



A

Mustang

Sally

Head for the Pryor Mountains
to see wild descendents of
Spanish horses brought here
five centuries ago

by Gary Beeler

EL CABALLO: Though of Spanish origin, the mustang represents many characteristics associated with the American West: freedom, ruggedness, and an unbridled spirit. Photo by Gary Leppart.

MY EFFORTS TO SLIP QUIETLY ALONG THE JUNIPER-STUDED gully proved in vain as the wild horses turned to watch my clumsy approach. I paused behind a craggy juniper, hoping to be forgotten as the harsh wind blew my scent away, but no such luck. The magnificent black stallion moved toward his harem and stood guard, nervously awaiting my next move.

Knowing that I had to be closer for a good shot, even with a telephoto lens, I tried a trick that helps when photographing moose. I strolled into the open and simply sat down. After several minutes, as the frost from the ground began to work up my spine and my fingers turned to frozen sticks, I began to sing softly to the horses. My renditions of *Red River Valley* and *Clementine* have, in the past, calmed nervous moose, and the same was true with the mustangs. Maybe they assumed (correctly) that anyone goofy enough to sit on the frosty ground and make funny noises doesn't have enough gray matter to be dangerous. But for whatever reason, they seemed to accept me. A sorrel mare lay down, accompanied by her black colt. The stallion and two other mares resumed grazing, nibbling at sparse blades of dried grass. Delighted with my first introduction to the wild horses of the Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Range, I sat and mentally reviewed what I knew about the horses and their rugged, mountainous home.

The Pryor Mountain wild horses are of Spanish descent, still showing many features of the traditional European Spanish horse. Their ancestors, domesticated Spanish wild horses, were brought to North America five centuries years ago by the conquistadors. Later, American Indians and then settlers began using the horses, which became a fixture of western life. Because horses tend to roam when not well tended, many escaped confinement and spread across the West. By the mid-1800s, an estimated 2 million horses, which had now become wild, ranged the western grasslands from Mexico to Canada. The Pryor Mountain herd, possibly strays from migrating bands of Crow or Shoshone Indians, has been around since the late 1800s (written accounts from trappers in the area before then make no reference to the animals). The horses' features show traces of their Spanish lineage. They are small, about 14 hands high, and have a narrow, deep chest and a short, strong back. Their colors vary, ranging from black, brown, and bay to gray, dun, and blue roan. Some are unusually marked with zebra stripes on the legs and with a black dorsal stripe running down the



MATT ALLAIN

NOT WILD ENOUGH: Biologists don't consider wild horses as wildlife and maintain that the feral livestock compete with native mule deer and bighorn sheep for scarce grasses and forbs.

back. The horses are extremely hardy, able to survive the frigid winters and dry, scorching summers on the range that was set aside for them in 1968.

That was when Interior Secretary Stewart Udall designated the 31,000-acre tract along the Montana–Wyoming border as the nation's first wild horse preservation site. The federal Wild and Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act, passed in 1971, protects wild horses and burros and makes the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) responsible for the animals.

GRAZING COMPETITION

Not everyone is in favor of protecting wild horses, however. Before federal protection, the animals were sometimes shot for sport and left to rot. Others were rounded up and sold to canneries for dog food or human consumption. Charlie Eustace, recently retired Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks regional wildlife supervisor at Billings, explains that some people consider the horses pests or oddballs that are neither domestic nor game animals. Wildlife advo-

cates and biologists contend that the horses, which are grazers, compete with native mule deer and bighorn sheep for limited grasses and forbs.

"They are a relatively new addition to the area," says Eustace, "so they make it that much harder for native wildlife to compete for food."

Eustace adds that the horses continue to range north from their established range onto U.S. Forest Service lands allotted for grazing. "That doesn't sit well with ranchers up there trying to graze their cattle," he says.

John Adams of the Montana Wilderness Association points to another potential problem: efforts by local communities to promote wild horse viewing. That, he says, could lead to more paved roads and motorized traffic into the Pryor Mountains, which environmentalists hope to see designated as a national wilderness area.

For their part, wild horse advocates maintain that mustangs are well worth promoting. They say the horses have become just as naturalized to their wild surroundings as ring-necked pheasants and brown trout—two other species not found in Montana 150 years ago yet today are highly esteemed. Members of the Wild Horse and Burro Freedom Alliance say the horses do far less harm to grasslands than cattle, live isolated in a tiny footnote of the state, and are prevented from overpopulating their range with periodic culling by the BLM.

The Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Range is bounded on the east by the Bighorn Canyon, on the west by Crooked Creek, and on the north and south by fences. The

land slopes up from the south to the north, from roughly 3,640 feet to more than 8,000 feet in the high mountains, and is laced with deep, rugged limestone canyons. Much of the range is rocky outcrop.

Like much of the region, the weather here is harsh, ranging from blazing prairie heat to deep snow and freezing temperatures on mountaintops. The entire area is parched: Yearly average rainfall ranges from just 5 inches in the low foothills to no more than 20 inches along the high canyons.

The area's vegetation is as diverse as its weather. Alpine fir, grasses, and sedges grow along the upper ridges and prairies, while the middle elevations are graced with stands of limber pine and Douglas fir interspersed with open meadows of grasses, forbs, and sagebrush. At lower elevations vegetation is sparse, except along Crooked Creek, where broad-leafed shrubs such as golden current and wild rose thrive.

The horses move throughout the region in search of water and food. During much of the year they stay near springs in the lower elevations, though in summer they often head uphill to subalpine meadows, where they find grasses and forbs, as well as several reservoirs.

HORSE HAREMS

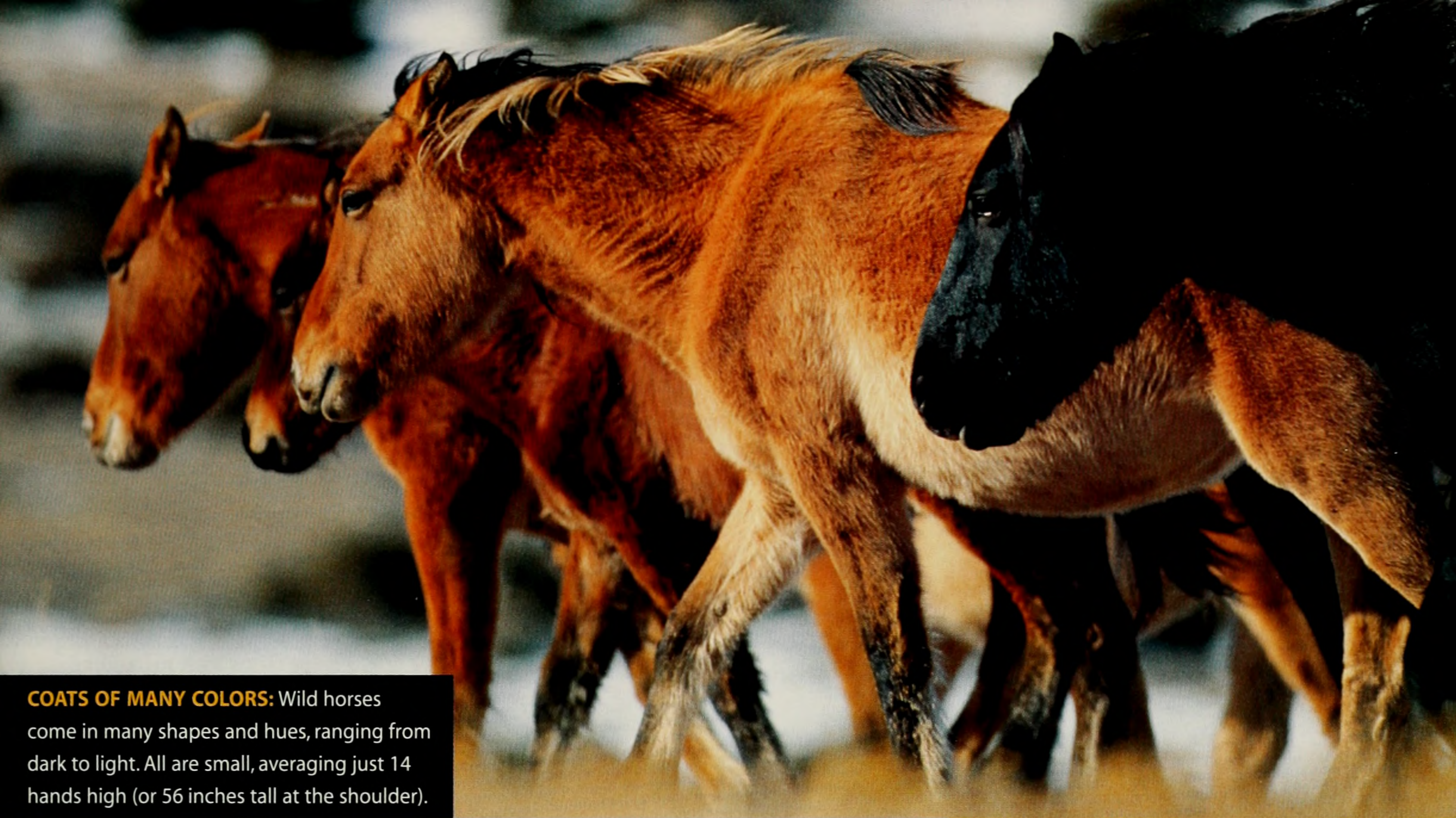
Roughly 120 to 160 wild horses live in the range, producing 20 to 30 foals every

BLACK BEAUTIES: Wild horse fans contend that the animals, though not native, are naturalized and merit the same respect given to other wild exotics such as the ring-necked pheasant and the brown trout.



GARY LEPPART

Gary Beeler is a writer and photographer from Boyd.



COATS OF MANY COLORS: Wild horses come in many shapes and hues, ranging from dark to light. All are small, averaging just 14 hands high (or 56 inches tall at the shoulder).

MICHAEL H. FRANCIS

spring. Each of the 30 or so harems contains a dominant stallion and a lead mare. The stallion wards off threats, but it is the lead mare that moves the harem to water and food or away from danger. Moving about the range and staying on the fringe of the harems are small groups of colts, called bachelor stallions, which have been kicked out of their fathers' harems. Until they gain the size and maturity to acquire their own mares, these colts stick together, sparring with each other to polish their fighting skills.

Because the mustangs have few natural enemies (primarily mountain lions and bears) and cannot be hunted, the Pryor Mountain population could quickly grow too large for the available habitat. Periodically, BLM staff members round up the herd (an activity called a gather) to selectively remove some individuals and draw blood samples on others to monitor genetics and health. The horses selected for removal are offered for adoption. Adopted horses are used as companion animals or simply to add a western touch to someone's private property.

Recently, the BLM began looking at new ways to improve herd health and keep mustang numbers under control. During the last gather in 2001, young mares were given a contraceptive vaccine, rendering them

infertile for one year. Not only did this lower the horses' birth rate, but by giving the mares a chance to grow older before conceiving, it allowed them to produce healthier foals.

CATCHING SIGHT OF ONE

Spying a wild horse in the Pryors isn't impossible, but it requires some effort. The most accessible of the three roads where mustangs might be seen is the Bad Pass Highway, a paved two-laner in the Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area, best reached from Lovell, Wyoming. From this highway, go west to the Sykes Ridge Road or the Burnt Timber Road, both of which head north up into the Pryor Mountains.

Horses aren't the only critters around. Bighorn sheep, elk, mule deer, and black bears also live in the Pryors, as do more than 200 bird species, including golden eagles, blue grouse, and peregrine falcons. Several species of bat hang around the limestone caves, and cutthroat trout can be seen darting into the shadows of Crooked Creek. If fishing along the brushy, rocky creek, listen for the warning buzz of rattlesnakes, which are abundant throughout the Pryors. Help can be a long ways off, and, unlike the wild horses, the snakes can't be pacified by song. 🐍

IF YOU GO

The Pryors are rough, remote mountains. A four-wheel drive is the preferred vehicle, but to really experience the place it's best to get out and hike. Summers can be beastly hot and winters deadly cold, so dress appropriately. And remember that the temperatures can change from hot to cold, or vice versa, in minutes. Bring plenty of water no matter what the season.

For more information about the Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Range, including the BLM's map of the Pryor Mountain area, write or call the Bureau of Land Management, Billings Field Office, P.O. Box 36800, 5001 Southgate Drive, Billings, MT 59107; (406) 896-5013.



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