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Horse Sense

To Americans, the image of mustangs pounding across the range is a potent symbol of the Wild West. But it's a myth that harms wildlife and wreaks ecological havoc.

By Ted Williams

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We know about them from magazines and coffee-table books: "wild horses"—a.k.a. "mustangs"—cultural icons, symbols of freedom and the American pioneering spirit. Usually they stand on their hind legs, pawing the gaudy sky, eyes flashing, nostrils flared and venting steam. Or they gallop across purple sage, long tails and manes streaming in the desert wind. Always they are in fine flesh. In the pictures.

I love horses. I grew up with them, trained them, competed in horse shows, rode to hounds in Old Chatham, New York. All my early girlfriends who hung around our barn whether I was there or not could accurately draw horses, mostly "wild" ones. Mobilized by "Wild Horse Annie"—a Nevada ranch wife named Velma Johnston—they and other grade-schoolers across America wrote impassioned letters to senators and congressmen, demanding that "wild horses" be preserved other than in dog food cans. The upshot was the Wild Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act of 1971, which placed all unrestrained, unclaimed equids (horses and burros) under government care and made it a felony to kill, capture, sell, or even annoy one.

Under this law the departments of Agriculture and Interior must manage free-roaming equids in such fashion as "to achieve and maintain a thriving natural ecological balance on the public lands." That mission is impossible for two reasons. First, the feds don't begin to have the capacity for nonlethal feral-equid management. Second, horses or burros cannot exist anywhere in North America in "natural ecological balance." They are aliens. The argument that equids are "native" to this continent because their progenitors were present during the Pleistocene—a mantra from the wild-horse lobby—makes as much sense as claiming that elephants are native because woolly mammoths were here during the same period.

Roughly 10,000 years after the extinction of North American horses, Spanish explorers introduced a larger domesticated species. But the continent's plant communities, having coevolved with ungulates that had cloven hooves and lacked upper teeth, were ill-equipped to handle solid hooves and meshing incisors. Result: ecological havoc.

Another mantra from the wild-horse lobby is that the "mustangs" extant in Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, and Wyoming are closely related to animals unleashed by the conquistadores. They are not; they are mongrels—a genetic morass of breeds issuing mostly from recently escaped or discarded livestock.

"Revisionist history promoted by horse lovers to give mustangs historic status," is how Tice Supplee, director of bird conservation for Audubon Arizona, defines the Spanish-bloodline pitch. The definition preferred by Erick Campbell—a biologist who retired from the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in 2005 and who frequently dealt with feral-horse issues during his 30-year career—is: "pure, unadulterated BS." Campbell told me this: "We managed everything from workhorses to Shetland ponies. Your daughter's horse gets old or she stops liking it. So you turn it loose. Prior to World War II ranchers were basically managing these herds for sale to the Army. And to keep the quality up the Army would give the ranchers studs to release."

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Since the BLM is the primary caregiver for feral equids, I asked Campbell how they affect native ecosystems. He conceded that cows do more damage because there are lots more of them, but he pointed out that cattle provide food and livelihoods. Feral equids are just out there perpetuating a myth, and when it comes to habitat destruction, what they lack in numbers they make up for in efficiency. "They're worse than cows," he says. "They do incredible damage. When the grass between the shrubs is gone a cow is out of luck, but a horse or burro will stomp that plant to death to get that one last blade. When cows run out of forage the cowboys move them or take them home, but horses and burros are out there all year. They're not fenced; they can go anywhere. BLM exacerbates the problem by hauling water to them. Instead of just letting them die, we keep them going. There are even horses in Las Vegas, which is obscene. In the desert! The horse groups have tremendous power with Congress. They only care about horses; they couldn't give a damn about all the wildlife that's adversely affected."

The BLM rounds up feral equids—on its own land only and often by helicopter—then puts them up for public adoption. The system is hideously expensive. "No way is the BLM equipped to manage horses and burros," says Campbell. "It doesn't get the money." Still, the agency spends about \$40 million a year tending feral equids. And this figure doesn't include the millions spent by the states and the U.S. Forest Service, Park Service, and Fish and Wildlife Service in vain efforts to keep them from destroying fish and wildlife habitat. For example, the half-million-acre Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge in Nevada—fragile high desert—has removed about 1,150 horses since 2004, and it still has 1,000 left. The refuge provides important habitat for a host of troubled species, including sage grouse, pronghorns, and bighorn sheep. "The horses are turning our riparian areas and springs into mud holes," says refuge manager Brian Day. "We have Lahontan cutthroats, a federally threatened species, and the horses silt up the creeks and cover up the spawning gravel. They eat the meadows down to dirt. There are a lot of sensible people who like these horses. And then there are the other types who don't let the truth stand in their way."

As you remove feral equids, those that remain are less stressed and breed faster, increasing the population by as much as 30 percent annually. Natural equid predators—saber-toothed tigers, cave bears, and dire wolves—are extinct, and any unnatural predator has to be pretty desperate to risk getting bludgeoned by the hooves of a feral equid. ("Probably as many mountain lions have been killed by horses as horses by lions," says Campbell.) Although we can find \$40 million annually to keep an alien on perpetual welfare, we invest only \$74,472 a year trying to keep the average threatened or endangered species from going extinct. Such are the priorities of the American public.

Strapped though they are for adequate funding, BLM equid managers squander what they get. "It's frustrating to see them spend money in areas that can't maintain viable horse populations," says Nevada Department of Wildlife habitat bureau chief Dave Pulliam. "We see places where BLM has established a management goal of 15 or 20 horses when their own science indicates that 100 is the threshold for [genetic] viability. So when money is the issue why are they wasting it? Why aren't they zeroing out these herds? Sensitive desert species like bighorns, desert tortoises, and Gila monsters can't tolerate horses. And horses will stand over a spring and run off other animals." Even as feral horses proliferate in areas where they can't make a decent living, they evict native species that would otherwise thrive. As one of dozens of examples, Pulliam offers the East High Rock Canyon Wilderness, where his agency wants to rehabilitate about 30 seeps and springs once associated with lush meadows. "In desert country, seeps and springs are the most important habitats for a whole myriad of species—sagebrush obligate birds, mule deer, bighorns, pronghorns, everything," he says. "And they are absolutely beat to mud holes. Riparian habitat has disappeared. Water tables have dropped. Horse use is excessive to the point of rendering this habitat unavailable to wildlife. Our wildlife constituents don't get as vociferous as the horse lovers."

The BLM, which has a reputation for underestimating equid populations and has no reliable way of figuring them anyway, claims that just on its own land there are about 32,000 animals, mostly horses. An additional

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26,000 are being maintained in holding facilities, awaiting adoption. At auctions held around the country the BLM adopts out about 6,000 feral equids a year. But it admits that that's not enough to keep the feral population in check, and there's a limit to how many feral equids the public wants. Generally, you pay a \$125 "adoption fee," and after you get a vet to sign a statement that you've provided humane care for one year, you get a certificate of title and can do anything you want with your horse or burro, including selling it to a slaughterhouse.

Feral horses are big and dangerous. Arizona Audubon's Tice Supplee has a friend who showed up looking like he'd been in a bar fight after his adopted mustang had knocked him around and eventually skewered itself on a fence stake. Now it's in his freezer. In addition to knowledgeable horse people, the program attracts weird-pet fanciers—the ocelot-coatimundi crowd. Burros, often adopted as companions for horses, are less dangerous but more obnoxious. "What kind of a nut would want one?" Arizona State University zoologist Robert Ohmart asked me in 1985 when I reported on burros for *Audubon*. It was a question I relayed to my mother, who kept one in a failed effort to calm her semi-feral horses. It brayed from dusk to dawn and had the least efficient digestive tract of any creature I've known. People get tired of adopted burros fast. Twenty-one years ago the BLM was telling me it had pretty much "saturated the market."

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The BLM is between a rock and the equine lobby. Two basic elements comprise this lobby—one somewhat practical, somewhat rational, and genuinely and rightly concerned about humane treatment of feral equids. In its more thoughtful moments the Humane Society of the United States might fit this description. While it doesn't worry about native ecosystems, it at least understands that population expansion leads to major suffering, and it is assisting the BLM in experiments with chemical contraception. "Where population reductions are well justified, nonlethal strategies like contraception should take the place of costly roundups," wrote HSUS president Wayne Pacelle in a letter to *The New York Times*. But until contraception is practical over large areas of the West, if it ever is, the HSUS favors roundups and adoptions over culling by rifle.

The other element, a political juggernaut referred to by wildlifers as the "horse mafia," advocates more animals on public range; vehemently opposes birth control, roundups, and adoptions; and wants no feral equid to die from anything, anywhere, no matter what. In 2005, for example, the Colorado Wild Horse and Burro Coalition and the Cloud Foundation (named after a feral horse named Cloud) failed in an administrative appeal to stop the BLM from experimenting with chemical contraception in Montana's Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Range. "BLM has used this herd as a science experiment, and it's a shame in a wilderness setting," declares Cloud Foundation director Ginger Kathrens. "It's a situation that can be managed by nature, but they don't value natural systems." When I asked her how a system with feral equids in it could be "natural," she said: "Wild horses are native to North America."

In the late 1990s National Park Service biologist Erik Beever, then a doctoral candidate at the University of Nevada at Reno, ran afoul of the horse mafia by discovering facts not to its liking. In the most comprehensive investigation ever undertaken of what feral horses do to wildlife habitat, Beever examined soils, rodents, reptiles, ants, and plants across nine mountain ranges at 19 study sites, documenting dramatic horse damage. For this the horse mafia viciously attacked him in the press, accusing him of whoring for the cattle industry, which doesn't like grazing competition from feral livestock. "It got pretty nasty," Beever recalls. His work provided the BLM with the means, if not the motivation, for determining how many horses should be removed from an area for their own good.

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Finally, consider the injunction preventing the Forest Service from rounding up and adopting out as many as 400 horses in northern Arizona. They're domestic animals that escaped from the White Mountain Apache reservation in 2002 when a forest fire destroyed a fence, but the plaintiffs—In Defense of Animals, the Animal Welfare Institute, and the International Society for the Protection of Mustangs and Wild Burros—convinced a federal judge that they might be part Spanish. So before the Forest Service can remove them it must run DNA tests on each animal to make sure there are no ancient genes, an impossible task even if it had the funds. "We reseeded the fire area, and the horses are just hammering it," says Robert Dyson, public affairs officer for the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest. "They're displacing wildlife. Channel 12 TV out of Phoenix reported that we planned to kill 'wild horses,' and our phones rang off the hook. We got letters from third graders all across Phoenix. We had carefully explained to Channel 12 that we'd be capturing the horses alive."

"The injunction was all over the equine rags this spring," says Supplee. " 'We won! We won!' These horses are in the heart of our elk country, and uncontrolled elk can hurt riparian systems, too. Here the Forest Service is telling Game and Fish to reduce their elk [through increased hunting], and meanwhile, they have 400 horses running around. The Forest Service really got outmaneuvered on this one."

Now and then, however, environmentalists outmaneuver the horse mafia. One of the first Important Bird Areas to be recognized in Nevada and possibly the best cottonwood gallery riparian forest left in the West is the Carson River delta—vital to all manner of birds, including western yellow-billed cuckoos and two subspecies of willow flycatcher. "The BLM had a management goal of 18 horses but let the population grow to 200 to 300," reports Don McIvor, Audubon's Nevada director of bird conservation. "They were hanging out in the riparian area, removing the understory, trampling willows, causing major habitat damage." The BLM wasn't doing anything about it, so McIvor and his colleagues complained to the Nevada Department of Wildlife, which prevailed on the BLM to remove all but 15 of the horses. The horse mafia never found out that Audubon was the driving force behind the roundup, so its full fury was directed at the state and feds.

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With some sort of population control, horses and burros might make a decent living on grasslands—where their Pleistocene progenitors evolved—but those grasslands are leased or owned by cattle ranchers. So feral equids are restricted to arid and desert regions, where they suffer terribly. Supposedly they're managed as wildlife, but when there's a drought or food shortage the BLM tends as many as it can in the field or in holding facilities. Most animals, though, get left on depleted range, and the BLM can't go onto the land of other agencies. So all across the West horses and burros slowly starve. In a January 4, 2005, op-ed for *The New York Times* entitled "Live Free and Die," journalist and writing instructor Judy Blunt described a typical scene: "A cloud hangs over the Nevada landscape, caused by 500 half-starved horses pounding the high desert to powder, looking for food, stamping any remaining waterholes into dust. The foals are long dead, left behind as they weakened. Cowboys under contract with the BLM set out to gather the horses and move them, but a phone call redirects them to a worse situation in another area."

Native animals are also capable of intense suffering. All manner of wildlife depend on desert trees such as paloverde, mesquite, and ocotillo. Small mammals are nourished by their seeds; birds nest in their branches; reptiles find sanctuary in their shade; desert bighorn sheep browse on their tender tips. Horses and burros girdle them with their meshing incisors, then stomp them into the dirt with their solid hooves. Supplee used to conduct Christmas bird counts in what she calls "lush and canopied dry riparian washes with huge mesquite

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and paloverde trees." Feral horses moved in and trashed the habitat. "They broke off branches, stripped the bark, and killed the trees," she says.

Burros are even harder on native ecosystems because they can live in higher, drier areas. Supplee referred me to Art Fuller, a biologist who retired from the Arizona Game and Fish Department in 2001. "I fought the battle for years," he says. "Burros were wreaking havoc in the Black Mountains. My position was that there shouldn't be *any* burros in these desert mountain ranges, but a few would be okay if the BLM would do inventory every year and remove the excess. They used to; then they stopped. They said it was too dangerous for them to fly the aerial surveys. So we and the Park Service flew them, and even then the BLM sometimes would say they didn't have the funding to remove those burros. It was very frustrating. Burros are hurting big game, small game, passerine birds, nongame mammals, everything. We have a crisis with desert bighorn sheep."

In the 1980s, after the spectacular failure of the Fund for Animals' helicopter transfer of feral burros from the Grand Canyon to happy homes, the Park Service started shooting burros, accounting for 500 by the early 1990s. Such was the public uproar that the agency is again allowing burros to proliferate. Elaine Leslie, a biologist at Grand Canyon National Park until 2004 and now assistant superintendent at Canyon de Chelly National Monument in Arizona, tells me this: "You can find burros or burro evidence in the vast majority of Grand Canyon springs or seeps. They spread exotic grasses, contaminate water, trample wetland species, remove vegetation, and eliminate small mammals, birds, and amphibians. I have seen the only water source for 20 miles get so polluted backpackers couldn't filter it. It was once rich with wetland vegetation, an oasis for birds and frogs; now it's devoid of vegetation. We're spending all this money—as per President Clinton's standing executive order—trying to control exotic invasive species, and we're not doing anything about feral horse and burro populations. Do people really look at what happens to these animals a year after they're adopted? They're in a can of dog food."

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So what's to be done? Congress hasn't a clue, but in December 2004 it did make its first feeble attempt to address the problem by passing a law that allows the BLM to sell a feral equid that is more than 10 years old or—for whatever reason, physical or behavioral—has been rejected for adoption three times. The Cascadia Wildlands Project warned that the legislation was really a scheme to remove horses "from their native habitat," the better to slaughter "thousands." And Wild Horse Preservation identified the program as a plot by the cattle industry to "funnel wild horses to slaughter." The following spring, when 41 feral horses found their way to a slaughterhouse, the agency shut down the new program until it had hatched a tough sales agreement that requires buyers to swear in writing they won't sell their animals for meat—this despite the fact that about 90,000 domestic horses were sold for meat last year. No feral equid has been slaughtered since, but the horse mafia is still in full cry.

"There's a train wreck coming," declares Bill Marlett, director of the Oregon Natural Desert Association. "In the Burns District in eastern Oregon alone, the BLM collects an average of 500 horses a year, and they're just maintaining the status quo. The corrals are full; they can't adopt them fast enough to keep up."

It is difficult to understand why Americans believe that starvation is more humane than culling. In Australia, where there are thought to be as many as 265,000 feral horses and 5 million feral burros, the government shoots them. According to its Model Code of Practice for the Humane Control of Feral Horses, "Shooting is considered more humane than capture and removal as the animals are not subject to the stresses of mustering [roundup], yarding, and long-distance transportation." Moreover, most other nations don't share

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our taboo against eating horse meat. It's considered a delicacy in Europe, and in Australia the commercial slaughter of feral horses, burros, and other livestock is a \$100 million-a-year industry. Australia is working on chemical contraception, too, but an effective agent practical for field application may be decades away.

In the United States, at least, there is still time for an alternative to shooting and starvation—leaving and managing a few herds of feral horses and burros of alleged “historical significance” on adequate range, perhaps on retired cattle-grazing leases, but rounding up and caring for the others. As expensive as this would be, the main investment would end when the captured animals died of old age.

As it stands now, though, the powerful horse mafia won't hear of such a thing. And fish and wildlife advocates shudder at the Australia-style disaster that apparently lies ahead.

What You Can Do

Urge your legislators to support the evacuation of most feral equids from most public land. Learn more about the [Bureau of Land Management's](http://www.wy.blm.gov/wildhorses) (www.wy.blm.gov/wildhorses) feral equid management and adoption programs.