

# Stampede

A mainstay of Western culture, the free-roaming stallions are now a force to be reckoned with - How the Mustang, the Symbol of the Frontier, Became a Nuisance

December 7, 2017

There's a reason that the logo for Ford's top-selling sports car depicts the galloping horse in profile. It's the same reason North American Aviation bestowed the name Mustang on its P-51 fighter plane, and that the wild horse was a favorite subject of Old West painter Frederic Remington: Few symbols are more evocative of power and breakneck freedom, or of the untamable frontier spirit. Just the word "mustang," an ad executive involved with the Ford brand once said, "had the excitement of wide open spaces. Plus, it was American as all hell."

The wild mustang is responsible for the naming of other entities. For the automobile, according to Ford, specific documentation about the car's naming no longer exist. The most plausible explanation, as related by the people at the heart of the decision in late 1963, was that John Najjar, the designer on the project, drew inspiration from the P-51 Mustang, a World War II-era fighter. As related in Robert A. Fria's book, *Mustang Genesis: Creation of the Pony Car*, Najjar's initial suggestion fell flat because Ford leaders didn't want to name the car after an airplane, but when the *horse* connotation of "Mustang" was proposed, the leadership team endorsed it.

For the aircraft, the **North American Aviation P-51 Mustang** is an American long-range, single-seat fighter and fighter-bomber used during World War II and the Korean War, among other conflicts. For the **Mustang Sally Band**, get ready for the ride of your life! They are as wild and rowdy as the Mustang horse. When you attend a **Mustang Sally** show, you are transported away from everyday life and into the world that Mustang Sally inhabits: a world where dancing on the bar is encouraged, and spontaneity is king. People are transformed from spectators into participants through interactive songs both edgy and sincere. The Mustang Sally Band name and brand has become synonymous with must-see entertainment.

Which makes it all the more astonishing that the horse has a new reputation: that of a pest. The American West is overrun with wild horses and burros, with nearly 70,000 running free on federal lands, or nearly three times the number considered environmentally sustainable. They are “eating us out of house and home,” says Laura Snell, an agronomist at the University of California. Mustangs pick ranges clean of essential plants and trample streamsides and pond banks, fouling the water that fish and other animals depend on.

To understand how we got to this point, you have to rewind the clock more than 500 years. Along with dangerous diseases and firearms, the Spanish conquistadors brought horses to the New World beginning in the early 16th century. Horses that escaped or were allowed to roam free eventually formed large herds that ranged across grasslands from modern-day Colorado to the Pacific. Thus, the name, “stray” or “wild”, having no master. Later, many horses were tamed by Native American warriors as battle steeds.

By the early 20th century, as many as two million mustangs roamed through the West, but commercial slaughter reduced the population: Horse meat was long a popular ingredient in dog and cat food. In 1971, Congress, calling wild horses and burros "living symbols of the historic and pioneer spirit of the West," passed a law that led to new reserves and shielded the animals from culling.<sup>[1]</sup> Throughout the course of history legislation has been passed in attempts to protect the mustang:

- In 1934, the Taylor Grazing Act established the United States Grazing Service to manage livestock grazing on public lands, and in 1946, the General Land Office (GLO) was combined with the Grazing Service to form the Bureau of Land Management (BLM).
- The first federal free-roaming horse protection law in 1959, titled "Use of aircraft or motor vehicles to hunt certain wild horses or burros; pollution of watering holes" popularly known as the "Wild Horse Annie Act", prohibited the use of motor vehicles for capturing free-roaming horses and burros. Protection was increased further by the Wild and Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971 (WFRHABA).
- The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is tasked with protecting, managing, and controlling wild horses and burros under the authority of the Wild and Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971 to ensure that healthy herds thrive on healthy rangelands and as multiple-use mission under the 1976 Federal Land Policy and Management Act. Under the 1971 act, shooting or poisoning mustangs in the wild is illegal, and doing so can be prosecuted as a criminal felony. In 1971,

the United States Congress recognized that "wild free-roaming horses and burros are living symbols of the historic and pioneer spirit of the West, which continue to contribute to the diversity of life forms within the Nation and enrich the lives of the American people."

- The Wild and Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971 provided for protection of certain previously established herds of horses and burros. It mandated the BLM to oversee the protection and management of free-roaming herds on lands it administered, and gave U.S. Forest Service similar authority on National Forest lands. A few free-ranging horses are also managed by the Fish and Wildlife Service and National Park Service, but for the most part they are not subject to management under the Act.

The Bureau of Land Management has carried out their mission for nearly 50 years. But in part because natural predators such as wolves and mountain lions have been so reduced by government hunting policies designed to protect cattle and other livestock, horse populations have soared. To deal with this, federal officials have regularly tried many means of protecting and managing the mustang population including rounding up horses and steering them onto private land leased from ranchers or into federal corrals, but at unsustainable costs; every so often, when the BLM considers a mass-euthanasia program to cull the herds, popular outrage wins out. Last September, a proposal to euthanize 45,000 horses that the Humane Society called "a sort of 'Final Solution'" was halted after a public outcry; animal rights activists call for setting aside more land for preserves, and some hope that improved birth control drugs, which can be administered by dart, can curtail the horse population boom. But implementing a plan like that

would be costly and onerous—you have to get to the horse to dart it, and for now the drugs are effective for just 22 months, so they'd have to be treated repeatedly; another method with which the federal government manages the wild population numbers, is a policy of rounding up excess population and offering these horses for adoption to private owners, has been inadequate to address questions of population control, and many animals now live in temporary holding areas, kept in captivity but not adopted to permanent homes.

The **mustang** is a free-roaming horse of the American west that first descended from horses brought to the Americas by the Spanish. Mustangs are often referred to as wild horses, but because they are descended from once-domesticated horses, they are properly defined as feral horses. The original mustangs were Colonial Spanish horses, but many other breeds and types of horses contributed to the modern mustang. In the 21st century, mustang herds vary in the degree to which they can be traced to original Iberian horses. Some contain a greater genetic mixture of ranch stock and more recent breed releases, while others are relatively unchanged from the original Iberian stock, most strongly represented in the most isolated populations.

Mustangs of all body types are described as surefooted and having good endurance. They may be of any coat color. Throughout all the Herd Management Areas managed by the Bureau of Land Management, light riding horse type predominates, though a few horses with draft horse [bred to be a working horse doing hard tasks such as plowing] characteristics also exist, mostly kept separate from other mustangs and confined to specific areas. Some herds show the signs of the introduction of Thoroughbred or other light racehorse-types into herds, a process that also led in part to the creation of the American Quarter Horse.

The mustang of the modern west has several different breeding populations today which are genetically isolated from one another and thus have distinct traits traceable to particular herds. Genetic contributions to today's free-roaming mustang herds include assorted ranch horses that escaped to or were turned out on the public lands, and stray horses used by the United States Cavalry. The herds located in two HMAs in central Nevada produce Curly Horses [unique curly coat of hair]. Others, such as certain bands in Wyoming, have characteristics consistent with gaited horse breeds.

Some breeders of domestic horses consider the mustang herds of the west to be inbred and of inferior quality. However, supporters of the mustang argue that the animals are merely small due to their harsh living conditions and that natural selection has eliminated many traits that lead to weakness or inferiority. In contrast, a few researchers have advanced an argument that mustangs should be legally classified as "wild" rather than "feral". They argue that horses were once a native species and should still be considered as such, defined as "wild" rather than viewed as an introduced species that draws resources and attention away from true native species, defined as feral.

Estimates of when the peak population of mustangs occurred, varies widely between sources. Prior to the 20th century no comprehensive census of feral horse numbers was ever performed and any early estimates, particularly prior to the 20th century, are speculative. Some sources simply state that "millions" of mustangs once roamed western North America. In 1959, geographer Tom L. McKnight suggested that the population peaked in the late 1700s or early 1800s, and the "best guesses apparently lie between two and five million". Historian J. Frank

Dobie hypothesized that the population peaked around the end of the Mexican–American War in 1848.

In the early 1900s, thousands of free-roaming horses were rounded up for use in the Spanish–American War and World War I.

By 1930, the vast majority of free-roaming horses were found west of the Continental Divide, with an estimated population between 50,000–150,000.

By the 1950s, the mustang population dropped to an estimated 25,000 horses. Abuses linked to certain capture methods, including hunting from airplanes and poisoning water holes, led to the first federal free-roaming horse protection law in 1959.

A census completed in conjunction with passage of the 1959 Act found that there were approximately 17,300 horses on the BLM-administered lands and 2,039 on National Forests.

Currently the BLM has established Herd Management Areas to determine where and how many animals will be sustained as free-roaming populations. Some populations of free-roaming horses and burros remain protected under the Act, but others have disappeared from places where there were once established populations. A few hundred free-roaming horses survive in Alberta and British Columbia. More than half of all mustangs in North America are found in Nevada (which features the horses on its State Quarter), with other significant populations in California, Oregon, Utah, Montana, and Wyoming. Another 34,000 horses are in holding facilities.

Healthy adult mustangs have few natural predators aside from mountain lions, and to a lesser extent, the grizzly bear and the gray wolf. The mountain lion is well known for predation on feral horses, and the larger members of the species may hunt both horses and moose. They are very effective predators that kill by either leaping onto an animal or chasing it down in a sprint, then grabbing the prey with their front claws and biting the neck, either at the windpipe or the spine.

Where there is natural balance of predators and prey, mustang numbers tend to stay in balance. However, in many areas, natural predators have been eliminated from the ecosystem. Without some form of population control, mustang herd sizes can multiply rapidly, doubling as fast as every four years.

Control of the population to within an Appropriate Management Level (AML) is achieved through a capture program. There are strict guidelines for techniques used to round up mustangs. One method uses a tamed horse, called a "Judas horse", which has been trained to lead wild horses into a pen or corral. Once the mustangs are herded into an area near the holding pen, the Judas horse is released. Its job is then to move to the head of the herd and lead them into a confined area.

Most horses that are captured are offered for adoption to individuals or groups willing and able to provide humane, long-term care after payment of an adoption fee of at least \$125. In order to prevent the later sale of mustangs as horse meat, adopted mustangs are still protected



under the Act, and cannot be sold in the first year except when certain very specific criteria are met. As of 2010, nearly 225,000 mustangs have been adopted.

Because there is a much larger pool of captured horses than of prospective adoptive owners, a number of efforts have been made to reduce the number of horses in holding facilities. At present, there are about 34,000 mustangs in holding facilities and long-term grassland pastures. The BLM has publicly considered euthanasia as a possible solution to overpopulation. In January 2005, a controversial amendment was attached to an appropriation bill before the United States Congress by former Senator Conrad Burns, dubbed the "Burns rider." This modified the adoption program to allow the sale (with the result usually being slaughter) of captured horses that are "more than 10 years of age", or that were "offered unsuccessfully for adoption at least three times." In 2009, Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar proposed the creation of federal wild horse preserves in the Midwest, where non-reproducing animals would be kept. Another approach to placing excess animals has been advanced by Madeleine A. Pickens, former wife of oil magnate T. Boone Pickens, who seeks to create a private sanctuary in northern Nevada. There are also increased efforts to assist with finding appropriate adoption homes. One example is a promotional competition, The Extreme Mustang Makeover, that gives trainers 100 days to gentle and train 100 mustangs, which are then adopted through an auction.

Free-roaming mustangs are freeze branded on the left side of the neck by the BLM, using the International Alpha Angle System, a system of angles and alpha-symbols that cannot be altered. The brand begins with a symbol indicating the registering organization.<sup>[2]</sup>

The mustang is not on any endangered list at this time, though there are people petitioning to change that. About 100 years ago, about 2 million mustangs roamed the North American terrain. Now, there are fewer than 25,000 mustangs left in the wild, according to the Humane Society. The mustang, its mane flying and hooves thundering, will always have a hold on the American imagination. But with the shrinking of the frontier, the emerging view is that even wild horses live at odds with their environment. The “green of the field is paling away,” as James Dickey put it in his poem “The Dusk of Horses,” and “They see this, and put down their long heads deeper in grass.”

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**References:**

<sup>(1)</sup> Matthew Shaer, Smithsonian Magazine, May 2017

<sup>(2)</sup> Wikipedia