

The end of an era: The long, lonely days of Mount Madonna's last white deer

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Credit: MediaNews Group

Hidden in the redwoods above Watsonville, California, a shy and ghostly beauty once drew crowds but is now destined to live, and die, alone.

The small white doe is the sole survivor of a large and cherished herd of fallow deer created by famed publisher William Randolph Hearst, gifted to cattle baron Henry Miller, bought by Santa Clara County and then expanded by the addition of a smaller herd seized during a raid of an illegal farm in Morgan Hill.

Now she is a mere oddity. The exotic creature, living out her final years in comfort in a wooded pasture, represents the end of an era at Mount Madonna County Park that is now committed to protecting wildlife that is native and natural, not weird.

"The strategy is to keep her healthy and alive," said ranger Scott Christopher, who schedules the deer's veterinary appointments and feeds her daily with a flake of alfalfa and a half can of sweetened honey oats. Protected by a tall black chain link fence, "she seems cheerful and happy and prancing around, running."

Named Penelope, the 10-year-old deer was born cream-colored but is now white, giving her a haunting appearance among the park's dark forests. Fallow deer aren't albino; rather, they're "leucistic," with dark eyes and muzzle. Much smaller than California's native mule deer, fallow deer are an ancient species believed to be related to the extinct Irish elk. Like elk, their antlers aren't pointed but are huge and flat, in the shape of a hand.

Her last companion, dubbed Big Boy, died of old age last year. Separated by a fence so they wouldn't breed, they could only gaze at each other.

Fallow deer, native to the eastern Mediterranean, have been moved around by humans since the Roman Empire, populating every continent except Antarctica. In the 11th century, Normans introduced them to medieval Britain, where royalty kept them in large herds on enclosed estates—often called deer parks—for viewing and hunting. They

represented power and privilege.

The deer were brought to California by newspaper mogul Hearst, who in the 1920s dreamed of building the largest private zoo in America at his sprawling 83,000-acre ranch in San Simeon, joining a menagerie of zebras, antelope, musk ox and other imported wildlife.

The deer flourished, overpopulating Hearst's estate. A pair was shipped to the hills above Gilroy, the summer home of Henry Miller, an ambitious Gold Rush-era immigrant famed for expanding the West's cattle and sheep industry.

But after Miller's death in 1916, the ranch fell into disrepair. County supervisors arranged for the purchase of the first piece of the park from Miller's heirs in 1927. The deer, which had grown into a herd, were part of the package.

"We inherited the deer. We didn't have a choice," said Christopher. "But we figured out a way to make it successful."

The herd grew and grew, until as many as 70 animals roamed the pen. For years, they were a huge draw, awing visitors with their ivory fur and regal antlers. Visitors were allowed to feed them carrots and other treats.

"They were probably the main attraction for Mount Madonna. People would come from all over and bring their kids, especially at Christmas time, to go see 'the Santa deer.' You had to stand in line to get up to the fence to see them," recalled retired Santa Clara County game warden Henry Coletto, who worked at the park in 1964 and became a county conservation officer in 1967.

They were well cared for, "because they were a real attraction," said Coletto.

But in the 1970s, with attention fading and funding tight, "they weren't taken care of and didn't do very well," he said. Once, without enough food, they ate the bark of redwood trees "and just laid down and died," he recalled.

There were other challenges.

Inbreeding began to affect the herd's health, causing congenital heart problems, according to Dr. William Seales, the veterinarian responsible for their care.

"If you were to run them around too much, they would roll over and die," he said.

In the 1990s, someone climbed into the pen and shot several animals. To protect them, park authorities had to move the pen closer to the park office, where road access was locked at night.

The herd rebounded in size. But in 2005, a mountain lion killed over two dozen.

"The cat was smart enough to climb up a tree on the outside, jump into the pen and kill a couple of deer at night," said Coletto. "Then it jumped right out of the pen, the same way."

When a tree fell on the fence, damaging it, six or seven animals escaped. To be recaptured, said Seales, some of the animals had to be sedated with explosive darts filled with anesthesia.

Neither wild nor tame, the [fallow deer](#) couldn't simply be released to join the park's native mule deer. Conservation biologists are increasingly alarmed by the infiltration of introduced animals, plants and microbes, which create ecological imbalance and often crowd out native species.

State law required that the deer stay in a pen.

"They're non-native, so there are strict rules and regulations," said Christopher. "They're a controlled species."

To reduce the herd size, males and females were separated to prevent breeding. The county also sold some deer to businesses that wanted a roadside attraction, such as Casa de Fruta in Hollister. But that became a paperwork chore. Over time, the weaker deer were just culled.

Penelope and several other does arrived about six or seven years ago, shipped by authorities from a San Martin property that lacked proper permits for the deer, considered a "restricted species" under California law.

California's other scattered herds are also now largely gone. Fallow deer at Point Reyes National Seashore, purchased from the San Francisco Zoo in the 1940s and released by a local landowner prior to the establishment of the park, have been eradicated.

But Mendocino County's Ridgewood Ranch is still home to some descendants of animals brought from the Hearst Ranch by Charles Howard, owner of the famed racehorse Seabiscuit, in 1949. The San Francisco Zoo said it could look into accepting the Mount Madonna [deer](#), if offered.

In her pen, Penelope is healthy and well cared for, said Seales. She has no parasites and is disease-free.

She still gets visitors but is no longer a celebrity. She isn't advertised in park brochures or other promotional materials and lacks the impressive antlers of a buck. She's reclusive, hiding in the woods during the day.

These days, people are more often drawn to the vast park for its wilderness—hiking, [horseback riding](#), camping or exploring trails for a glimpse of banana slugs, California newts, gray foxes or other native wildlife.

Penelope wanders her pen alone, with only birds and squirrels for company.

Once gone, she won't be replaced, according to Christopher.

"We're not a zoo," he said.

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