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## wild horses

Mustangs in Nevada have long been at the center of unprecedented controversy. And with their population rising above the Bureau of Land Management's sanctioned number, the debate carries on.

BY CHARLIE JOHNSTON | JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2009



Photo: Brian T. Murphy

As I climb into Willis Lamm's Ford pickup I briefly glance back at the mustangs. With my excitement ebbing, the gravity of the previous few hours sinks in. I was temporarily a part of that band—an awkward two-legged outsider nonetheless—permitted to walk among one of the West's proudest symbols. Early last fall, Lamm, president of Least Resistance Training Concepts, and Bonnie Matton, president of the Wild Horse Preservation League, took me to the Virginia Range east of Dayton to introduce me to some of their closest friends, Nevada's wild horses.

Anyone who has read a Nevada publication in the last couple decades knows that wild horses, and the issues surrounding them and their range, remain among the most controversial topics in the state. Although the controversy has evolved into an emotional, convoluted collection of opposing viewpoints, everything relates to two main issues: the horses' sharing of land and resources with free-ranging livestock and the methods with which state and federal government manage the mustang population. Those issues are closely related to the niche wild horses fill on the range, where they fall in the spectrum of animals sharing the habitat, and the debate over whether they should be considered a feral (introduced) or reintroduced species.

According to Jay Kirkpatrick, director of the Science and Conservation Center in Billings, Montana, ancestors of modern horses started evolving in North America about four million years ago. The most recent ancestor to exist on the continent, *Equus lambei*, went extinct about 12,000 years ago. Kirkpatrick goes on to say DNA analysis shows that this extinct species is the genetic equivalent of the modern horse that was reintroduced into North America in the 1500s by Spanish explorers, and that modern horses, *E. caballus*, could have evolved nowhere else but North America. Kirkpatrick's findings point to wild horses deserving consideration as indigenous, not feral—as common belief for more than a century suggests—animals.

By 1900, there were as many as 2 million wild horses in North America. During the following decades, that number fell sharply as the horses were increasingly captured and domesticated for private and military use and slaughtered for consumption. During the 1950s, activists such as Velma Johnston, better known as Wild Horse Annie, pressured government to pass a bill prohibiting the use of aircraft or motorized vehicles to hunt wild horses, and in 1959 the Wild Horse Annie Act went into law. The decree only stoked the flames of public outcry, and the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971 was implemented. In its declaration of policy, Congress said, "Wild free-roaming horses and burros are living symbols of the historic and pioneer spirit of the West; that they contribute to the diversity of life forms within the Nation and enrich the lives of the American people; and that these horses and burros are fast disappearing from the American scene." Under the law, mustang populations around the country were protected from capture, branding, harassment, and death. The Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service (most herd areas are under BLM jurisdiction) were charged with implementing the act and managing herds on public land with an emphasis on maintaining a "natural ecological balance." Counts conducted following the passage of the act set the number of animals that the BLM and Forest Service were responsible for maintaining.

According to Susie Stokke, Wild Horse and Burro Lead for the BLM, there are about 18,800 mustangs in 102 BLM Herd Management Areas (HMAs) across Nevada. That number does not include close to 1,000 wild horses on state-owned and private lands. She says the ideal number—to maintain the aforementioned balance—is about 12,600. “We have been trying to get to the proper number (of animals) for the last decade,” Stokke says, and according to BLM studies and counts, that can only be accomplished if the surplus animals are removed from the range. Currently, roundups are the primary method with which the BLM attempts to control population. “We want healthy animals and healthy range lands,” Stokke says. She is well aware that the BLM’s wild-horse program elicits strong emotions. “People are very passionate about the horses,” she says. “We’re very passionate about them, too. I love them.”



A dozen Nevada roundups in 2008 removed 3,837 horses according to BLM Deputy State Director Michael Holbert. The number of animals captured each year during roundups in 2006 and 2007 were between 3,000 and 4,000 as well. Once the horses are gathered, they are transported to holding facilities, such as the Palomino Valley National Wild Horse and Burro Center, about 20 miles north of Sparks, and are prepared for adoption. But they are not being adopted in large enough numbers.

Stokke cites the nation’s struggling economy as one of the biggest factors contributing to a steadily declining rate of adoption. This means that the horses are held in facilities like Palomino Valley for much longer than intended, a situation that cost the BLM about three quarters of its \$37 million budget in 2008 and prevented the agency from having enough funding to properly manage other parts of the wild horse program, according to Stokke.

Advocacy groups, such as The American Wild Horse Preservation Campaign, argue that the range can support even more horses than it currently does, making adoptions and holding facilities like Palomino Valley unnecessary. The groups claim that the BLM gives preferential treatment to livestock—such as cattle and sheep for which ranchers lease grazing privileges—on public lands around the state, resulting in an inaccurate assessment of the appropriate sustainable numbers for wild horses. Furthermore, according to Lamm, the horses can graze in areas where cattle and sheep cannot survive, and wild horses are not responsible for overgrazing. In Paula Morin’s book, *Honest Horses: Wild Horses in the Great Basin*, Bob Brown, a retired wild horse specialist for the BLM’s Ely Field Office, argues to the contrary. He says that when horses graze they bite small plants low enough to remove the roots, making it so the plants have no chance to regenerate. “If horses were left unchecked, they would be the last to survive out there,” he says. Independent studies support the arguments of both sides, contributing to this fundamental discrepancy that has yet to find a compromise.

In 2004 the controversial Burns Amendment was enacted to provide an alternative to long-term holding. The amendment changed the language of the 1971 legislation to allow for the open sale of horses that have not been adopted after three tries. This is an attempt to defray some of the costs—each horse held at Palomino Valley costs the BLM \$4 to \$5 per day according to JD Parsons, assistant facility manager—and alleviate pressure on holding facilities. Activists strongly oppose the amendment on the grounds that horses put up for sale stand a greater chance of being slaughtered, as horse meat is regularly consumed and considered a delicacy in countries such as Belgium, France, and Japan and still used to feed zoo animals and exotic pets worldwide.

Stokke emphasizes that the BLM does not want any of the horses it sells under the amendment to be slaughtered, but that it is a possibility if the horses are sold without limitations. She adds that even though the law mandates that horses that are not adopted after three tries can be euthanized, killing these horses remains an exceedingly unlikely option. “I know of no BLM employee who would want to be in the position of having to put down a healthy horse,” she says. Failing increases in adoption rates, the best option for the BLM seems to be more funding. “The BLM needs about \$60 million to operate this program in 2009,” she says. Congress has proposed a budget between \$35 and \$36 million. Stokke points to rising costs of hay for adoption facilities and fuel for transporting the horses as the main reasons the agency needs a larger budget.

Some people, such as Ely rancher Hank Vogler, say they have seen starving mustangs and are open to humane slaughter. “The horses are the ones that suffer,” he says. “Starvation is a terrible, agonizing death. It’s a travesty.” Vogler adds that restrictions on humane slaughter in the U.S. (the last three horse meat abattoirs were ordered closed in 2007 according to an Associated Press article) encourage some people to ship horses to Mexico, where he says slaughter practices are downright gruesome. In a video on The Humane Society’s Web site, a horse is repeatedly stabbed in the neck until its spinal column is broken.



Brown contends that slaughter in the U.S. is a more humane option. “The animals (sheep and cattle) go down instantly, there’s no chance for them to feel anything,” he says. In the U.S., slaughterhouses use what is called a captive bolt gun which thrusts a heavy steel rod into the forehead of animals, leading to a quicker, less painful death. In September 2006, the U.S. House of Representatives voted to ban the slaughter of horses for human consumption. The bill, however, was not taken up by the Senate.

The amount of mustangs on the range can vary greatly year to year, adding further challenges to effective population control. Statistics concerning wild-horse reproduction and survival rates vary greatly depending on their source. Regardless, there is no refuting that if unchecked, wild-horse populations have the potential to climb even farther above the number set by the Free-Roaming Wild Horse and Burro Act. In a 1982 National Academy of Science report cited by the American Wild Horse Preservation Campaign, wild-horse populations throughout the West experience annual increases of less than 10 percent, while the 1971 study conducted on behalf of the BLM suggests an annual increase of about 20 percent. A 2004 essay from the USDA National Wildlife Research Center titled, “Evaluation of Three Contraceptive Approaches for Population Control in Wild Horses,” puts the rate between 15 and 20 percent. A difference of five to 10 percent might seem small, but when dealing with tens of thousands of animals over many years, it can equate to huge discrepancies.

A 1992 article in *RANGE* magazine points to an episode in Southern Nevada on the Nellis Air Force Range in which a herd of 1,000 horses increased to 10,000 in “little more than a decade.” The article, “Wild Horses: No Home on the Range?” describes the sickening condition of many of the removed horses that suffered from extreme dehydration and starvation. “Down at Nellis there were colts that were just dried as prunes, not one but dozens of them,” says Dave Cattoor, a contractor for the BLM who worked on the roundup. “Their little mouths were caked with mud. We had to rinse the mud out before you could feed them,” he says. This population explosion represents an annual increase of more than 25 percent.

With adoptions dwindling and the strong sentiment opposed to any kind of slaughter, many see fertility control as a viable and acceptable means

to prevent such extreme situations as that which occurred at Nellis. The USDA essay regarding birth control aimed to find contraceptives that were safe, potentially reversible, effective for several years, and had minimal affect on reproductive or harem-maintenance behavior. The study concluded that the two tested vaccines prevented pregnancy in all of the 27 mares tested, while the other contraceptive prevented pregnancy in 10 out of 15. The study also found that none of the contraceptives had adverse effects on the health or behavior of the horses. According to the essay, further research is needed to evaluate the longevity of the birth-control measures, and only one of them is currently approved for use.

A continuing barrier to this method of population control, according to Stokke, is the cost and logistics of administering contraceptives that, for all intents and purposes, are not proven beyond one-year effectiveness. The horses still must be gathered, and the time and potential risk involved in administering birth control is far greater than that for regular roundups.



Stokke says that the BLM wouldn't be able to treat enough animals for the contraceptives to help control the population. "We have to catch the horses, bring them in, and apply it," Stokke says. "We turn them back out and won't catch them again for four or five years, so there is currently no practical means of remotely applying fertility control to thousands of horses across millions of acres."

The question of whether there is a viable solution remains. Although there are situations in which the conflicting factions work together—advocates that protest BLM roundups also help by promoting adoptions, and the ranchers pay close attention to the range so that it can sustain both their livestock and wild horses—certain key issues remain uncompromised on. Are there too many horses on the range? Is it worse to slaughter mustangs or risk their starvation when and if their numbers grow too unwieldy for the range to support? Is birth control for wild animals a realistic answer to population control?

But, for all of their differences, practically everyone involved with Nevada's wild horses shares a common goal: to ensure the wellbeing of these magnificent animals. The horses have no control; their fates lie in the hands of these people and the hope that they can continue to work together on behalf of the animals they all care for so deeply.

As we left the band of Virginia Range horses, I thought about the future of these animals and wondered if such compromises were possible. My reflection was interrupted when the lead mare cautiously approached me. After a moment of eye contact I surmised that it was safe to raise my hand toward her face. She gave it a few sniffs and allowed me to lightly stroke her nose. Lamm and Matton were astonished; apparently she doesn't let just anyone pet her. I like to think she knew I was there for a good reason.

### Water Shortages

In the Virginia Range east of Dayton, water is sparse in late summer and early fall. With more and more water being used to hydrate the ever-growing suburban areas around Reno and Carson City, domestic cattle and wild horses in the area are faced with increasing challenges to their survival. That is where people like Willis Lamm and Dell Brandt come in. The two volunteer countless hours to provide watering troughs for animals in the region. Lamm makes it clear that they provide water only, not food. While the horses use the troughs just as they would a natural spring, feeding them would create a dangerous dependence on humans. "Feeding these animals would be a death sentence," he says.



### CONTACT

Least Resistance Training Concepts  
[whmentors.org](http://whmentors.org)

### Adoption

"We don't see sick horses coming in off the range," says JD Parsons, assistant facility manager at the Palomino Valley National Wild Horse and Burro Center. "These animals are much harder than domestic horses." The mustangs taken to adoption facilities such as Palomino Valley are prepared for adoption by BLM staff and volunteers. In addition to giving the animals all the necessary vaccines, the facility occasionally offers a \$100 price cut from the regular \$125 adoption fee. Parsons adds that another advantage to adopting mustangs is that with the proper attention, they take to training very well. "They're basically a clean slate," he says.

If the only thing keeping you from adopting a mustang is the challenge of training it, a prison horse adoption might be for you. Prisoners at the Warm Springs Correctional Center in Carson City work with mustangs for 120 days before the horses are put up for adoption. The adoptions can be successful—the last one, in October 2008, found a home for every horse. The next adoption is set for February 21.

### CONTACTS

Palomino Valley National Wild Horse and Burro Center  
[wildhorseandburro.blm.gov](http://wildhorseandburro.blm.gov)  
775-475-2222

Nevada Department of Corrections, Warm Springs Correctional Center  
[doc.nv.gov/wsc](http://doc.nv.gov/wsc)  
775-861-6469

### CONTACTS

Bureau of Land Management  
Nevada State Office  
1340 Financial Blvd., Reno  
[blm.gov/nv](http://blm.gov/nv)  
775-861-6400

The American Wild Horse  
Preservation Campaign  
P.O. Box 926, Lompoc, CA 93438  
[wildhorsepreservation.com](http://wildhorsepreservation.com)  
877-853-4696

Wild Horse Preservation League  
P.O. Box 1858, Dayton, NV 89403  
[wildhorsepl.org](http://wildhorsepl.org)  
775-220-6806

Least Resistance Training Concepts  
[whmentors.org](http://whmentors.org)

The Humane Society of The United States  
2100 L St., NW, Washington, D.C.  
[hsus.org](http://hsus.org)  
202-452-1100

State of Nevada Commission for the  
Preservation of Wild Horses  
885 Eastlake Blvd., Carson City  
[wildhorse.nv.gov](http://wildhorse.nv.gov)  
775-849-3625

### WORTH A READ

*Honest Horses: Wild Horses in the Great Basin*, by Paula Morin. University of Nevada Press, [unpress.nevada.edu](http://unpress.nevada.edu), 775-784-6579. 408 pages. Visit "[Battle-Born Books](#)" for a review.