

The Wild Horses of the Mojave



By Suzanne Hurt

The Mojave Desert looks drier than a water barrel in a seven-year drought. Anything except sage and desert horned lizards seems like a mirage.

We're driving on a dirt road toward the Nevada border east of the White Mountains. Something's up ahead. We can barely make out shapes seared into the landscape. The road goes straight to them: a band of wild horses standing in desert scrub.

Few things invoke images of the Wild West like mustangs. These fast-moving icons of an untamed, independent frontier have grabbed the American consciousness with an ethereal elusiveness akin to smoke rising from a just-doused campfire: the barest hint of their existence can stir the soul.

But most Americans will never see even one.

The small band is among 32,000 wild horses living in this country on U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land -- roughly 2,630 in California, said Tom Pogacnik, manager for BLM's California Wild Horse and Burro Program. Others exist on non-BLM land.

Wild horses must withstand threats from nature, predators and government-managed herd thinning. In the desert, they also have to exist with little food or water.

"One of the things that captures the public's imagination is how they manage to survive in one of the harshest environments in the United States. Wild horses always seem to find a way to hang on," said Pogacnik.

Horses originated about 55 million years ago in what's now the United States. Researchers say the horse developed from a creature the size of a small dog, with toes and padded feet, to a larger, single-hoofed animal with long legs and eyes on the sides of its head -- the first "true horse" -- two million years ago. Characteristics improving survival in the wild evolved right here. Like humans, horses are one of the oldest mammal groups to survive into the present.

Horses vanished from North America 7,000 to 10,000 years ago after the Bering land bridge disappeared. Horses had already crossed into Asia and continued to evolve there, then spread into Europe and Africa.

America's wild horses are believed to be descendants of domesticated horses re-established here by the Spanish. Some escaped from the Spanish or were stolen by Native Americans as early as the 1500s. Other mustangs are descended from horses abandoned by ranchers, farmers, miners and the military cavalry.

The word "mustang" derives from the Mexican-Spanish word "mestengo," sometimes interpreted as "having no master."

That fits a high-elevation herd inhabiting a remote area east of Mono Lake. The Pizona Springs or Montgomery Pass herd escapes BLM roundups, brandings and sales by cunningly living primarily in Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest, the largest forest in the lower 48, and neighboring Inyo National Forest.

The herd descended from survivors of a post-Civil War horse drive across the Sierra. The herd hasn't had real human contact in nearly 70 years, after an Eastern Sierra rodeo family stopped using them, said Chalfant Valley resident Walt Svetich, an Inyo National Forest Service retiree who's published a book, "The History of the Montgomery Pass Wild Horse Territory."

The herd, last counted at 230 head, travels to 8,000 feet in the Pizona Range in summers and sometimes into upper elevations in the north end of the 11,000-foot White Mountains, said Ryan Kitts, a professional horse trainer in Benton. He grew up in Bishop working with horses and has provided expert field support to researchers connected to the BLM and the University of California's White Mountain Research Station.

The Pizona horses migrate to lower elevations like 6,506-foot Adobe Valley in winter. In summer, they travel the range drinking from upper and lower Pizona Springs and other springs. The herd is thinned naturally by mountain lions and tough winters.

Several more herds, totaling about 200 horses, travel BLM land east of the White Mountains down to Death Valley's north end. The band of seven horses we encountered belongs to the Fish Lake Valley herd, named for the valley they roam between the Whites and the Silver Peak Mountains.

Horses have evolved to escape predators and capture. Wild herds divide themselves into bands averaging eight to 10 horses. Bands are led by alpha mares, which guide the way to foraging areas and water, and decide when, where and how long to rest. Bands also contain an alpha stallion and sometimes one or two younger stallions sired by the older male, said Kitts. Most wild horses give birth in the spring so foals can survive the next winter.

These naturally migratory animals move day and night. They can cover up to 30 miles a day but usually do no more than 10. They've adapted to need only 3 hours of sleep a day, taken in five-minute, standing naps. They'll travel far to find their primary food -- protein-rich bunch grass -- and then a long way back to water. The Fish Lake Valley herd also survives by eating ranch hay and farm-raised alfalfa, which annoys ranchers and farmers.

"No matter how tough things get, these animals always find a way to survive," said Pogacnik.

At night, the horses avoid springs, where predators often wait. Wild horses stay high on ridges watching for predators; ridge-top locations are easy to escape from. Horses have evolved to be able to go without drinking water every day, said Svetich.

During daylight, they move into lower canyons and the bottoms of draws for springwater, then quickly leave. They mostly walk in a single-file line, a habit called “trailing.” They trot if disturbed but rarely lope because it burns too much energy, Kitts said.

Fish Lake Valley and Pizona Springs horses make up distinct herds. Valley horses tend to be smaller and primarily dark brown (bay) or red (sorrel), with a few blacks. Pizona Springs horses are mostly gray, brown-gray (dun) or tan with black markings (buckskins), with some bays and sorrels.

The Fish Lake Valley herd stays mostly in “the bottoms” in their namesake valley or Deep Springs Valley to the south. They find water and shade in Furnace Creek Canyon, a small oasis, or other canyons. They move into the foothills in summer, staying about 6,000 feet.

Occasionally, horses can be seen on top of the Whites. A small band of three horses used to wander into Crooked Creek, about 10,000 feet. The band has dwindled down to one horse – a branded gelding, Kitts believes.

“He’s by himself now,” he said.