

CAMARGUE'S Rugged Rebels

In his series "Band of Rebels: White Horses of Camargue," photographer Drew Doggett documents these graceful animals and their caretakers against the monotone backdrop of their remote habitat in France.

Story and photos by DREW DOGGETT

The horses that freely roam the Camargue marshlands in southern France have a mystical quality. Known as the White Horses of Camargue—although, technically, they are gray—their exact origins are unknown. But many believe they're descended from the horses that lived in the region tens of thousands of years ago and whose bones are deposited thickly around the Paleolithic site of Solutré.

Camargue, a river delta southwest of Arles, is only 360 square miles; it's bordered on the east and west by two branches of the Rhône and on the south by the

Mediterranean. But it abounds with remarkable species that have adjusted over time to live in this harsh, wet region. Camargue is humid, so the summers are heavy and the winters bitterly cold; one environmentalist described it as a "watery desert." But the horses and Camargue's other inhabitants aren't troubled by the challenges the conditions pose. The environment seems only to reinforce the resilience of these sturdy horses.

It's not just the horses and other wildlife that catch the eye here; it's also the light. Camargue's natural qualities render the tones of water and land within one end of the



This image helped inform the title of the series: "Band of Rebels." Despite the odds, these horses have lived in the same manner for years, and they are naturally suited to Camargue's extreme conditions.

light spectrum, casting an ethereal quality. This brilliant, nuanced contrast with the horses' coats, and their framing against the minimal backdrop, heightens the animals' beauty. There are also textural effects that I wanted to document: Running through the mud, the horses dirtied their pristine coats, but this also created a painterly finish that reminded me of modern art. With their remarkable coloring and defined musculature, the horses seem otherworldly.

A tight-knit group of caretakers, the Brotherhood of the Camargue Horsemen—also known as *gardians*, or “cowboys of the Riviera”—look after the horses. Since the 1500s, the *gardians* have preserved their caretaking tradition, although social and economic factors have begun to chip away at this longstanding, noble career.

The *gardians* also look after the region's native breed of cattle—also called Camargue—that are known for their black coats and vertical horns. This is one of the only places in southern France where bullfighting is legal, and the region's 100 or so arenas draw tourists who want to witness *la course Camarguaise*, the area's traditional and largely bloodless bullfight, in which the white-clad matador, or *raseteur*, must grab a ribbon from between a black Camargue bull's horns.

As Camargue has become an exotic destination for bullfighting and its horses, the *gardians* now deal with the tourist influx, which only provides regular income during the busy summer season and often leads to permanent effects on the environment. Camargue has faced such disruptions before, sometimes on a large scale: During World War II, for example, Camargue was a military training ground, which adversely and permanently affected the environment.

The *gardians*' job can feel isolating. They live in single-story homes deep in the marshlands, generally with no windows due to the delta's high winds, and far from major cities. Even so, the cowboys have created and kept their own rituals, like placing bullhorns on their doors to ward off evil spirits or celebrating an annual festival, the *Fête des Gardians*, on May 1.

The *gardians*' relationship with the horses and black bulls is a symbiotic one: The Camargue horses historically have served as the cowboys' workhorses and help them wrangle the bulls. The long, dynamic connection between the horses and the *gardians* is based on the trust and respect that the men and the animals have earned in their many years of living alongside each other.



COVER FEATURE



Gardian Pierre Pages has spent more than 30 years tending to the horses in Camargue. "With the horses, it's all about respect," he told me. "They have to know you, and you have to know them. It's a codified language: gestures, looks and some words. [But you must] do it kindly, softly, with tenderness."



I became interested in exploring the salt water's effect on the horses' coats and manes; it created a painterly, textured effect.

In taking this image, I was drawn to the dichotomy between the horse's power and musculature and the calm waters.





The natural tones of the land, water and sky in Camargue, framed against the horses' pure coloring, created an environment that enhanced their majesty.





The Camargue horse's large, expressive eyes are one of their most striking characteristics. As they look at you, they seem to see deeply into your soul. Their defined, muscular makeup and nearly white coloring coupled with the rich coloring of their eyes gives them a fantastical appearance.





The horses range freely in Camargue's marshy delta. The hierarchies and relationships within the herds are apparent in nearly all of the horses' interactions. I found myself able to identify the leaders quite easily as they galloped through their watery landscape.

WANT MORE?

ON THE WEB:

To see Drew Doggett's Camargue images, visit drewdoggett.com/collection/band-rebels-white-horses-camargue/.

ON VIDEO:

Get an inside look at gardian Pierre Pages' life among the horses in the short film *Band of Rebels* at chronofhorse.com/article/camargue-horses, featuring an original score composed by Oscar and Grammy winner Christopher Ward.

MEET THE ARTIST:

Drew Doggett will attend a Nov. 11 reception at the Tryon International Equestrian Center's Legends Club for a showing of the images and *Band of Rebels* film. The reception, from 5:30 p.m. to 7 p.m. in Mill Spring, N.C., is open to all. The images will be on display at the Legends Club through mid-December.