

Where the Forgotten Find Refuge

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By Jim Leonard

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BROOKS — Bentley arrived with visible scars. Toast, a thoroughbred, was severely emaciated. Milkshake had also suffered neglect and needed time, food and sustained care to regain strength.



An aerial view of High Meadow Farm at Peace Ridge Sanctuary in Brooks. The sanctuary has two locations in Brooks, as well as separate locations in Albion, Freedom and Belfast.

Photo courtesy of Peace Ridge Sanctuary

Today, all three horses are recovering at Peace Ridge Sanctuary's Northeast Equine Sanctuary in Albion, one of several refuges the Brooks-based nonprofit runs in Waldo County and beyond.

Their improving condition contrasts sharply with the circumstances from which they were removed and reflects the sustained work that follows a rescue: veterinary care, careful feeding and the slower task of rebuilding trust.

The horses were among the animals at the center of the cruelty case against Alexis Ingraham of Burnham. Following a three-day trial in Belfast, a Waldo County jury found Ingraham guilty Aug. 14 on four counts of cruelty to animals, including two aggravated felony counts. Peace Ridge says it initiated the investigation, worked with the Maine Animal Welfare Program and took in every horse involved, along with one cow.

Melissa Andrews, Peace Ridge's director of development and humane education and outreach, said the organization had monitored the situation because Ingraham had a previous animal cruelty conviction and people in the horse community had raised concerns. When Peace Ridge learned that horses might be moved while dogs and cats on the property were under investigation, founder and Executive Director Daniella Tessier located the animals and brought state officials into the case, Andrews said.



Melissa Andrews, director of development and humane education and outreach at Peace Ridge Sanctuary, encourages some of the sanctuary's residents to go out and play.

Photo by John Blodgett

The sanctuary's role did not end with transportation. Animals taken in during a prosecution can become living evidence. "We have to preserve them," Andrews said. "They are the case. We hold the animals, document their intake condition and rehabilitate them. We can show in court where they started and this is where we got to. It makes the case."



Peace Ridge Sanctuary takes in large farm animals like pigs, horses and cows. Hay is just one expense as the organization seeks to rehabilitate these animals.

Photo by John Blodgett

Peace Ridge estimates that the Ingraham rescue alone has cost approximately \$140,000 in veterinary care, staffing, feed and related expenses. Starved large animals may require bloodwork, mineral supplements and specialized farrier and dental care; some have teeth so damaged that their food must be specially prepared.

That expense falls largely on the donor-supported nonprofit. Peace Ridge receives grants and individual donations, but one large seizure can consume resources needed for the next emergency. The sanctuary created a Safety Net Emergency Fund to support major rescues and preserve its ability to respond when authorities call.

The operation is easy to underestimate from outside its gates. Founded as a farm animal program in 2001, Peace Ridge now manages a network anchored in Waldo County and extending into neighboring Albion. Andrews counts five shelter locations: two in Brooks, equine properties in Freedom and Albion, and a smaller Belfast facility. The organization's official overview describes four licensed facilities by grouping the equine operation as one.

Across the network, Peace Ridge protects approximately 2,000 acres for rescued animals and wildlife. It reports caring for more than 600 animals at a time, with some current materials

placing the total above 650 as the population changes. Andrews said the typical population includes more than 60 dogs, more than 75 horses and donkeys, and more than 450 farmed animals, including cows, pigs, goats, sheep, alpacas, rabbits and poultry.

High Meadow Farm, the flagship Brooks campus, occupies more than 1,000 acres and houses farmed animals, equines and companion animals. A second Brooks property, 240-acre Low Meadow Farm, provides quarantine, intake and specialized care for geriatric animals, emergency arrivals and animals with contagious illnesses.



Peace Ridge Sanctuary staff member Jer Harper feeds the pigs at the Sanctuary's High Meadow Farm.

Photo by John Blodgett

Little River Farm, a 37-acre property near downtown Belfast, serves as an education center and smaller shelter. The equine program, expanded after a 640-acre property was donated in 2020, includes a large horse barn, surgical space, run-in shelters and housing for round-the-clock caregivers. It rehabilitates horses and donkeys, seeks adoptive placements when appropriate, shelters animals whose owners are escaping domestic violence and works to keep vulnerable equines out of the auction-to-slaughter pipeline.

Many residents, however, are not on their way to another home. Some are elderly, medically fragile, behaviorally complicated or too difficult to place, and Peace Ridge promises them

lifelong sanctuary. Every admission must therefore be measured against years of feed, fencing, shelter, medical treatment and daily care, not simply the cost of rescue.

That scale fills a critical gap in Maine's animal welfare system. Peace Ridge accepts referrals from the Maine Animal Welfare Program and local animal control officers, assists with investigations and advises people who are uncertain how to report suspected cruelty.

The sanctuary also advises animal control officers and is planning a training session on handling farmed animals. "It's a big responsibility," Andrews said. "Imagine there are 40 pigs that need to be sheltered. That is why we've built this big capacity, because we wanted to enable the state to enforce the laws and give them a place and a resource to house the animals."

Peace Ridge's work is rooted in an animal rights and vegan philosophy. Its humane education programs use individual animals' histories to encourage visitors to reconsider how animals are treated. Scheduled tours, nature walks and programs for children and people with special needs bring the public into that mission, while the Belfast site places some of the educational work closer to regional population centers.

The sanctuary also protects forests, fields, wetlands and waterways used by wildlife. Its growth has brought outside recognition: Peace Ridge became the first farm sanctuary in New England accredited by the Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries in 2021. By January 2025, all of its facilities had received accreditation, and the federation gave Peace Ridge its 2024 Outstanding Sanctuary Award.

Tessier founded Peace Ridge on a property in Penobscot when farm animal sanctuaries were largely unfamiliar in Maine. "When I first began building a farmed animal sanctuary here, this kind of animal sheltering was virtually unknown," she said in a reflection on its 25th anniversary. "I knew we were stepping into something much bigger than simply creating a safe place for these animals." Much of the operation's physical and institutional center is now in Waldo County.

Peace Ridge now hopes to open a low-cost veterinary clinic at one of its locations and work with state officials on laws protecting farmed animals. Both goals address the same practical problem: Rescue capacity has little value unless cruelty can be investigated, animals can be removed and affordable medical care is available when they arrive.

The emotional burden remains as real as the financial one. Andrews, who joined Peace Ridge as a volunteer in 2012, said the work can break her heart every day, but recovery gives it meaning. "When the animals get better, so do we," she said. "We like to say that when the animals are happy, we're happy."

Bentley, Toast and Milkshake embody that mission. Their rescue required investigators, animal-welfare officials, caregivers, veterinarians, suitable land and enough money to sustain months of rehabilitation. Their recovery is personal, but the system behind it is large: a Waldo County-based sanctuary network built so that when Maine's most difficult animal cases have nowhere else to go, there is still a place able to say yes.

For more information on Peace Ridge Sanctuary and the services and opportunities it provides, visit <https://peaceridgesanctuary.org>.