

Apogee Photo Magazine

## Life with Animals: A Photo Essay of *Wild Domestic Animals in Armenia* by Osvanna Hovsepyan

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**Wild horses - living far from people. Spring - May, 2007.**

They live in a completely different world. They're perfect and have no need to be better. They are simply what they are. They feel your energy, even if you don't communicate with them, don't talk with or touch them. It seems they feel your aura. I talk about a world that seems to be close to us, but at the same time, we know little about--the world of animals. I think people need animals to become kinder and happier--to have bigger hearts.

David Sarkissian (filmmaker) and I used to love animals, but loving was not enough for us. It wasn't enough to feed and save many homeless, motherless, and sick animals. We wanted to do something more, to show the world their true nature and beauty. So, we decided to shoot a film.

We chose domestic animals as our film heroes, because most of them become victims of human whims. They live with people, which is the reason they seem less interesting and more ordinary.

Our film-shooting days became the happiest days of our lives. In the village, people warned us not to approach untamed animals—such as the horses that lived on a nearby mountain. People said the horses had killed several men. However, when we reached the top of the mountain, I was suddenly no longer able to determine if I was experiencing a dream or reality. It was like a page of a fairy tale book. The horses were completely wild and had never known a saddle, a loud human cry, or a lash. We quickly realized that the only way we were going to be able to achieve the kinds of extraordinary images we wanted was to become a part of nature, to forget we were humankind, to become one of them. We needed to understand the language their hearts were talking.

The horses accepted us at once--a great honor for us. The bonding process began when I went and lay down very close to them. The stallion (the herd included only one male) came to me and began to smell my foot. I could barely manage to control my urge to cry out with happiness. My heart was jumping out of my chest. His nostrils were so huge that, as he smelled me, they were pulling at my trousers like a vacuum cleaner. Then other horses moved closer, one after another, to smell as he had. They loomed over me, gigantic and powerful. When they had sniffed their fill, they began eating grass next to me. I understood that they had chosen to trust me. Then David came and lay down. He had the good fortune to be able to enjoy the same happiness that I had; he was also accepted. In fact, one mare liked him so much that she took his trousers into her teeth and began to lift him up.



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**Female horse lifting David up with her teeth.**

The horses were beautiful and free. There was no mind-thinking, no conscious or subconscious, only feelings which were on the highest level of purity. One day, when I was sitting, a foal approached me from behind. I didn't turn to look at her, so I wouldn't scare her. She smelled my hat before suddenly seizing it and running away. David and I called her "Lirb," which means "crazy girl" in Armenian.



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**"Lirb" with her mother. She was so active and that was disturbing everyone.**



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**Artsrun and his son Saqo with one of their oldest female horses, which is 13 years old.**

The herd was owned by Artsrun Voskanian, who had dreamed of owning a herd of horses since his childhood, but his father had never let him. Little Artsrun saved his money for years in order to purchase his first horse, but his father gave it away when Artsrun wasn't home. His father used to tell him that having animals was not a "serious" job. Artsrun didn't manage to collect his horses until he was already a married man. Now he has ninety-two wild ones that he loves with no expectations of receiving anything in return. His horses love him and can recognize his voice from far away.

One day, the horses proved just how much they had come to trust me. I was walking with my dog that I call Dingo. Suddenly Dingo noticed some wild birds and began to bark and chase them. I turned around just in time to see a group of horses preparing to attack. I didn't know what was happening, but I began to talk to them, saying things like, "Hey, what's the matter? Don't you recognize me?" Once they recognized my voice, they calmed down. Later, Artsrun explained that was a very dangerous moment, because the horses thought Dingo was a wolf. They were getting ready to fight to protect their young. They could have killed my poor little dog.

In addition to horses, animals such as cows, sheep, pigs, donkeys, and huge dogs (that reminded me of black bears) also lived in the area. David and I wanted to capture the most intimate shots possible, so we often set up our camera among the animals and went away. Once they were confident we were gone, the animals would investigate our camera, coming close enough to poke their noses into the lens.



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**A hungry baby drinks the milk of her mother. This mother had 15 piglets.**

**What a strange flower?**

We didn't have to be absent for the animals to vent their curiosity. One day, while I was shooting resting sheep, I felt strange breath from behind me. I turned and met a huge face—eye-to-eye. The donkey began to smell my face, ears, and shoulders. I kissed his nose, and I think he liked it, because he learned where my mouth was and stayed close to it all day. We rested together; I talked to him; he ate from my hand (by the way, he ate all my bread). I think he fell in love with me.



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**Self portrait - a sweet kiss for a donkey.**



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**She could stand and look inside the lens like a monument. I wondered what was she thinking that time!**

The sheep were also interesting. I sat among them, doing nothing, just sat and tried not to think about anything. I was attempting to be like them, to become one of them. They came closer and began looking into my eyes. They seemed wise. They seemed to be talking with me, seeing every cell in my soul. Even when they were resting, they appeared to be meditating. The kids liked to touch everything that was strange. They were curious about my camera, my face, and my clothes. They liked to lick the camera and chew on my jacket and my shoe-laces.



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**Little kid looks at me and is afraid to get his nose closer.**

David and I were accepted by the cows, as well. In fact, they licked us so much that we didn't need to take baths. (I took this picture after having a cow give my face a big lick.) I had the good fortune to be a midwife for a little calf. She was born in May and she seemed to be cloaked in gold, so we

called her May-Gold. She was born to a fourteen-year-old cow named Maral (which means “beautiful girl”), who had mothered ten other calves. The birth was very difficult, and we worried that the baby would die. But, luckily, we were in the right place at the right time, and everything is fine now. Little May-Gold is healthy and beautiful.



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**She looks at me after giving me a big lick to my face.**



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**She was born and shining like gold.**

In contrast, the dogs that lived there had a reputation in the village of being very dangerous. People said the dogs had lived free in nature so long that they had reverted to the instincts of wild animals. They certainly were not like the dogs we were used to seeing in human company. They were huge and heavy. When they played with us, they rolled us on the ground beneath their weight, and we had trouble breathing.

When we were with the animals, David and I felt like we had joined a big family. Sadly, our film is not only about the happy life of animals, but also about the ways in which animals are used for transportation, food, and clothing. This article, however, reflects the dream of letting animals be what they are, without forcing them to fit roles that people find appropriate. I wrote about a dream that I had the good fortune to realize.



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**David & Osvanna are young artists searching the world for friends who are also interested in protecting animals.**

**Self portrait - he used to rest next to me every time I lay down on the ground.**

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