Wild horses in Oregon

The ancestors of today's horses evolved in North America around 3.5 million years ago; but after spreading to Asia, Africa, and Europe across the Bering Land Bridge, horses became extinct in the Americas between 13,000 and 11,000 years ago. The reasons for their extinction are unknown, but changing climate and the impact of newly arrived human hunters are probable factors. Thousands of years later, Spanish explorers and missionaries re-introduced horses into the American West. Within a century, wild horses covered the plains and dominated the landscape in many areas, changing the ways of life of countless Native Americans.

Early immigrants exploited wild horses and burros for commercial uses. The population of wild horses diminished dramatically due to human encroachment on their range**.** During the 1950s and 1960s, Velma B. Johnston**,** who became known as “Wild Horse Annie” for her dedication to wild horse welfare, led a grassroots campaign in Nevada that led to the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971. The law directs the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to carry out a program that includes protection, management, research, and adoption of wild horses and burros in a humane manner.

In southeastern Oregon, the BLM manages seventeen Herd Management Areas (HMAs) and co-manages one Wild Horse Territory with the U.S. Forest Service. Oregon's wild horses are known for their quality and color and are popular with those who adopt wild horses in the United States. In 2009, the BLM estimated that approximately 2,600 wild horses were roaming on Oregon’s HMAs and the Wild Horse Territory.

Three to five of Oregon’s herds are gathered annually to remove excess animals and to balance population numbers with the range’s capability to sustain them. Animals removed from the Oregon range are taken to the Wild Horse Corral Facility near Burns, where they are prepared for the adoption program. Those animals that are not suitable for adoption are sent to federally funded sanctuaries or long-term holding facilities, where they live out their lives on the prairie. Despite these measures, the wild horse population currently exceeds the official “carrying capacity” of western rangelands.

Controversy still surrounds the BLM’s methods of managing the population numbers and sharing the land and resources. Managers must decide how to allocate scarce resources among horses, domestic livestock, and wildlife. Since wild horses reproduce fast enough to double their population every four years, the result could be an ecological disaster if left unchecked. The BLM's management goal is to remove thousands of animals each year and put them up for adoption to individuals who agree to take good care of them. Unfortunately, the adoption program has never kept pace with the number of animals available, and there were approximately 34,500 horses and burros being kept in holding facilities at a cost of $29,000,000 in fiscal year 2009. Due to spiraling costs, some older and unwanted horses are being sold directly to interested buyers; and for the first time, the BLM is considering euthanasia for a portion of the captured horses.

Wild horse and burro advocates counter that federal rangelands could support more wild horses if domestic cattle were removed and that current laws authorizing cattle grazing on federal land should be revised or rescinded. Advocates claim that rounding up and transporting the horses cause stress and mortality and waste funding that could be used for more humane management options. They have also charged that some adopted horses and burros have ended up in slaughterhouses. There are questions about whether the recommended herd numbers are high enough to maintain genetic viability for long-term sustainability, as well as debate over whether a species that has been re-introduced after thousands of years of extinction is really native to the West.

The best-known Oregon mustangs are the Kiger horses on Steens Mountain. The Kiger mustangs are genetically related to the original Spanish mustangs and exhibit similar color characteristics known as the “dun factor,” which may include dorsal stripes, zebra stripes on knees and hocks, and bi-colored ears, mane, and tail. They are noted for their beauty, intelligence, and stamina. Because the Kiger herd may be one of the best remaining examples of Spanish mustangs, their preservation is important.

Oregon’s wild horses are admired for their color and quality, and seeing the beauty of wild and free-roaming mustangs in the wild is an unforgettable experience. They are living symbols of Oregon’s diverse history and the spirit of the state's western heritage.

Written by Barbara Ditman

Further Reading:

"Factsheet on Challenges Facing the BLM in its Management of Wild Horses and Burros." Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior Burueau of Land Management, Sep. 29, 2009. www.blm.gov/wo/st/en/prog/wild_horse_and_burro/wh_b_information_center/blm_statements/new_factsheet.html.

"Wild Horse and Burro Program." Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior Burueau of Land Management. www.blm.gov/or/resources/whb/index.php.

Flores, Dan. “Bringing Home All the Pretty Horses.” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 58:2 (Summer 2008), 3-21.

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