

# Roundup at Sand Springs

By Teresa Gibson

The whirl of a hovering helicopter, the creaking sound of metal panels being rearranged, and a multitude of colored horses closing in on the trap are just a few of the sights and sounds that dominate the scene of a wild horse roundup.

Anticipation and tension build as the helicopter whirl becomes louder and louder as it nears the horse trap in the Sand Springs Herd Management Area in the extreme southeastern corner of Oregon.

About 5 miles off in the distance, the helicopter pilot slowly

maneuvers in large lazy circles, like a bird of prey, above a small band of horses yet to be seen from the trap site. The pilot calls in on the radio announcing that he has seven horses in this group, and he expects to be in within the hour.

Initially the group of horses run from the helicopter at a strong gallop, uncertain of the flying machine. But with time, the animals become used to its presence and are slowly edged into the desired direction with gentle coaxing from the man above.

The pilot tries to keep the herd

together and is careful not to push the horses too fast because they have a long way to go. He considers the terrain, weather conditions, and distance to be traveled to make sure the smaller colts are able to keep up with the rest of the herd.

Under the pilot's guidance, within minutes the horses are generally running single file behind the lead mare or stud toward the trap. They eventually slow down to a trot as they become less intimidated by the helicopter. Along the way, one of the horses reaches down to take an occasional bite of snow as a source of water.

From this point on, the horses seem to be moving more at their own pace. At times, it looks as if the horses purposely slow down to resist the helicopter.

Meanwhile at the trap, the crew is patiently waiting for the small band of horses to arrive. Wranglers are busy reorganizing the trap panels for better loading, while outside the trap, visitors rest on rock outcroppings and discuss what kind of photography angle they would like to get of the horses as they arrive.

An hour and a half has passed since the pilot picked up the horses, and the animals are now nearing the trap. Everyone takes their position, some hide behind rocks, and others behind sagebrush blinds.

The area is fairly open, with no trees or tall bushes to hide behind and only small hills and mounds of rock outcropping scattered across the generally flat rangeland. The trap, somewhat obscured by the location, is camouflaged by



*The foal running in front of the band demonstrates the easy pace set by the helicopter pilot and wranglers during capture operations. If herded too rapidly, foals tire and lag behind the rest of the band.*

sagebrush bunches laced between the visible panels.

The whirl of the helicopter blades increases in volume. The approaching horses become larger in size and shape as they gradually come into view.

Within about half of a mile from the trap, the pilot—a modern-day aerial cowboy—steers his quarry toward the trap opening. From behind a nearby rock mound, wranglers release two “traitor horses” to lead the unsuspecting wild herd into the trap. These horses are useful for capturing wild horses. They serve as decoys to their to-be-domesticated counterparts and are trained to run directly to the trap.

As the horses pass into the mouth of the trap, a wrangler on horseback pulls a long canvas gate across to close the opening. Three others come out of hiding to support the cloth canvas in the middle and shoo at the horses to prevent them from jumping over the exit.

Meanwhile the helicopter steadily maintains position over the canvas area about 100 feet above the ground, reinforcing it so the horses dare not try to come back out.

On this second day of the roundup, there is not much slack time. All hands are busy loading horses into the trucks between each group of incoming horses. A total of 74 horses were rounded up on this very busy day.

Patience and persistence are the keys to loading wild horses enclosed for the first time in a confined area. Two wranglers on either side of the elongated runway of the loading chute separate the horses into smaller groups and eventually onto the loading ramp. On occasion, a few of the horses get turned around and find themselves backing up into the truck, adding a little light-heartedness to the group of onlookers.

Somehow, the last 10 or 11 horses are herded into the truck and the final gate is closed. The

engine starts up for the two-hour trip to the wild horse corrals in Burns, Oregon. There the horses will receive medical treatment, vaccinations, blood tests, and permanent identification numbers, and eventually will be transported to an adoption center or to holding facilities.

But this is only the second half of the roundup day.

The six wranglers started the day while the moon and the bright eastern Oregon stars were still out. For about 10 days straight on each roundup, the Government cowboys are up by 6 o'clock in the morning, swig down coffee and eat a fast breakfast, and warm up their rigs or pickups by 6:30 a.m.

As the rising sun breaks over the horizon, the rigs pull out onto the highway on their way to the trap. One of the trucks hauls the horse trailer with two saddle horses and two “traitor horses” inside. A full day's work has just begun for the crew and those four horses, and they will return to the horse camp in 10 to 12 hours. They will shut down only for lunch.

Even before the roundup begins, much thought and work goes into the development of management and gathering plans plus the construction of a horse trap in the open range.

Herd management plans are developed and occasionally updated to determine the number of wild horses allowable on the range. In these herd management areas, the wild horses are in competition for forage and water with wildlife and livestock in the area.

Inventories are conducted at least every other year and sometimes annually to determine the number of horses presently on the range. With wild horse populations in Oregon multiplying at about 20 percent or more per year, each herd is reduced every four to five years depending upon available funds and several other factors.

Several weeks and sometimes months before a roundup, BLM

employees will fly over the herd management area to inventory the horses and to determine the best possible location for a trap site.

When looking for a good trap location, several things are taken into consideration. First, an area with good road access is preferred. Next, the BLM employees find a place that the horses regularly travel. Finally, the location should have small hills and other natural terrain, which would restrict the horses' view once they are within the confines of the trap.

Once a location is selected and all regulations and clearances are met, the actual trap is constructed. During construction—which takes about two days—60 to 150 metal panels are used to build the necessary structure. Some holes will be dug to position the corner braces so the trap will be sturdy enough to hold the weight of horses against the panels. The trap is carefully constructed so as not to injure the horses with obtrusive edges or sharp points. For additional safety, the area is also cleared of any large rocks.

Roundups like these are perhaps one of the most exciting aspects of the wild horse and burro program, but they are not without complications and risks. The gathering crew must be extremely careful around wild horses. Roundup plans may change daily, and the crew's activities heavily depend upon weather conditions.

Throughout the Western States where roundups—like this one in Oregon—are taking place, each gathering will differ somewhat in techniques and procedures. However, all have a common goal of reducing the numbers of wild horses and burros on the public rangelands to more manageable levels.

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*Teresa Gibson is a public affairs specialist in the Bureau of Land Management's Burns, Oregon District Office.*

# Letters, We Get Letters

**D**on't misunderstand us—we love to get letters. We like to hear what's on your mind, and we thoroughly enjoy the painstaking drawings forwarded to us by budding young artists.

But since so many of your letters express the same concerns, we'd like to take this opportunity to answer some common questions about wild horse and burro management. If your questions aren't addressed here, please feel free to write to us at:

U.S. Department of the Interior  
Bureau of Land Management  
Division of Wild Horses and Burros  
(250)  
Premier Building, Room 909  
Washington, D. C. 20240

## **Why is BLM allowing wild horses and burros to be slaughtered for pet food?**

One of our most frequently asked questions, we answer this with an emphatic **WE'RE NOT!!!** Wild free-roaming horses and burros have been protected from such a fate since Public Law 92-195 was enacted on December 15, 1971. Before that time, mustangers frequently sold the animals they rounded up with trucks and airplanes to canneries as a source of pet food. The law, commonly referred to as the Wild Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act of 1971, was a direct response to the inhumane treatment the wild horses and burros often were subjected to during roundup and transportation to the slaughterhouses.

The law does not allow excess wild horses and burros to be sold at auction or in any other manner. Excess wild horses and burros must be removed and disposed of

in the following order and priority: First, old, sick, or lame animals are to be humanely destroyed. Second, healthy animals are to be placed in private maintenance through the Adopt-A-Horse (or Burro) Program as long as there are qualified individuals wishing to adopt them. Third, remaining excess animals for which there is no adoption demand are to be destroyed in the most humane and cost efficient manner possible.

A moratorium on the destruction of healthy excess animals has been in effect since 1982. BLM has no desire to destroy healthy animals, nor does public sentiment favor such action. The only wild horses and burros being destroyed by BLM are those that are so old, sick, or lame that they have little chance of recovery. These animals are destroyed as a humane measure and generally constitute less than 5 percent of the animals captured. None of the animals are processed into pet food.

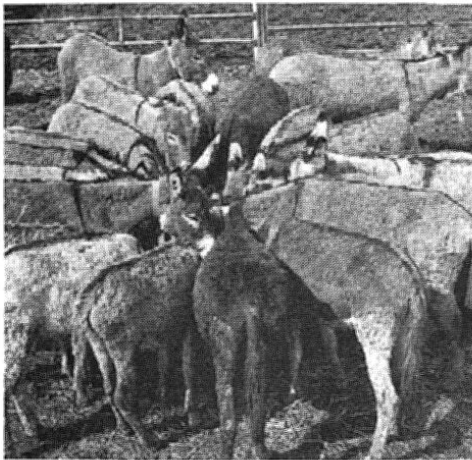
## **Why does BLM support legislation that would allow it to sell unadopted excess wild horses and burros?**

We now are faced with the task of maintaining thousands of unadopted wild horses in holding facilities, at considerable expense. We feel this is an undesirable situation for the animals themselves, for BLM, and for the taxpayer funding the program.

The sale at public auction of unadopted excess animals would be an alternative to destruction. Although we recognize some of the animals might be sold to slaughterhouses, a public auction would provide one more opportunity for the animals to be placed in the private sector.

## **Are all wild horses and burros protected by law?**

No. The Wild Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act applies only to those animals on public lands administered by BLM or the Forest



*Wild burros are available at most Bureau of Land Management adoption centers, especially those in the eastern and southwestern States.*

Service. Horses and burros on other Federal lands, such as national parks, wildlife refuges, and military installations, are not protected by the Act.

#### **Aren't wild horses and burros an endangered species?**

No. Although Congress declared in the Act that "these horses and burros are fast disappearing from the American scene," the animals have never been in danger of extinction. Since 1971, herd populations have increased from an estimated level of 17,000 wild horses and burros to approximately 64,000 animals. These animals have few natural predators and under the protection of the Act increase at an approximate annual rate of 16 percent.

#### **Why can't wild horses and burros simply be left alone on the public lands?**

That sounds like an easy solution, but unmanaged wild horse or burro herds could spell disaster to the rangeland resources, to the wildlife and domestic livestock that share the range with them, and ultimately to themselves.

The fragile public rangelands in the West are managed by BLM for a broad range of values and uses, including recreation, timber, wilderness, mineral production, and scenic and cultural resources. The vegetation on these lands must protect watersheds and prevent erosion. It also provides a limited supply of forage for livestock, and habitat and food for deer, antelope, elk, bighorn sheep, and other wildlife, in addition to wild horses and burros.

To protect the vegetation from overgrazing and to maintain healthy animal herds, it is necessary to control population levels of all animals on the public lands. Livestock are managed through permits limiting the numbers of cattle, sheep, or other domestic animals by seasons and

areas of use. Wildlife numbers are managed by State fish and game departments. Similarly, wild horse and burro populations are controlled through removal of excess animals.

#### **Why can't BLM move excess wild horses and burros to other areas of the public lands?**

In the Wild Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act, Congress directed that these animals be managed "in the areas where presently found, as an integral part of the natural system of the public lands." Thus, herd areas are limited to those areas of the public lands where wild horses or burros existed in 1971.

Even if relocation were an available alternative, it would not solve the problem caused by natural increase and the resultant need to control herds at some level. As with any herbivore, given sufficient time and the lack of natural controls, the herds would expand to fill, and exceed, the carrying capacity of any habitat provided.

BLM officials have identified 303 herd areas containing approximately 47.5 million acres of public lands. If the population in a herd area identified for long term management of wild horses or burros falls below an acceptable level, excess animals from another herd area may be brought in to maintain a viable population.

#### **Why doesn't BLM control wild horse and burro populations with antifertility drugs?**

BLM has been evaluating both stallion-focused and mare-focused approaches to fertility control to manage rates of increase. The National Academy of Sciences' Committee on Wild and Free-Roaming Horses and Burros also has reviewed the subject and concluded that neither approach has been developed to the point of being ready to use in the management of wild horse herds. We propose

to use part of the \$1 million Congress made available for research this year to study the subject further.

#### **Why does BLM use helicopters to round up wild horses and burros? Isn't that illegal and inhumane?**

Humane use of helicopters in BLM and Forest Service roundups was authorized by the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976. Helicopter use is more humane to the wild horses, the wranglers, and their mounts than the more traditional method of rounding up by cowboys on horseback. One of the greatest advantages of using the helicopter is that once the horses are heading in the right direction, the helicopter can back off and let them proceed at their own speed. When the terrain is steep, they can rest. If they were being herded by saddle horses, this could not be allowed because as soon as they catch their breath, they will scatter in different directions.

Bands may also scatter when they are gathered by helicopter, but with the helicopter's ability to hover, fly slowly, even fly backwards, the pilot easily moves the band back together. If they were being herded by horseback, the rider would be on a horse that has already traveled some distance, carrying weight, pursuing horses that are not, and often running in precarious footing while attempting to turn the band.

Frequently, horses that have been herded toward a trap by helicopter for more than an hour are not sweating; the foals are running up in the front of the band, indicating that even they are not tired; and they exhibit no symptoms of terror or unusual stress. This may be because wild horses and burros do not expect predator from the air and are instinctively more fearful of pursuit from the ground.

**How can someone adopt a wild horse or burro?**

By submitting an adoption application form describing the type of animal wanted and the kind of feed, transportation, and facilities available for its care. Applications and a brochure describing the Adopt-A-Horse Program are available from your local BLM office, or by writing:

Adopt-A-Horse  
Bureau of Land Management (130)  
Room 5600  
18th & C Streets, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20240

To qualify to adopt, you must be of legal age (parents may adopt

for their children), have no prior convictions for inhumane treatment of animals, and have adequate facilities and means of transportation to provide humane care and proper treatment for a wild horse or burro.

**Where are the animals available for adoption?**

Wild horse and burro adoption centers are located across the Nation, although most are found in the West. Facilities open year-round are found in Kingman, Arizona (burros only); Susanville, California; Ridgecrest, California (burros only); Boise, Idaho (horses only); Palomino Valley, Nevada; Burns, Oregon (horses only);

Lewisberry, Pennsylvania; Cross Plains, Tennessee; Collinsville, Texas; and Rock Springs, Wyoming (horses only).

BLM also sets up temporary "satellite" adoption centers in sections of the country some distance from permanent centers. These centers typically operate for 3 to 4 days, generally over a weekend. Watch your local media or contact your local BLM office for information on temporary centers in your area.

**How much does it cost to adopt a wild horse or burro?**

Adoption fees are \$125 per horse and \$75 per burro.

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
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Bureau of Land Management  
701 C Street, Box 13  
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(801) 524-3146

**WYOMING AND NEBRASKA:**

Bureau of Land Management  
2515 Warren Avenue  
P.O. Box 1828  
Cheyenne, WY 82001  
(307) 772-2111



Adopt a wild horse or burro. Thousands need homes and can be trained for farming, riding, showing, packing and other everyday uses.

*Pictured is Carolie Colwell, a member of the Echoing Hoofbeats 4-H Club in Lewisberry, Pennsylvania, with Sir Echo, the 50,000th wild horse and burro placed in a foster home by the Adopt-A-Horse Program.*

For information  
and an  
application, write:

**Adopt-A-Horse**  
Bureau of Land Management  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20240

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