



WE THE NORTH

The gritty Canadian Horse exemplifies the nation that created it. So why is it at risk of disappearing?

BY NICOLE KITCHENER

As Canada looks back on 150 years of Confederation in 2017, the Canadian Horse's role in building the country should be underscored. But, although officially recognized by Parliament as the national horse in 2002, the breed today faces a potentially perilous future with only about 2,500 individuals worldwide.

Rare Breeds Canada, a non-profit dedicated to protecting endangered breeds of farm livestock and poultry, lists the Canadian as a species at-risk. It's also on the critical status list of comparable U.S. watchdog, The Livestock Conservancy.

The breed's population has fluctuated since its 14 forebears – 12 mares and two stallions – arrived from King Louis XIV's private stable in France to what is now Quebec in 1665. This mix of Andalusian, Arab and Spanish Barb became the basis of a horse population that grew to 24,000 by 1784 and 150,000 by the mid-1800s.

At this point, they had become an extremely robust, smaller-statured horse without influence from other breeds. The Canadian was much admired and sought after by early settlers and earned the nickname "little iron horse" for its hardiness and ability to thrive in the often

Breed Characteristics

Colour:

mainly black or bay, occasionally chestnut

Height:

14-16 hh

Average weight:

400-455 kilograms
(900-1,000 pounds)

Build:

Sturdy, well-muscled, well-proportioned

Other:

Thick, wavy mane and tail

unforgiving Canadian environment. Their physical strength and endurance, combined with a willingness to work, made them ideal for jobs such as driving, plowing and logging.

By the late 1880s though, the population was nearly extinguished for various reasons including introduction of other breeds, mechanization and export to the United States for cavalry use during the Civil War as well as World War I and World War II. Governments attempted resurrection throughout the years, including the establishment of the first stud book in 1886, the formation of the Canadian Horse Breeders Association in 1895, an improved stud book in 1907, and a number of federal breeding programs starting in 1913. But, by the 1970s, only 400 registered Canadians existed. Since then the population has yo-yoed.

The breed has this in its favour: Canadian enthusiasts are an impassioned bunch. “The obvious reason is they’re the national horse. They are a reflection of Canada. So, we have the connection to the patriotism of that,” said owner Breanne Dou Roig.

The Canadian Horse has seen tough times partly because of the country’s “inferiority complex,” said Rick Blackburn, owner of documentary film production company Shootfilms and self-described “Canadian nut” – both the country and the horse, that is.

“If something says Canada on it, we immediately stop paying attention to it. It’s ridiculous,” he said. “This is another example of Canadians not taking Canada seriously and not really protecting or preserving our heritage.”

Breanne agrees. “It’s our national horse and it is getting fewer in numbers,” she said. “What does that say about how we’re supporting Canada?”

One thing is certain, the passion of individuals like Breanne and Rick will be what ultimately saves the breed from demise. Read on for their stories about how Canadian Horses have touched their lives.



Breanne and her husband Marcel aboard Ferro and Troy. The couple chose the Canadian Horse for their unique combination of versatility, durability and personality.

BREANNE DOU ROIG

Young newlyweds Breanne and Marcel Dou Roig knew they wanted to build a life together in the mountains. So, three years ago, when Marcel found a job in his field as an electrician in north-central British Columbia, they moved from Ontario to a 10-acre property in the small community of Fort St. James.

Before leaving, they sold their four horses, knowing they needed “a special type” of breed to suit their new lifestyle, said Breanne. Something “durable and self-sufficient that would really want to bond with us because it’s really important to have a safe animal up here in the mountains.”

Years earlier, while working as a dressage trainer in Florida, Breanne had been quite taken with a Canadian Horse named Majestic. “He was really intelligent, outgoing, super-funny. He was really athletic,” said Breanne, now 30. “Between him and the Warmbloods, he held his own. He wasn’t as amazing as far as movement goes, but he took the cup when it came to personality and I always remembered him.”

This was just what she and Marcel were looking for.

Just over a year ago, two Canadian geldings were shipped from Alberta breeder Canadian Hay Ranch to their new B.C. home. They have since become a major part of the Dou Roigs’ world.

Blain Revelstoke Yoshi is Marcel’s horse. (Unlike most breeds, there is a set naming system that is used to identify individuals based on the registration format employed by the Canadian Livestock Records Corporation. Registered names contain three elements – herd name, sire’s name and the horse’s given name, which starts with the letter of the alphabet assigned to the year when the foal was born, i.e. 2017 = E; 2018 = F.)

Six years old and standing 15.2 hands, they call him Troy “because he’s our little war horse,” said Breanne. Brave and strong, he is the worker of the two, plowing snow in the driveway, pulling firewood from the bush, pushing cows, dragging pastures to seed and leading the way on long trail rides. Troy isn’t too confident when he’s learning something new, but once he’s caught on, “he’s extremely proficient and takes pride in it,” said Breanne. He can also be kind of serious “but has this subtly sweet side.”



Breanne says Ferro enjoys showing off his tricks. Here, he performs the Spanish Walk.

Her horse is four-year-old, 15.1-hand Blain Eros Apace, aka Ferro, Spanish for steel – a nod to the breed’s nickname “little iron horse.” Shy at first, Ferro now has a “huge” personality, said Breanne. “Teach him a trick and he’ll show it to you all the time. Tell him he’s good and he turns on the X-factor,” she laughed.

Although Marcel and Breanne interact with both horses, she says Troy and Ferro know which human is theirs. “That’s kind of the unique quality they have,” said Breanne. “They really want to be with you.”

It’s a trait for which the Canadian has been recognized for centuries. “The thing that makes them stand out for me is they are so diverse in what they can do. They want to do it for their person. They might not make it to the Olympics, but they’re going to try their hardest at everything,” said Breanne.

RICK BLACKBURN

Filmmaker and Canadian history expert Rick Blackburn is so dedicated to the Canadian Horse, he rode 4,000 kilometres from his home in Quebec to Texas A&M University with 50 DNA hair samples in a saddlebag to prove the breed is the foundation equine stock of North America. And he and his wife Louise Leroux created a full-length French-language documentary about the journey, *La Légende du cheval Canadien* or *The Legend of the Canadian Horse*.

Why exactly? “It got under my craw,” he said. “Breeds come and go. Breeds die out. But another great Canadian thing is now fading away and why?”

Rick speaks from experience about the Canadian Horse. When his family decided to get horses more than a decade ago he considered the breed as it appealed to the history lover in him.

“The history of the Canadian Horse is pretty much the same as Quebec and Nouvelle France and that’s what I was interested in,” he said.

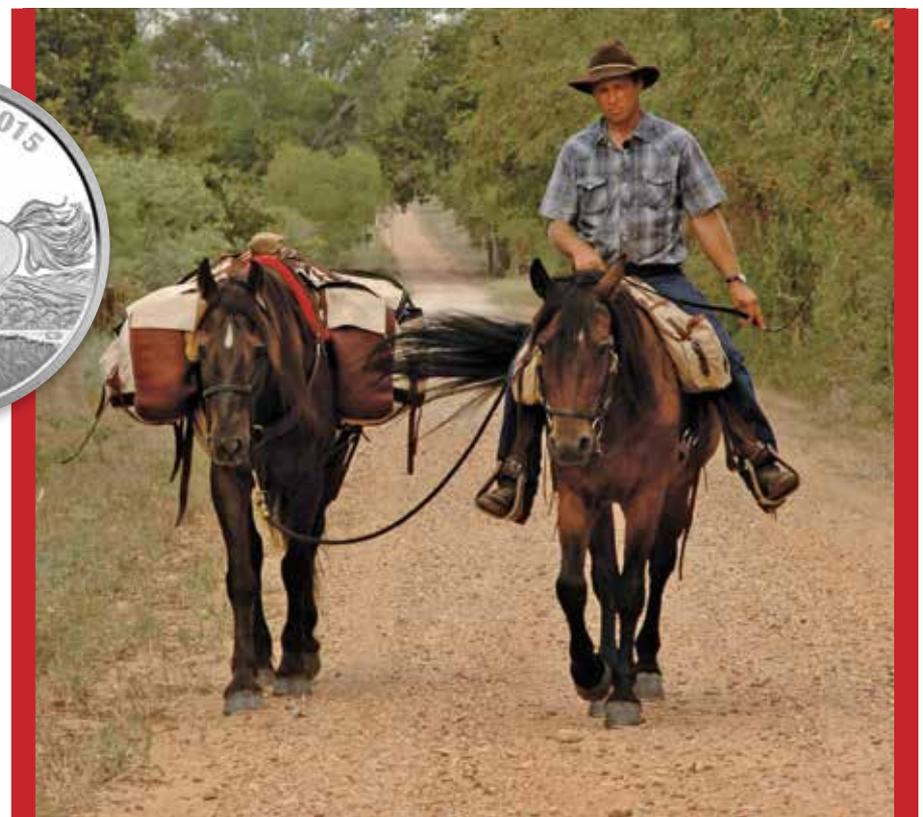
Canadians seemed like a perfect fit. The gelding Galopin (Mainguy Bismark Galopin) came home first and proved his worth right away.

“I was a typical non-horse person and a father and I told my girls, ‘Safety first. You’re not allowed to go to the barn or do anything with the horse without me,’” he recalled. But early the next morning ... “I looked out the window and my seven-year-old is on the back of the horse. My five-year-old is holding his mane and he’s eating hay out of a bucket.”

A couple of months later came Hannah (L’Angelus Pacha Hannah), who was in foal with Tacha (Peace Haven Kurt Tacha). The herd remained a trio until a few months ago when a rescued gelding named Socrates, arrived.

Canadians are exactly as legend describes them, Rick said. “They are

On their way to deliver DNA samples to researchers at Texas A&M and promote the Canadian Horse breed, Rick rides Hannah as Galopin carries the gear.

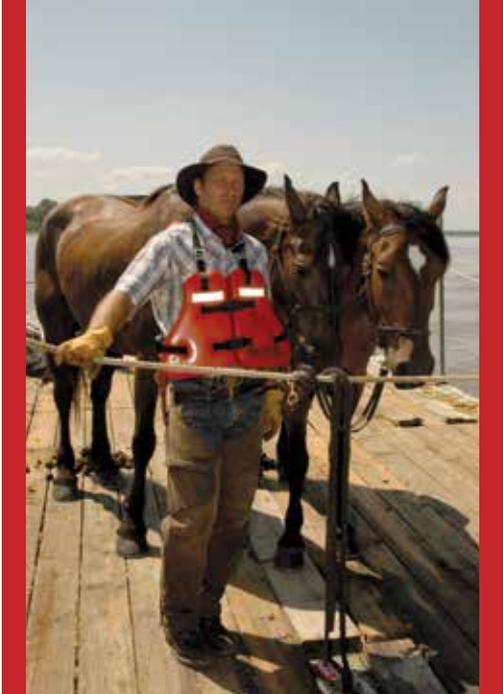


To celebrate the breed’s 350th anniversary, the Royal Canadian Mint released a special edition \$100 Canadian Horse silver coin in 2015, designed by Alberta artist Michelle Grant.



ROYAL CANADIAN MINT, REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION | CANADA POST © 2009, REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION

In 2009, the Canadian Horse was depicted on a Canada Post commemorative stamp.



Rick and his horses take a raft to cross the Mississippi River between Memphis, Tennessee and West Memphis, Arkansas.

.....
 incredibly versatile, docile, domestic, very human-centric breed of horse. This amazing, sort of chunky, Labrador dog of horses.”

The more Rick discovered about the Canadian’s “feats of strength, endurance and human connection” the more he was reminded of the Morgan, which was reputed to be North America’s foundation breed. “The producer’s lightbulb went off and I thought, ‘I’ve got a great film idea here. A great Canadian, Quebec story.’”

While researching the project, Rick contacted geneticist Dr. Gus Cothran at Texas A&M University, who was mapping the genetics of North American equines, to ask where the Canadian Horse fit into the equation. Dr. Cothran explained they had never been able to procure sufficient DNA samples to include in his dataset. Part of the problem, Rick explained, was the language and cultural gap between the Quebec French core breeders and the scientists.

So, he became the link and in summer 2009 began the four-month journey to Dr. Cothran’s Equine Genetics Lab, about 155 kilometres northwest of Houston. He rode Hannah all the way, with Galopin packing necessities. His wife Louise followed in a camper. They covered about 60 kilometres a day, six days a week, mainly using original French trade routes.

“I wanted to help, in a very small way, raise awareness about the breed,” said Rick. “The one liner is that if I’d couriered the DNA to Texas nobody would have watched the film. The idea was to ride them down to give the film a central narrative that showcased the strength and endurance of the horses.”

The documentary was released in 2009. When the study based on Dr. Cothran’s work was published five years later in the *Journal of Heredity*, it revealed what Rick and the researchers had suspected. The report summary reads: “These findings support the ancient legends of the Canadian Horse as North America’s first equine breed and the foundation bloodstock to many American breeds, such as the Morgan Horse.”

Perhaps even better news, the investigation showed the breed has “high values of genetic diversity.” This essentially means the Canadian has been bred responsibly, making it easier to

make a population comeback without risk of inbreeding, explained Rick.

As for Rick and his Canadians, he’s currently planning another long-distance ride and associated film. (Enter new pack horse Socrates!) The Heritage Canada partnered project called *Canada’s Forgotten Soldiers* will see him ride 8,000 kilometres across Canada to honour the nation’s war horses and those who rode and cared for them. 🐾

The Canadian Horse Breeders Association is headquartered in Quebec. To find a breeder visit www.lechevalcanadien.ca

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