

What's Happening

I N T H E U S A ?

BY LAWRENCE GABLE

VOL 17, NO 5 JANUARY 2010

Wild horses still live in America's open spaces. However, in many places these mustangs compete with sheep and cattle for grasses. On December 14 the U.S. government approved the removal of 2,500 wild horses from public lands near Reno, Nevada. The government has been dealing with wild horses for almost a hundred years, and this is the latest strategy.

The horse is native to North America. Many mammals disappeared from the continent when ice moved across it 12,000 years ago. Some scientists think that the horse was among them, killed off by climate and hunters. Others think that small herds survived. That theory gets support from oral histories of Native American tribes.

Spanish conquistadors brought horses to the New World. Cortés sailed to Mexico in 1519 and brought 16 horses. In 1539 Coronado and de Soto also brought many hundreds of horses to what is now the American South and Southwest. Possibly the Spanish horses bred with native horses. Within 200 years they had spread across the Great Plains and West. A hundred years ago two million wild horses spread across 17 states.

The remote lands protected them only somewhat from humans. Some people shot them for sport. Others profited by rounding them up and sending hundreds of thousands of them to slaughterhouses. There they became fertilizer, pet food, glue or meat. People hunted them using aircraft and motorized vehicles. That became illegal in 1959 because it caused extreme trauma, injury and death among the animals.

For a century ranchers have been fighting the mustang. In 1934 the U.S. Congress passed a law that helped them. The Taylor Grazing Act protects public lands for grazing by sheep and cattle. Its protection of mustangs was simply to require people to get permits before they hunted horses.

By 1971 the population of wild horses had fallen to 25,000. Congress passed a law that made it illegal for individuals to capture, brand, harass or kill unclaimed horses and burros on public lands. The law also led to the creation of three hundred protected ranges



The Government Plans a Roundup

for them. However, the government has continued to round up mustangs. It sent some to slaughterhouses until the last three closed in 2007. It puts them up for adoption, and gives them birth control before sending them back to the land.

The government's Bureau of Land Management (BLM) oversees the use of public lands for grazing. Eight million cattle graze on public lands, but since 1971 the BLM has taken away 20 million acres of habitat from mustangs on public lands. The horse population on public lands has grown to 37,000, half of which live in Nevada. Officials in the BLM say that the open range can support just under 27,000, otherwise some will starve. An additional 34,000 live on the protected ranges in the Plains, and those are nearly full.

Now the BLM has decided to round up 25,000 mustangs and burros. It will send them to pastures and corrals in the Midwest and East where the government will pay for the animals' feed and care. Several of those sites could even become preserves where tourists see the animals, and their dollars would help pay for their care. The sites would accommodate 25,000 non-reproducing horses and burros, and it wants to send some horses there from Nevada. Horse advocates have taken the decision to court.

Horse advocates are proposing other steps by the BLM. They want the government to create more public land for horses by removing some cattle. That would save the government the expense of capturing and feeding the horses. They also maintain that the BLM's plan to use helicopters in the roundup is still illegal. Finally, they argue that wild horses should live on wild, open land.

The roundup of the first 2,500 mustangs near Reno was supposed to begin in December. It is being delayed while a judge rules on whether the roundup can happen. His decision should come around Christmas. It could shape the future of wild horses, a symbol of the West that is trying to survive in modern America.

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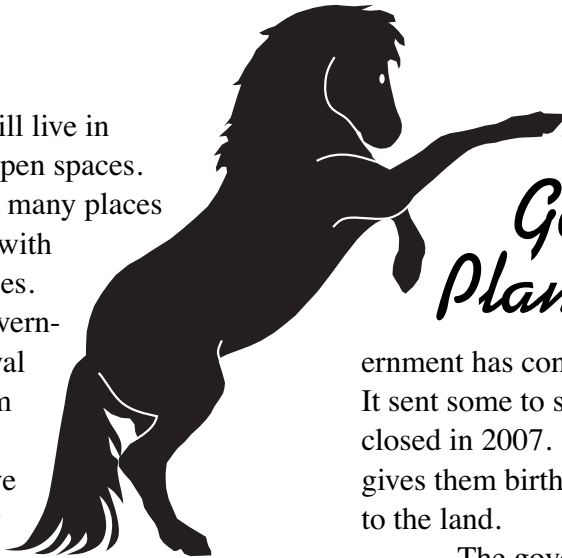
The horse is native to North America. Many mammals disappeared from the continent when ice moved across it 12,000 years ago. Some scientists think that the horse was among them. Others think that small herds survived, and oral histories of Native American tribes support that idea.

Spanish conquistadors brought horses to the New World. Cortés sailed to Mexico in 1519 and brought 16 horses. Others also brought hundreds of horses to what is now the American South and Southwest. Possibly the Spanish horses mated with native horses. Within 200 years they had spread across the Great Plains and West. A hundred years ago two million wild horses spread across 17 states.

The remote lands did not protect them from humans. Some people shot them for sport. Others profited by sending hundreds of thousands to slaughterhouses. There they became fertilizer, pet food, glue or meat. People hunted them using aircraft, but that became illegal in 1959.

For a century ranchers have been fighting the mustang. In 1934 the Taylor Grazing Act helped them. That law protected public lands for grazing by sheep and cattle, and the hunting of horses continued.

By 1971 the population of wild horses had fallen to 25,000. Then a law that made it illegal for individuals to capture, brand or kill unclaimed horses and burros on public lands. It also created 300 protected ranges for them. However, the gov-



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Now the BLM plans to round up 25,000 mustangs and burros. It will send them to pastures and corrals in the Midwest and East and pay for their feed and care. Several of those sites could even become preserves where tourists see the animals. The sites would hold 25,000 non-reproducing animals. Horse advocates have taken the decision to court.

Horse advocates recommend other steps. They want the BLM to create more public land for horses by removing some cattle. They also argue that the BLM's plan to use helicopters in the roundup is still illegal. Finally, they argue that wild horses should live on wild, open land.

The roundup of the first 2,500 mustangs near Reno was supposed to begin in December. It is being delayed while a judge rules on whether the roundup can happen. His decision should come around Christmas. It could shape the future of wild horses, a symbol of the West that is trying to survive in modern America.

Background Information

The BLM manages 253 million acres, more than any other federal agency. The BLM calls the land the National System of Public Lands, most of which is located in 12 Western states, including Alaska.

The prehistoric “dawn horse” was not quite two feet tall. Later came the species called *Equus* that was five times larger. The standard measurement for horses is the hand, which equals four inches.

Sites where scientists have found bones of prehistoric horses include the Ashfall beds in Nebraska, the Hagerman site in Idaho, and the La Brea tar pits in Los Angeles.

The years 1920–1935 are known as “the great removal” because so many mustangs were taken from the land. Railroads shipped horses for a penny per pound to three plants in California where they became chicken feed. In 1923 horses became popular ingredients in cat and dog food. There were almost 200 processing plants in the U.S.

The BLM had planned for the first roundup to begin on December 7, but it had to delay it until December 28 because of the lawsuit filed by the organization In Defense of Animals, wildlife biologist Craig Downer and author Terri Farley.

The BLM’s term for roundup is “gather.”

The BLM says that mustang herds can double in size every four years. There is general agreement between the BLM and horse advocates that birth control measures are important to controlling herd populations. Capturing and injecting mares with a contraceptive vaccine one at a time has proven costly. The BLM warned in 2008 that slaughtering some of the wild horses and burros under its control might be necessary as a cost-saving measure.

The BLM spent about \$50 million this year to feed, corral and otherwise manage the nation’s wild horses, up from \$36 million last year.

The number of wild-horse foals is about 7,000 per year. In 2005 the number of adoptions was 5,700, but the number fell to 3,700 in 2008. Officials hope to loosen the rules under which wild horses and burros can be adopted.

The 1971 law that the U.S. Congress passed unanimously is the Wild Free Roaming Horse and Burro Act. It describes horses and burros as “living symbols of the historic and pioneer spirit of the West.” It also calls them “an integral part of the natural system of public lands.”

Topics for Discussion and Writing

Pre-reading:

- Why do you think that wild horses on public lands need protection?

Comprehension:

- Explain why the BLM wants to round up horses now, and why horse advocates are against it.

Beyond the Text:

- In what ways is the mustang a symbol of the American West?
- Name some ways that horses changed life for Native Americans and settlers on the Plains.
- Use a map to identify the Great Plains and to locate the open spaces in states west of the Rockies.

Vocabulary (*advanced article only)

Article-specific: roundup; herd; tribe; conquistador; slaughterhouse; trauma*; to graze; permit*; to brand; to harass*; pasture; corral

High-use: native; mammal; oral; theory*; to breed*; remote; to profit; fertilizer; to oversee; habitat; accommodate*; advocate

Sources

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Reno Gazette December 15, 2009

Bismarck Tribune December 15, 2009

Seattle Times December 14, 2009

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Mustang: The Saga of the Wild Horse in the American West by Deanne Stillman (Houghton Mifflin, 2008)

Bureau of Land Management www.blm.gov

CA Curricular Standards (4–12)

English-Language Arts

Reading 1.0 Vocabulary Development

2.0 Comprehension (Informational Materials)

Writing 1.0 Writing Strategies

2.0 Writing Applications

ELD—Intermediate and Advanced

Reading Vocabulary Development/Comprehension

Writing Strategies and Applications

Listening and Speaking

History-Social Science

4.2; 5.2; 5.8; 7.11; 8.8