

Illegal Horse Butchers Are Running Wild Across Florida

By Francisco Alvarado

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*After illegal butchers filleted this horse, its remains were dumped near a residential cul de sac in the Kendall area of Miami-Dade County, Florida. Photos courtesy of **Animal Recovery Mission***

Sometime between the evening of November 21 and the pre-dawn hours of November 22, thieves quietly whisked away Thunder, the largest horse grazing the pasture of a ranch in Homestead, a mostly agricultural city roughly 40

miles southwest of Miami. Investigators later discovered someone had cut a hole in the property's fence big enough for the 23-year-old gelding to fit through, according to a Miami-Dade County Police incident report. They also observed fresh tire marks on the dirt road near the spot where the fence's woven wiring had been gashed.

It didn't take long for detectives to surmise Thunder had become the latest victim of illegal horse butchers. Sure enough, they found the horse's remains a day later, across the street on a neighboring property underneath a crop canopy, according to Sergeant Deborah Puentes of the Miami-Dade Police agricultural patrol section.

Whoever killed the animal, Puentes explained, had expertly cut away most of the flesh from Thunder's front legs, upper torso, and hindquarters. "I have seen butcheries where you can tell the people didn't know they were doing," Puentes told me. "But on Thunder, the cuts were precise. It was professional."

The crime has a tight-knit community of horse owners in Homestead and neighboring rural communities on edge. "It's scary," said Christina Bowden, president of the South Florida Horse Show Association. "Everyone is on alert."

Thunder's gruesome death came less than a month after the still-unsolved death in Palmetto, Florida, of Phedras de Blondel, a strapping jumping horse that belonged to

American equestrian Debbie Stevens. The brazen slayings of Thunder and Phedras are strong signs the black market for horse meat in Florida—which had the fifth-largest horse population in America as of 2012—continues to flourish despite efforts by law enforcement agencies and animal rights groups to crack down on shady butchering.

In Florida, killing a horse with the intent of selling its meat for human consumption is a felony, as is possessing said meat, but these offenders are slipping through the cracks at a time when local police departments are focused on stopping everyday crime and increasing accountability. According to Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Gimenez's 2014-2015 budget proposal, his primary goal is putting more officers on the streets and equipping 1,000 cops with body cameras.

Sharon Monzon, the purchasing manager for Robbie's Feed & Supply Store in the Redland, another farming community near Homestead, said she's aware of at least 18 horses that have disappeared from ranches and farms in the southwest Miami-Dade area since January. "I'd say half of them have been found butchered," Monzon said. "It's been going on for quite a while, but the thieves are getting more bold."

She noted the ranch where Thunder (whose owner, Sandra Fobb, declined to comment for this story) was stolen from is near US-1, a well-traveled road that connects the Keys to Miami. "That's a very busy area,"

Monzon said. "Before, they target[ed] horses on more secluded properties."



The charred, decapitated head of a horse found in a field in Homestead, Florida

Puentes, the Miami-Dade Police sergeant, said her department's agricultural patrol section has cases open on 16 slaughtered horses found this year compared to 13 in 2014. In one case, five carcasses were discovered on a southwest Miami-Dade property owned by the South Florida Water Management District, Puentes said. An additional seven horses were reported stolen in the last 11 months in the county, compared to 13 last year.

Of the 20 horses reported stolen, seven have been found slaughtered.

But cops in Miami-Dade have not been able to make any arrests connected to the thefts and deaths of horses. The department simply does not have the manpower to penetrate the black market horse-meat industry, Puentes told me, noting her unit patrols an area that covers 440 square miles. "Everyone is short-staffed," she added. "It's not just Miami-Dade Police."

Once concentrated in south Florida, the illegal horse-meat trade is now a statewide epidemic, warned Richard "Kudo" Couto, founder of Animal Recovery Mission, or ARM, a Miami-based organization that conducts private investigations of illegal animal slaughter. Since 2010, ARM's band of 15 volunteers have infiltrated dozens of open air slaughterhouses and farm where livestock are butchered illegally, they say.

Using hidden cameras and pretending to be customers, ARM members have recorded pigs being shot at point-blank range with shotguns and goats getting their throats slit while suspended from their hind legs, among other gruesome footage turned over to local police agencies. Since 2011, ARM has documented 236 cases of illegal horse slaughtering in Florida, according to its website.

"This is going on as far as Ocala and Jacksonville," Couto said, referring to a pair of cities in northern Florida.

"We're currently undercover at two farms where they are butchering around 25 horses a week."

Typically, stolen or unwanted horses end up at illegal slaughterhouses after they are purchased at horse auctions or from Craigslist, Couto said. A quick search of the online classifieds website's south Florida farm and garden section shows that some horse owners are selling their ponies for as low as \$500.

"Someone who buys the horse with the intent of selling the meat can make \$1,300 to \$1,500 off just one horse," Couto said. "The profit margins are so high, it's a no-brainer why these guys get into the horse meat trade."

Differences in culture are also a significant contributing factor, explained Laurie Waggoner, ranch operations director for the South Florida chapter of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. "We have a lot of people in Miami who come from places where it is OK to eat horses," she said. "It doesn't matter to them that it is illegal here."

The trend is further complicated by the clandestine nature of the criminal horse-meat industry. Despite ARM's undercover investigations, as well as long-term stings conducted by some law enforcement agencies, there have been few arrests, and even fewer convictions, of suspected horse-meat dealers and buyers due to a lack of evidence. A review of *Miami Herald* archives since 2010—the year then-Governor Charlie Crist signed

the law that elevated horse-meat dealing from a misdemeanor to a felony—suggests only four individuals have been convicted for crimes connected to the illegal sale of horse meat, but not for the crime itself. For instance, Santiago Cabrera and Luis Cordero pleaded guilty in 2011 to armed burglary after they admitted to breaking into people's farms to steal and kill horses for the meat. Cabrera was sentenced to five years and Cordero was hit with a four-year sentence.

In other parts of Florida, two major investigations in Hillsborough and Palm Beach counties in the past three years resulted in only two people getting arrested for possessing horse meat with the intent to sell it. One individual pleaded guilty but got no jail time, while charges were dropped against the other suspected dealer.

"It is hard to do undercover buys," Miami-Dade PD's Puentes said. "Everyone in my unit wears uniforms and drives police trucks. [Dealers] know who we are, but we don't know who they are."

Even when law enforcement agencies devote massive resources to investigating horse killings, they often come up empty.

For instance, in the summer of 2011, the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office, along with US Department of Agriculture (USDA) inspectors, launched a probe after Couto informed detectives that "thousands of horses

were being slaughtered and the meat sold for human consumption," according to a December 2012 department press release.

Roughly 18 months after initiating the investigation, sheriff's deputies arrested one person. According to the press release, an undercover detective bought horse meat from then-26-year-old Jose Felix Ortega at Georges Farms in Tampa on February 19, 2012. He was not formally arrested and arraigned until November 6, 2012. According to Hillsborough County criminal court records, Ortega pleaded guilty, but he completed a pretrial intervention program in 2014 to avoid having the felony conviction on his record, an option afforded to first-time offenders by Florida state courts.

The same year he pleaded guilty to three separate federal charges related to his illegal slaughter operation. According to a March 2014 indictment, Ortega knowingly killed pigs in an inhumane fashion and sold meat that had not been inspected by the USDA and that was decomposed and unfit for human consumption on October 27, 2011. Last May, he pleaded guilty and five months later he was sentenced to three years probation.

Investigators also bought meat from an unidentified woman at another Tampa farm, but the local state attorney's office declined to file charges against her.

The investigation was further hindered by a spat between the Sheriff's office and Couto. According to the

release, Couto failed to provide any "surveillance video or photographs of horses being slaughtered, killed or butchered for any purposes." Furthermore, Couto attempted five or six times to set up horse meat deals that fell at the last minute, and on August 30, 2012, he stopped cooperating with detectives, the press release claims.

For his part, Couto says cops took their eye off the ball. "Instead of making arrests and bringing these guys to justice, they tried to discredit our investigative work," he told me.



Bags of horse meat purchased by undercover Animal Recovery Mission investigators

Detective Larry McKinnon, the Hillsborough Sheriff's spokesman, said the department tried to do the exact opposite. "We can't prosecute people simply based on theories and conjecture," McKinnon told me. "We did a very thorough, extensive investigation. Nothing was ever found."

More recently, an ARM undercover investigation led the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office to raid three farms in Loxahatchee, recover 750 animals, and arrest six men on various animal cruelty charges on October 13, according to sheriff's spokeswoman Therese Barbera. "This was the first of its kind for us," she said. "With the evidence Mr. Couto gave us, we were able to obtain the search warrants."

Undercover video footage taken by Couto and his ARM investigators shows pigs, fowl, and goats being inhumanely slaughtered, but no horses. In one clip, though, Couto displays finely cut filets of meat he claims came from a horse that was butchered at one of the illegal slaughterhouses, Garcia Farms.

However, Barbera said deputies "found no evidence of horse slaughtering" and only one of the suspects, Rafael Ramirez, was charged with possessing horse meat with the intent to sell. According to the Palm Beach County Clerk of Courts website, Ramirez's case was dismissed last month.

Nevertheless, ARM is performing a job that should be handled by cops, advocates say. "We need a statewide task force set up by law enforcement officers that sets up stings," Waggoner of the local Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals said. "It is the only way to infiltrate these groups."

Unfortunately, police agencies don't seem to have the resources to keep up.

"With the manpower shortage, it's simply not realistic," Sergeant Puentes of Miam-Dade PD told me. "I don't see [horse killings] ever stopping, but the community needs to be more alert and more cognizant of what is going on in their environment."