

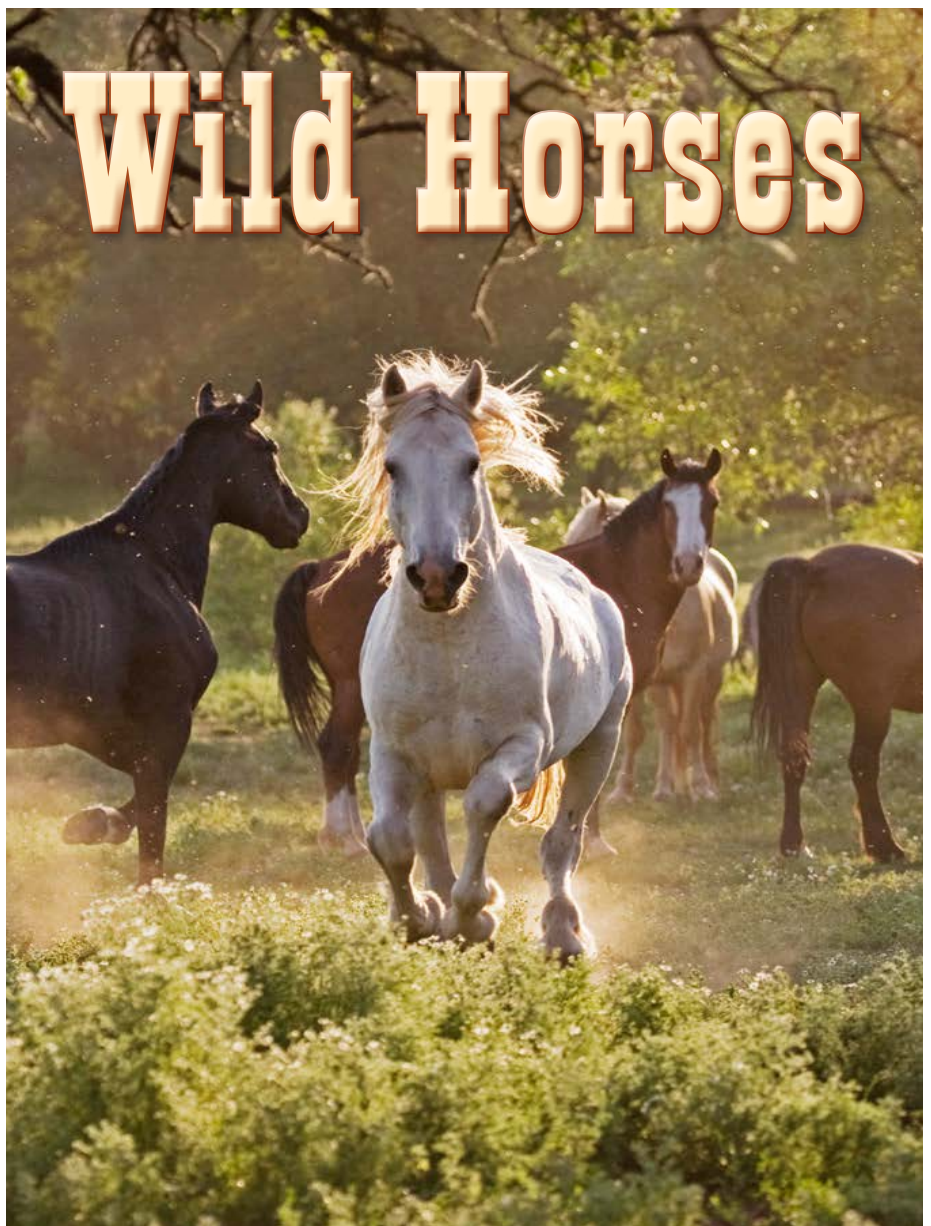
LEVELED BOOK • M

Wild Horses



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Wild horses run across parts of Wyoming today much as they did long ago.

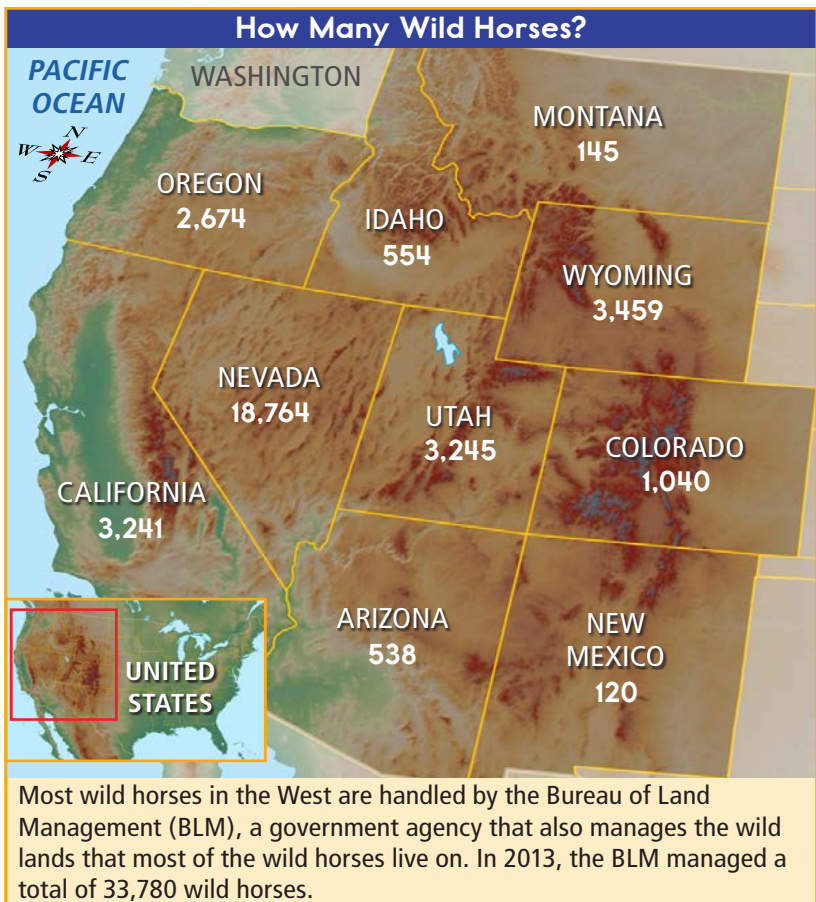
Introduction

Long ago, huge **herds** of horses ran across the **plains** of the American West. There may have been millions—so many that early maps simply named the area “Wild Horses.”

Thousands of horses still run free. They roam the West in herds, usually far from people. These wild horses are called **mustangs**.

Word Wise

Mustangs got their name from the Spanish word *mesteño*, which means "stray animal."





In this painting, Native Americans are amazed to see a horse for the first time. Some Native Americans thought the man and the horse were one animal.

Where Did Wild Horses Come From?

When Spanish explorers crossed the Atlantic Ocean five hundred years ago, they brought their horses. Over time, the Spanish left behind some horses. Other horses ran off. The horses learned to live free as wild animals across the American plains.



In this nineteenth-century painting by George Catlin, an Osage Indian captures a wild horse.

Over time, Native Americans **tamed** some of the wild horses. So did cowboys, who used horses to move large herds of cattle across the land. Other settlers used horses to help with the hard work of making new homes in the West.

Once again, many of these tamed horses ran off. Others were left behind when people no longer needed them. Again, they joined herds in the wild.



A wild stallion in Montana prepares to charge. Stallions often charge other stallions that intrude into their territory.

Life of a Wild Horse

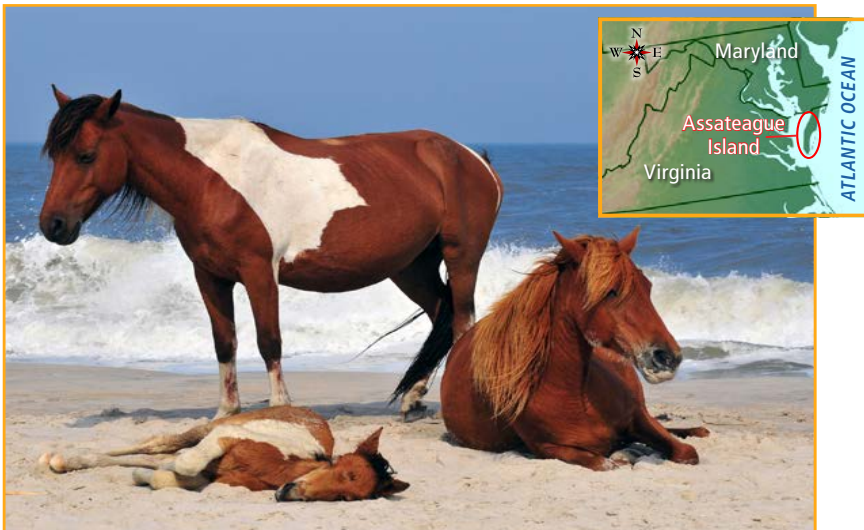
Wild horses live in herds, or “bands.” An adult male horse, called a *stallion*, leads each herd. The stallion is the mate of several female horses, or *mares*, who stay with the herd.



A wild pinto foal eats grass beside its mother. *Pinto* means *spotted* in Spanish. It refers to the white pattern on both horses' coats.

Young horses are called *foals*. When the foals are a few years old, they leave to join a new herd. By playing together, young male horses learn how to grow into stallions that can start their own herds. Young females leave their herds to become the mates of these new stallions.

Wild horses mainly eat grass, but sometimes they also browse for leaves. One mare leads the herd to food, water, and shelter. The stallion follows behind to watch for danger. Each herd stays together to raise young horses and help the group.



Wild Horses by the Sea

Wild horses often make people think of the American West, but wild horses also live in the East. Two wild herds live on opposite ends of Assateague Island, off the coast of Maryland and Virginia. Life by the ocean is hard. These horses eat tough marsh plants and know how to survive the stormy weather.



In 1925, Hollywood came to southeastern Montana. A casting director rounded up five hundred wild horse “extras” for a movie.

Protecting Wild Horses

In the West, people once depended on tame horses. After the West was settled, they began to think of wild horses as **pests**. Some of the wild horses were killed so cows and sheep would have more grass to eat. Others were gathered up and sold for meat.

In 1971, a law was passed to protect wild horses from harm by humans. That law is the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act. (Burros are wild donkeys.) Since then, the number of free wild horses in the United States has grown twice as large. Now, thousands of wild horses roam free in ten western states.

Horse Hero

For years, wild horses were caught and killed by the hundreds. Then along came a Nevada woman named Velma Johnston, nicknamed "Wild Horse Annie." Thousands of schoolchildren joined Wild Horse Annie to write letters to Congress. Thanks to them, the law protects wild horses today.



Velma Johnston stands with one of the mustangs she rescued, around 1976.



A helicopter herds horses toward a fence in Colorado. Experts disagree about whether or not helicopters should be used in roundups.

Wild Horses Today

Although wild horses in the United States are protected by law, herds can grow too quickly. So for now, hundreds of horses are caught and removed from the wild each year.

Some of them are adopted by people who will take care of them. Horses that don't find homes right away sometimes wait in fenced areas called *corrals*. Others go to live in wild horse **sanctuaries** where they still have wide spaces to roam.



The Black Hills Wild Horse Sanctuary

In 1988, Oregon rancher Dayton Hyde bought some land near Hot Springs, South Dakota. Then he convinced the Bureau of Land Management—the federal agency that oversees wild horses—to send him the horses they couldn’t find homes for. He took horses that, in his words, were “either too old, too ugly, or too independent” for adoption and gave them a new, wide-open home in the Black Hills.

A number of other sanctuaries around the country also protect wild horses. Many give tours that raise money to help pay for the care of the horses.

Science and the Wild

Herds can double in size every four years. Scientists have created a special shot that keeps wild mares from having so many babies. This tool may help keep herds smaller so fewer horses must be captured from the wild.



Wild mares are released back into their Wyoming range after getting a shot that helps keep wild horse numbers down.

Many people are working to make sure some wild horses can always run free. They are why beautiful herds can still thunder across the West—the land those herds call home.

Glossary

herds (<i>n.</i>)	groups of large land animals, especially hoofed animals (p. 4)
mustangs (<i>n.</i>)	small wild horses of western North America (p. 5)
pests (<i>n.</i>)	insects or other animals that are harmful (p. 11)
plains (<i>n.</i>)	large stretches of flat or rolling land, usually with few trees; prairies (p. 4)
sanctuaries (<i>n.</i>)	safe places (p. 13)
tamed (<i>v.</i>)	brought under control or made less wild (p. 7)

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