

## Saving America's Living Legends

The first time I saw wild horses running free across the Nevada landscape, it took my breath away – and my heart too. The herd consisted of all sizes and colors of horses moving as a coordinated unit, seemingly carefree but with a destination in mind. Reading about such things doesn't compare to the real experience. In that moment I was part of history - the Pony Express, wagon trains, main streets in pioneer towns, Native American hunters returning to their villages with buffalo carcasses. I was remembering tales of the 1600s when Spanish horses were dispersed by settlers throughout the Southwest and California. Watching the herd from a camouflage blind as a Bureau of Land Management (BLM) employee, the mountains of Nevada in the background, it dawned on me that I had no clue how fast a wild horse could run! Another fact would surface as well: wild horses and burros cannot exist on the range at their present population levels.

Months later, on another staff visit to America's public lands, a colleague and I watched a horse standing by a tree - alone. John, a man with years of wild horse and burro experience to his credit, said the horse would not wander far from that spot. The animal's ribs were easily visible and its eyes were dull. John was right. The horse never moved during our short stay. This time, my reaction to seeing a wild horse was different. Instead of excitement, I felt a little moisture pooling in my eyes. Old age was not the reason for the horse's poor condition; drought and lack of nutritious vegetation were. Native grasses had been replaced by cheatgrass, an abundant invasive species, one of many on western ranges. Cheatgrass does not even appeal to livestock. However, even though livestock can and do succumb to drought and malnutrition, cattle can be managed so they do not starve - not such an easy task for wild horses.

During the next four years I saw more herds whose numbers multiplied, and I witnessed more unhealthy wild horse and burro incidents. Can adoptions be the answer to this problem? Not entirely. Reaching appropriate management level among 30,000 plus wild horses and burros is a nearly insurmountable goal. But rounding up animals and offering them for adoption can present a **partial** solution. However, animals removed from the range and not adopted must remain in short-term corrals or long-term holding facilities.

Today, as I sit at my desk in the BLM Eastern State Office working with the Wild Horse & Burro (WH&B) Program, I often recall that first Wild West experience. It is almost possible to taste the dust left behind from hooves moving in unison and to feel

the ground vibrate as if an earthquake were to strike at any moment! But reality brings me back to the present and to the important task at hand which is to find ways to save the lives of these amazing animals. Help is at hand in the form of colleagues, adopters, volunteers and partners who support the BLM mission to act as “Guardians of the Past; Stewards for the Future.”

Spending \$125 to adopt a wild horse is, for hundreds of adopters, the beginning of a long friendship. Juan Palma, BLM Eastern States Director, describes wild horses as, “Intelligent, athletic, sure-footed, able to compete in a variety of events and excel in cutting, endurance, western pleasure, and even dressage.” This description nearly echoes the words of a wild horse and burro adopter when describing her adopted wild horse. Funds were tight for her and her husband at the time, and they didn’t have a lot of land. What they did have was an attachment for this animal that seemed to return their affection with his brown eyes.

A trainer said, “You can train all the domesticated horses you want, but a mustang, that’s a true test of who you are.” Adopting a wild horse or burro today IS possible and there are many, many volunteers, adopters, trainers and BLM horse specialists available to help with the process. Once you have adopted one of these wild creatures, life will not be the same. It will be vastly enhanced!

Won’t you please think about adopting a wild horse or burro? Or several of each? Remember, there is help out there for training, answers to questions, learning what works, facing challenges with other adopters and many additional support mechanisms. Adoption can be from a scheduled site or from the Internet. If you already own horses, is there a stable for one more horse or burro?

Visit [www.wildhorseandburro.blm.gov](http://www.wildhorseandburro.blm.gov) or call 866-4MUSTANGS for further information about the BLM Wild Horse & Burro Program, including adoptions.