

Central Coast: Past, Present, Future

A donkey by any other name: The Rancho Burro Donkey Sanctuary

By Mark James Miller

“Masters, do not forget to specify when time and place shall serve, that I am an ass.”

— **Dogberry, in Shakespeare’s Much Ado About Nothing**

Late in the 18th Century the word “donkey” replaced “ass” to describe *Equus africanus asinus*, that member of the horse family that human beings domesticated and put to work more than 5,000 years ago.

That about summed up what I knew about donkeys until a recent visit to the Rancho Burro Donkey Sanctuary (RBDS) in the Edna Valley. There, I learned that they are gentle, playful and loving creatures who can’t wait to give a friendly nudge of their heads to tell you they want their famously long ears scratched or their necks petted.

“They are very appreciative of affection,” says Jim Eckford, who, along with his wife Carlen, owns the 501c that rescues donkeys from places as far away as Texas.

Whether called a donkey or an ass, I was happy to learn some fun facts about them: They can live to age 50. A male donkey is called a “jack.” A female is called a “jenny.” A young donkey is a “foal.” When a jack mates with a mare, the result is a “mule.” When a stallion mates with a jenny, a “hinny” is the result. There are more than 40 million of them on the planet, but the African Wild Ass is a critically endangered species.

Jim and Carlen began rescuing donkeys in 2002, and while caring for them is a round them clock job, they have never looked back.

“We saw there was a real need for this,” Jim says. Some of the ways donkeys make it to RBDS are through being abandoned by their owners, from neglect, and even being saved from the slaughterhouse. There are 13 resident donkeys at RBDS, as well as one mule named Ruby.

Donkeys are part of our collective consciousness. A donkey has been the symbol of the Democratic Party since the 1830s. They are mentioned 88 times in Shakespeare. We have colloquialisms such as “donkey's years” to refer to a long period of time, and “talking the legs off a donkey” describes an especially loquacious person.

Almost the moment we arrived at the corral gate, Jim introduced us to “Bo,” “the unofficial greeter,” who comes right over to say hello. Once inside, we are presented with some of the other residents of the corral: Tutti, rescued from a Texas slaughterhouse and who was, unbeknownst to anyone, about to give birth to Bella Luna.

Then there was Norton, who Jim describes as “the most playful of all.” After getting his head rubbed and his ears scratched, Norton went to an open space on the ground and had an obviously fun time rolling on his back in the dirt. Getting quickly back on his feet, he brayed, then trotted to a place nearby and went happily to sleep.

Over the years RBDS has grown to the point where they now have a full-time employee. Like all 501cs they rely on donations to keep going. Vet bills alone are a major expense.

Many of the donkeys come to RBDS with physical problems such as their hooves needing to be trimmed (if left untrimmed they continue to grow until the animal is almost

lame) to needing to recover from physical mistreatment. Jojo, for example, was the victim of rodeo-style roping practice, being lassoed and then having his feet tied together. “In spite of this, he is as affectionate and loving as he can be.”

To find out more, go to www.ranchoburrodonkeysanctuary.org. You can also find them on Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/Ranchoburro/>.

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