Ashley: Thank you. I appreciate it. Thank you for helping spread the word, as always.

Carol: Thank you for listening to this episode of Freedom for Wild Horses. For more information, please go to www.losthorses.org.

Thank you for listening to this episode of *Freedom for Wild Horses*. If you want to learn more, follow me at www.wildhoofbeats.com for more information and for ways to help America's wild horses. See you next time.