

A group of blind horses pasture at Rolling Dog Ranch near Ovando. The ranch is home to 76 disabled animals, including 20 blind horses. At right, Alayne Marker puts a halter on Tonto, who went blind a few years ago and now spends his time with three other blind horses.



# second chances

*Couple's one-of-a-kind ranch provides care and a home for blind and disabled animals*

BY CHARLES FINN  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHAD HARDER

The horses stand in pairs or grouped together in threes. Appaloosas, Paints, Quarter Horses, they bow their heads, thinking their horsey thoughts. When the wind comes out of the Bob Marshall Wilderness it blows over fields of alfalfa, and if the horses have a mind to, they set out against the wind, testing it with their shoulders and breasts. They beat their hooves against earth and hear it drum back and they smell the distant snow. If they had eyes with sight in them they would surely look up and see the blowing fields, the mountains, this selfsame snow. But these horses have no eyes with sight in them — some have no eyes — and when darkness falls it falls no differently than does the afternoon light.

On a gusting October afternoon, I turn off Highway 200 five miles east of Ovando and point myself into a north wind. Two miles farther on I come to a dusty crossroads that I speed through.



On the seat beside me lies a paperback edition of *The Shape of a Pocket*, a collection of essays by the Booker Prize-winning author John Berger. Opening it to a page I've marked just for this occasion, I hold the book against the steering wheel as I read:

"I know of few things more sad (sad, not tragic) than an animal who has lost its sight. Unlike humans, the animal has no supporting language left which can describe the world. If on familiar terrain, the blind animal manages to find its way about with its nose. But it has been deprived of the existant and with this deprivation it begins to diminish until it does little but sleep, therein perhaps hunting for a dream of that which once existed."

I replace the marker and look to my right. A line of wire fence, absent of barbs, runs parallel to the road. Behind it pairs of horses (blind, existant, undiminished) stand cropping the late fall grass. Each pair is cordoned off into a separate paddock roughly



10 acres in size. Closest to me a pair of Appaloosa graze, while in the near distance three chestnut mares frisk and jog in the afternoon sun. It is only because I have come specifically to visit these blind animals that I know they are blind. Otherwise, I would be as much in the dark as they are.

The idea that you can keep a blind horse safely, that it can be pastured, ridden, that it can lead a happy, even productive life, flies in the face of conventional thinking. Conventional thinking, however, is not Alayne Marker's strong point. Personal experience, not hearsay, inform her opinions. Marker and her husband, Steve Smith, operate Rolling Dog Ranch Animal Sanctuary, a non-profit charitable organization that is home to 76 disabled animals, including 20 blind horses, 18 blind dogs and three blind cats (I don't ask about mice), as well as horses, dogs and cats suffering from cancers, neurological and muscular disorders, or deafness. It is, to the best of their knowledge, the only facility of its kind in the country.

When I pull in, Marker is standing just inside a wire enclosure with photographer Chad Harder. Already Harder is being introduced to the fallacy of Berger's statement. Travis, a cream-colored husky mix with a fused jaw knocks his tail against Harder's leg, begging attention. Meanwhile Blind Evelyn, a black lab, "sings" in a series of different pitched woofs then drops to the ground, rolling eponymously on her back, four paws in the air. When Smith comes out of the house there are handshakes all around, including with the dogs.

For the next four hours we tour the ranch. Twelve buildings, 160 acres, pity conspicuously absent. Smith and Marker caution us not to feel sad for the animals, but the reminder is unnecessary. Except for obvious deformities — a three-legged dog, a cat with leaky eyes, a horse with eyeless sockets — it is impossible to discern what problem an animal has, if any. The dogs have acres to run and play, and run and play they do. In "the cat house" blind and deaf cats wind around our ankles, purring. When Marker calls a horse it will lift its head, swivel its ears to the front and begin walking directly toward her. Visitors, seeing the horses gallop across the open spaces, will invariably ask, "Where are the blind ones?"

At some point in each person's life, it is hoped they stumble upon what they are truly meant to do, and when they do that the fall is long and vertiginous and without end. Smith and Marker never had to talk about their decision to start an animal sanctuary. They simply gravitated toward it, like a stream finding its way down hill. They were working corporate jobs in Seattle and over time collecting a variety of disabled dogs and cats. They saw a "niche," as Marker puts it, and began working toward filling it. In 1998 they bought the land in Ovando — roughly 50 miles

**Steve Smith carries Allie back into the cottage after an afternoon in the "Dog Paddocks" Allie has been diagnosed with a brain disorder that prevents her from walking straight or standing for long periods. The Canadian-born mix came to the ranch after money was raised for her plane ticket.**



**Steve Smith leads Scout into the stables after a day out to pasture. Although Scout was nervous when he arrived at the ranch, he gained confidence and now nickers whenever Steve or Alayne approach.**

northeast of Missoula — and began preparations. In 2000 Smith called home with news of their first tenant, Lena, a blind horse.

“The animals are a real inspiration for us,” Marker says, standing next to Lena. “Seeing how these blind horses get around and how much they enjoy life. We’re giving them a chance and we’re glad we can do that. When we started we didn’t know a damn thing about blind horses. There was nothing out there on

how to care for a blind horse. Lena taught us. Essentially everything we’ve learned came from her first.”

Marker slides an arm around Lena’s neck and fits a halter. The two commune for a moment in the attitude of intimates, cheek to cheek. Lena came from a ranch in the Bitterroot, and from what Marker and Smith can piece together, her training consisted of tying Lena’s reins tightly behind the saddle so that if she reared up she’d go over backwards. The idea was to teach her not to rear, but four successive times landing on her head and back, the repeated ground shaking blows, ruined her optic nerve. She is now totally and permanently blind.

There is a saying in the horse world that if you can’t ride it, pack it or breed it, you can it — literally. The pun does not go unnoticed, nor is it meant to be cruel, it simply extends the idea that a horse who has outlived its “usefulness,” been injured or is disabled in some way, is not worth keeping.

On a Friday afternoon last spring in South Carolina,



**Alayne Marker feeds two draft horses on an autumn evening. “We call them the ‘surfer dudes,’” says Alayne, in reference to their tan, muscled bodies and long, blond hair. While neither of the horses are blind, one has a “sway back” that prevented it from being a useful draft horse. Instead of slaughter, the two nearly inseparable brothers will live their remaining days at the Rolling Dog Ranch.**



a well-meaning veterinarian may have been thinking just that, drawing up a syringe to euthanize a horse. It was a newly dropped foal who had come into the world blind, her eyeballs smaller than a pencil eraser, a condition known as microphthalmos. The owner, a breeder, wanted the animal put down, but just before the injection was to be administered the barn manager serendipitously intervened, asking for one more day. Saturday morning, a phone rang in Montana. Smith picked it up.

Each animal at the sanctuary has a similar story — dogs with muscular dystrophy, another that had been beaten blind with a shovel, Winchester, a cat who was shot four times with a .22 and lived. All were rescued and through the auspices of strangers found their way to Rolling Dog Ranch. The saddest call Marker says she ever got was from a woman who was sobbing on the phone. She'd just put down her horse, saying her vet had told her if she kept the animal it would be the cruelest thing she'd ever done. Believing him, she'd euthanized the animal only to discover afterwards the Rolling Dog Ranch Web site. Reading about Smith and Marker the woman said she felt she'd betrayed her best friend.

“Those are the people we’re trying to reach,” Marker says.

Smith wants it clear that they are not trying to make vets or owners out to be bad people. “It’s out of ignorance,” he says, “that they take these positions. They

**Dogs Penny and Tyler guard the wood shed, a winter’s worth of firewood used to heat the dogs’ cottages. While the ranch’s blind dogs spend their nights in the heated and insulated cottages, during the day they romp about in a two-acre, fenced field.**



Geese are supposed to head south, but your skin?

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don't know any better. Nobody tells them any different. And again their experience tends to be limited to that initial period when a horse is going blind and panicking and fearful and thrashing around and they just extrapolate from that that the animal is going to be like this its whole life and it's inhumane to let it live this fearful existence."

As I drove away it was almost dark. Up until a few weeks earlier, I'd never thought of a blind animal, horse, dog, cat or otherwise. Never considered the idea. That day, I almost came away with a blind kitten — I was that touched. I also touched John Berger's book again but instead pulled out a newspaper clipping I'd saved about Smith and Marker. It was from a paper in the Bitterroot and it began with a quote from Mahatma Gandhi: "The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated."

In the distance I could just see Smith and Marker bringing in the last of the horses. They were gray wraiths in that expansive landscape, moving small and insignificant toward the tabernacle of a sheltering barn. I was alone in the car, gratefulness stacked up inside me like a deck of cards. With deliberate formality I remember speaking Gandhi's words out loud. Not that a soul could hear me, but because it pleased me to think that the horses would have agreed. 🐾



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