VINTAGE

Horsewatching

Desmond Morris

Contents

About the Book

How intelligent are horses? Why do they toss their heads and what makes them paw the ground?

After spending more than twenty years studying the body language of the human species, Desmond Morris turned his attention to the behaviour of some of our closest animal companions. First he looked at dogs, then cats, and now horses. As Curator of Mammals at the London Zoo he was able to study closely the zebras and wild horses in his charge. More recently, as a racehorse owner, he has scrutinised the glamorous world of thoroughbred racing.

Throughout his long involvement with horses, Desmond Morris has never stopped asking questions. In *Horsewatching* he sets out to answer them. As a zoologist and a lifelong student of animal behaviour, he approaches the horse world in an unusual way, dealing with topics often ignored in equine literature. In addition to examining details of behaviour, Dr Morris considers such questions as why horseshoes bring good luck, why we don’t eat horses, why jockeys are allowed to whip their mounts and why we call a bad dream a nightmare. And for punters everywhere, he applies his zoological mind to the all-important question of why some horses run faster than others …

About the Author

DESMOND MORRIS studied animal behaviour under the famous Dutch ethologist Niko Tinbergen at Oxford University. He then became Curator of Mammals at London Zoo, where he established his own behaviour research group. For thirty years he has presented animal and human behaviour in many popular television series, including *The Animals Roadshow*, which he has made the subject of a recent book. His book *The Naked Ape* added a new term to the English language and was a worldwide success. Other bestsellers include *Catwatching, Dogwatching* and *Catlore*.

Also by Desmond Morris

The Biology of Art
Men and Snakes (*co-author*)
Men and Apes (*co-author*)
Men and Pandas (*co-author*)
The Mammals: A Guide to the Living Species
Primate Ethology (*editor*)
The Naked Ape
The Human Zoo
Patterns of Reproductive Behaviour
Intimate Behaviour
Manwatching
Gestures (*co-author*)
Animal Days
The Soccer Tribe
Inrock (*fiction*)
The Book of Ages
The Art of Ancient Cyprus
Bodywatching
The Illustrated Naked Ape
Dogwatching
Catwatching
The Secret Surrealist
Catlore
The Animals Roadshow
The Human Nestbuilders

HORSEWATCHING

Desmond Morris

JONATHAN CAPE
LONDON

Introduction

If the dog is man's best friend, then the horse could be well described as man's best slave. For thousands of years horses have been harnessed, ridden, spurred and whipped. They have been ruthlessly driven into the centre of bloody battlefields where they have been hacked to pieces. For centuries they have toiled to drag heavy loads in the service of human ambition and then been rewarded at the end of their days with a trip to the knacker's yard. Their endless exploitation has been due to their amazing willingness to cooperate with their human companions and to struggle as best they can to please us. This temperament, which has so often been their undoing, stems from their naturally sociable lifestyle in the wild. Horses are by nature herd animals that live in small bands where cooperation is as powerful a theme as competition and where affection for one another is so strong that it is easily transformed into a horse-human bond. Unfortunately for the horse, this bond always ends with the human partner coming out on top, both literally and metaphorically. Being so good-natured has cost the horse dearly.

The other side of the coin is man's great love and respect for the horse, now stronger than ever. For every example of brutality there are many cases of human devotion to horses, shown in long hours of selfless care and protection. For every callous horse-whipper today there is an army of passionate horse-lovers, ready to rise at dawn and endure repeated hardships to ensure that their adored equines enjoy the best lifestyle possible. No animal is more admired or more highly valued.

What is it about the horse that awakens such intense feelings? Is it the animal's looks or its behaviour, its graceful athleticism or its personality? The answer is to be found in a remark made nearly four hundred years ago by the naturalist Edward Topsel when he wrote of the horse that it possesses 'a singular body and a noble spirit, the principal whereof is a loving and dutiful inclination to the service of Man, wherein he never faileth in Peace nor War … and therefore … we must needs account it the most noble and necessary creature of all four-footed Beasts.' The clue to its special appeal is summed up by the words 'noble and necessary'. It is the combination of its proud bearing with its slavish service to man that makes it so irresistible. If it were noble but untameable, like a giraffe, we would wonder at its beauty but would not become passionate about it. If it were useful but ungainly, like a pig or a cow, we would be grateful for its services but would not, perhaps, compose poems to it or wax lyrical about its great spirit. No, the secret of equine appeal is that it slaves for us while still looking noble. It is our humble servant even though it has the demeanour of an animal aristocrat. The mixture is magical. If such a dignified beast is subordinate to our will, then we must indeed be masters of the world.

So it was, from the very start of equine domestication, that man came under the spell of the horse. And right from the beginning there was one feature in particular that made a special impact on human affairs: its swift legs. Put to work for mankind, they gave a sudden boost to human expansion. For the first time our ancestors could move fast from place to place. Previously cattle had been the beasts of burden, the draught animals and the pullers of the plough. Now they could be restricted to the slower, clumsier tasks and the long-distance duties could be carried out more quickly by the horse. The mobility of man was magnified dramatically. Civilization could spread, trade routes could be opened up that were previously impossible.

Cultural exchanges could be developed and the hybridization of ideas rapidly led to new creative vigour. For thousands of years, right up to the arrival of the internal combustion engine, the horse was the vehicle of the human conquest of the earth.

Its swift legs are significant, too, in having created its noble image. Because wild horses are fast-moving plains-living grazers, specialized for open country, they have had to evolve, over millions of years, the elegant frame of the muscle-rippling athlete. Rapid movement demands a certain style of body-structure, a style which we, as athletes ourselves, appreciate. As a species we are fast runners, too – not diggers or climbers or clingers, but sprinters – and this gives us a common bond with the horse and a deeply rooted admiration for its amazing pace and grace. Psychologically it becomes an extension of our own running bodies. Sitting on its back we fuse with it in our minds to become one single, galloping, invincible being – the great centaur of ancient mythology.

When did all this happen? Surprisingly the horse was something of a late-comer on the domestic scene. Dogs, goats, sheep and cattle had all been brought under human control for thousands of years when in the third millennium B.C. the horse was first domesticated. This took place in the area which is now southern Russia and north-west Asia, as part of the advancing tide of agricultural management. It was not, of course, mankind's first contact with the horse. Horses had been hunted for food since the Old Stone Age, as the beautiful prehistoric paintings on the cave walls of France and Spain testify, but there was then no attempt to bring them under control. They were trapped, speared and eaten and that was the limit of our relationship with them.

An intriguing sideline on this hunting phase is the fact that the number of wild horses was already decreasing without any help from humans. This was because at the end of the Ice Age there was a rapid spread of thick forests

across most of the temperate zone. As an animal of the open plains, the horse was therefore losing ground little by little and it is estimated that it might well have become extinct eventually had the ancient farmers not intervened and domesticated the species before it vanished for ever. This is a pleasant reversal of the usual tale, in which human intervention condemns many a species to early retirement.

By the second millennium B.C. the decline of the horse had been turned around and as a domesticated animal it was once again spreading across Europe and increasing in numbers everywhere. By 1500 B.C. there were already two distinct types of domestic horse – the stocky ones of the colder northern regions and the slender ones in the warmer south. Specialization was beginning. From the heavy-set northern ponies, by selective breeding, came the giant breeds that were to be the great beasts of burden in the farmers' fields and on the soldiers' battlegrounds. From the leggy southern horses came the magnificent Arab steeds that were later to father the modern thoroughbreds of the racecourse. Wherever man explored and extended his range the horse went with him, until together they both acquired an almost global distribution. In the New World the Spanish intruders took a handful of horses with them – Columbus took thirty and Cortés sixteen – and before long these were to give rise to a whole new population of 'Indian horses' and to change the social structure of the Plains Indians of the Americas.

As human populations everywhere began to explode into teeming millions, the number of horses thrown into service reached new heights. The whole of society seemed to be dependent on equine abilities, for farming, transportation, warfare, ceremony, sport and pleasure. As weapons became more advanced, the fate of horses in times of war became more hideous. In a single day's fighting during the First World War seven thousand horses were killed. Of the million British horses sent to the front in that disgusting

conflict, only 62,000 were ever to see British soil again. The majority of those that were lucky enough to escape the bombs and shells were rewarded after the armistice by being fed to prisoners of war or sold to continental farmers to be converted into fertilizer.

Despite the helplessness of horses in the face of the new weaponry, there was one final cavalry charge at the start of the Second World War. In 1939 the Polish cavalry rode bravely into battle against the tanks and dive bombers of the Nazis. They were totally obliterated. The warhorse was gone for ever. We who watch war films today are spared the horrors of equine bloodshed. Trained film horses are too valuable to be killed for our entertainment, so their demise is merely suggested and we easily forget what a terrible price we have made the obedient horse pay for its domestication by man.

With the coming of the industrial revolution the age of the horse began to wane. At first trains replaced the transportation horse, then motor-cars. Finally, mechanized equipment swamped them out, both on the road and in the field. Lorries, tractors, tanks, buses, coaches, vans and family cars took over. The blacksmith became an endangered species. Only nostalgia kept the working horse alive. Apart from racing and leisure-riding there was little for the modern horse to do. But with the removal of the arduous labour of earlier days came a growing respect and appreciation for our equine companions. Today, more than ever before, this respect is spreading with each generation. Equine commerce has been replaced by a much kinder equine love-affair. For the first time in five thousand years it is once again a good time to be a horse. Man’s best slave may not have been completely freed to roam the plains but his slavery is now at least a benign one, full of care and devotion.

Back in the Elizabethan era, John Florio wrote, ‘England is the paradise of women, the purgatory of men and the hell

of horses.’ Today that hell has become something approaching a heaven for most of our horses, as we start to repay our long-standing debt to the noble beast. But strangely, even in our most zealous and enthusiastic infatuation with the horse we still fail to appreciate it for its own sake, as a remarkable species full of subtle expressions, body language and social behaviour. It is possible to be an expert horseman or horsewoman and still not fully comprehend the nature of equine social life. The bond between horse and rider dominates to the exclusion of horse-to-horse relations. *Horsewatching* fills this gap with some objective observations of one of our closest animal allies. And it ends with an examination of some of the less familiar aspects of horse myths and folklore. It is a book for horse-watchers everywhere, whether they have spent fifty years in the saddle or have never encountered a horse outside their television screens. After reading it I hope you will agree that the horse is, even today, a ‘noble and necessary’ creature, that enriches all our lives merely by its presence among us.

What does a horse signal with its ears?

The ears of a horse are seldom still. Like radar dishes scanning the skies, they are for ever moving this way and that, picking up tiny sound clues from the world around. For the wild ancestors of the domestic horse this was particularly important. Their only method of self-protection was fast retreat from danger and it was vital that they should be aware of the very first signs of trouble so that they could take off at high speed in the split second before a predator leapt to the attack. Their mobile ears were their early warning system.

Because the position of the ears varies as the horse's mood changes, its ear postures can be read as signals by its companions. One horse can tell the emotional condition of another by glancing at the way its ears are held or moved. So the ears have a double role – they receive sound signals and they transmit visual signals. The visual signals are unusually helpful because equine ears are so conspicuous. Other hooved animals, such as cattle, antelope and deer, have horns or antlers protruding from the tops of their heads, which tend to hide their ear movements. But the ears of horses, not being obscured in this way, are highly visible even from a considerable distance, or when the animal can only be seen in silhouette. The language of equine ears is as follows:

When the ears are neutral they are held loosely upwards, with their openings pointing forwards and outwards. In this way they scan the area in front of the horse and to either side of it. This basic posture provides the best coverage of the environment, but the moment a strange sound is heard,

one or both ears rotate instantly to face it and examine it more carefully.

If a sound appears to be strange or worrying, the horse also turns its head or even its whole body towards the source and then pricks its ears so they are stiffly erect with their apertures facing directly towards the sound. *Pricked ears* are typical of horses that are startled, vigilant, alert or merely interested and are most commonly seen during frontal greetings.

The opposite of pricked ears are *airplane ears*. Here they flop out laterally with their openings facing down towards the ground. These are the ears of a tired or lethargic horse or one that has completely lost interest in the world around it – they indicate clearly that the animal is psychologically at a low ebb. Sometimes the posture becomes more extreme and there is a *drooped ears* posture, with the ears hanging down loosely on either side of the head. This is seen when a horse becomes very dozy or is in actual pain and wants to switch off all incoming messages. These sideways ear postures are also used as signals of inferiority during status battles or stressful social encounters. The weak horse is saying, 'I am not arguing with you, I have switched off, you are the boss, so now leave me alone.'

Sometimes it is possible to observe a ridden horse adopting *drooped backwards ears* as a special signal. The ears are stuck out sideways, but their openings are directed backwards towards the rider. This indicates a horse that is submissive towards and fearful of its human companion. The lateral element of the ear posture reveals the submissiveness and the twisting backwards of the apertures shows the animal's need to catch any tiny sound from the fear-inducing figure on its back. This ear posture is common in horses with brutal owners. It is also observed when male and female horses encounter one another in a sexual mood. The female often adopts this position of the ears when her strong sexual urges make her approach a