

Wild Horses Ensnared in People's Battles

By **ROBERT REINHOLD, SPECIAL TO THE NEW YORK TIMES**

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Whoever shot the wild horses that roam this stark desert valley near the Utah border apparently wanted to hide the evidence. A single shot to the gut sent each animal to stagger off into the sagebrush in agony, to bleed slowly and die alone.

So far, 28 carcasses have been found scattered over about 200 square miles, and Federal officials have begun helicopter searches for more, possibly as many as 400.

The shootings have reopened one of the most emotional issues tearing at the American West: the fate of the wild horses that roam free in 10 states under the protection of Federal law, celebrated by many Westerners as symbols of the free spirit of the open range but reviled by cattle and sheep ranchers as competitors for scarce forage.

The issue is more than just the cruel deaths; it is the very control of the land in what remains of the Wild West. Wild horses and burros, which once numbered in the millions but which the Federal Government counted at 44,907 in 1988, are caught in competing interests of animal rights advocates, environmentalists, ranchers and the Bureau of Land Management, the powerful Federal agency that manages millions of acres of public land in the West. Looking for Clues

Vanloads of agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Bureau of Land Management and state agencies have descended on this remote arid region of eastern Nevada, pounding on ranch house doors looking for clues and suspects. A grand jury in Las Vegas has heard testimony, but no charges have yet been brought.

"You'd think there was a mass murder of people," complained Cheryl Vogler who, with her husband, Henry, runs a ranch in North Spring Valley. The Voglers say they can live with the horses, but like most ranchers, they argue that their numbers should be controlled.

On June 28, two men went on trial in Federal District Court in Reno on five counts of killing wild horses last year in Lander County, Nev. Two more are scheduled for trial July 19 for selling or shooting horses and burros in Pershing County. The charges, which are gross misdemeanors, resulted from an investigation into the deaths of more than 500 animals in Central Nevada last year. Conviction can bring one year in prison and a \$2,000 fine for each animal.

"Ranchers are stealing them, shooting them, trucking them off for slaughter, anything to get rid of these horses," said Robert K. Hillman, field services director for the Animal Protection Institute of America in Sacramento, Calif. He said the issue came down to whether public lands should be given over mainly to wildlife or to livestock. "There's a lot more room out there for more horses, but the ranchers don't want to lose that gravy train," he said.

And Mark McGuire, director of the Nevada Humane Society, says ranchers, having long controlled the horse herds themselves, do not see horse killing as a serious violation. 'How Many Do We Need?'

The livestock industry vigorously disputes the Animal Protection Institute's assertion that they have

begun "guerrilla warfare" against horses. "I would not want to see all horses eliminated," said Deloyd Satterthwaite, president of the Nevada Cattlemen's Association. "But how many do we need for scenic and historical purposes? Do we want to sacrifice food and fiber for wild horses?" Mr. Satterthwaite said he remained unconvinced the recent killings were the work of ranchers or their hands.

The Bureau of Land Management, an arm of the Interior Department, has a program to round up "excess" horses and put them up for adoption or send them to special sanctuaries. That program was sharply curtailed last year after complaints that some of those adopting the animals were selling them for slaughter as pet food after the minimum holding period.

Resentment has been growing among Nevada ranchers because roundups in the state have been halted pending the outcome of a legal challenge brought by the Animal Protection Institute. On June 7 in Washington, the Interior Board of Land Appeals largely upheld the institute's challenge to the removal of 2,087 excess horses from Nevada lands, finding that the land management agency had failed to prove the roundup was needed to "restore a thriving natural ecological balance" in most areas.

Terri Jay, executive director of the Nevada Commission for Preservation of Wild Horses, said the ruling would further delay roundups, and some say this will lead to more killings as the horses breed. Policy Changed in 1971

Until 1971, ranchers were free to kill or sell wild horses and burros on the land they leased from the Federal Government. Because of public outcry, Congress passed the Wild Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act that year to protect the creatures. Today a vast majority, estimated by officials at 27,000 (fewer, say animal rights advocates), are in just one state, Nevada, where the land management agency manages 48 million acres on which 600,000 cattle and sheep graze.

Sometimes known as "mustangs," these horses with their big heads and long skinny necks are, in fact, not closely related to the true mustangs, which were brought to America in the 1500's by Spanish explorers. The remnants of that breed are mainly in Idaho. The Nevada wild horses are the descendants of domestic animals that got loose over the years.

Many roam the remote valleys here in White Pine County, a harsh otherworldly land of craggy peaks and broad dry valleys carpeted with brush. The land is mostly fenceless open range where livestock compete with horses, mule deer, antelope, even jack rabbits, for meager forage. The vast county covers 8,882 square miles, larger than New Jersey, but has only 8,200 human inhabitants, 14 churches and 7 schools.

The horses range valleys to the northeast of Ely, where carcasses of both horses and mule deer have been found in recent weeks. The deer, protected under state law and legally hunted for only part of the year, are also considered nuisances by the ranchers. Lawman Has a Theory

It is not clear whether the motive for the killings was sheer vandalism or something more sinister. Under Sheriff Harry Collins has suggested strongly that the way the animals were shot, in a particularly cruel manner that makes them scatter, implies that the killers were trying to rid the range of livestock competitors.

"They were gut-shot," said Brian McKenzie, investigator for the Nevada Humane Society. "If you shoot them alongside the road, they take off perpendicular to the road, up or downhill. Most go a quarter-mile or so before bleeding to death. It's a slow, painful death."

Whatever the case, it is clear there is no love lost between the ranchers and the wild horses. "The horses will eat anything and there are so damn many of them," said Eugene Degler, who helps out on the ranch owned by his brother-in-law, Henry Yelland. "They eat whenever they're not laying down sleeping."

Up the road, at the Vogler Ranch, Mrs. Vogler suggested that the horse and deer killings were the deed of environmental "radicals" wanting to cause trouble for ranchers.

"Whatever's done on public land is the ranchers' fault," she said bitterly. "We have problems with people thinking we go out and shoot dumb animals sitting there." She added that while she agreed the horses had rights, their numbers had to be controlled. "We have as much right here as anybody."
Disagreement on Forage

Animal advocates disagree. "That isn't cattle country," said Nancy Whitaker, program assistant at the 150,000-member Animal Protection Institute. "Why do we let one group of users destroy public land? They make a profit, and it's up to you and me to subsidize them."

Under law, ranchers pay \$1.85 for each animal to graze on public land. They maintain that is all this sparse land is worth in rent. Ms. Whitaker contended that even if every horse were removed, there would be less than a 5 percent increase in available forage.

Animal advocates say the Bureau of Land Management caters to cattlemen's interest, while the ranchers maintain that the agency has mismanaged the horse program. The agency is completing a study on how many livestock animals the land can sustain, and ranchers fear their allotments will soon be cut back, especially since the horses have new protection as a result of the June 7 decision by the Interior Board of Land Appeals halting removal of excess horses. "The only thing to do now is remove something you have control over, the livestock," complained Mr. Satterthwaite, the ranch leader.

"Where cattle and horses graze together, there certainly will be a measure of competition," said Robert E. Stewart, spokesman for the Bureau of Land Management in Nevada. "We have to work within the law to bring a balance."

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