

# COLORADO

## Little Snake Field Office



November 2005

## A Gather to Remember

By Theresa Sauer

**O**-*dark-thirty*. That's when the alarm goes off and I start the day getting ready to experience my first wild horse gather. Today is the first day of what will be four days of gathering horses – wild horses.

At 5:30 a.m., as the car pulls out of my hotel parking lot in Craig headed for the Sand Wash Corrals, I don't know what to expect, but I do expect to learn a lot about these horses and their lifestyle.

The Sandwash Basin has been home to wild horses since the turn of the century. In 1926, records show local ranchers reporting that northwest Colorado was "crawling with wild horses." Less than a decade later, ranchers shipped over 600 wild horses out of town on the Craig railroad.

These horses live in the great wide open. They roam across approximately 160,000 acres of land between Vermilion Bluffs and Sevenmile Ridge, grazing on bluebunch wheatgrass, western wheatgrass, Indian ricegrass, and bluegrasses.

As the sun rises on the horizon, the earth is bathed in a red glow. Off in the distance there are rain clouds and bolts of lightning flashing in the sky, but hanging above the Herd Management Area (HMA) is a perfect rainbow – a promising sign for a productive day ahead.

The Sandwash Basin looks flat from a distance, but is full of dry stream beds, gullies and washes. This rolling and dissected landscape serves as rangeland for two livestock grazing permittees and is home not only to the horses, but also sage grouse, raptors, great horned and burrowing owls, pronghorn, elk and mule deer. Because of all of these users, the area must be managed for all of its inhabitants.

By 7:30 a.m., I and a group of BLMers, local media, and other interested parties, are hiking up to the top of a hill overlooking the HMA. This is our first viewing site and as we sit anxiously waiting I don't know what to expect, but as the beating of helicopter props thumb in the air, I look down to see horses running below. There are



A YOUNG FOAL STARES BACK AT US AS WE GAZE AT HIM.

PHOTOS BY DENISE ADAMIC



pintos and paints, grullas, grays, browns and blacks – the “historic and pioneer spirit of the West.”

According to program experts, this HMA can support between 163 and 362 adult horses. At last count, there were 388 wild horses living in the Basin.

“When the population reaches 362, it means there are too many mouths to feed unless we lower the herd size,” said Valerie Dobrich, a natural resource specialist with the Meeker Field Office.

Hence, this week’s gather.

From our perch atop the hill, we can see the Judas horse aiding wranglers with the gather. The Judas horse is a domestic horse, trained to run into the trap after being released mid-way, and direct the others to follow. The wild horses, beginning to sense danger, watch the Judas horse flee ahead of them, and believe that he will lead them to freedom.

While I had imagined cowboys with ropes rounding-up these wild animals, I was fascinated to watch Cattoor Livestock herd the horses in more modern ways. Instead of cowboys on horseback, I see the Judas horse leading the way while Dave Cattoor drives the horses along in his helicopter. Dave and Sue Cattoor, I learned, grew up in Maybell and know the Sandwash Basin and its wild horse herd well. Their family operation has been contracting with the Bureau of Land Management for over 30 years and they have been the contractors for gathers in the Sandwash Basin since 1995.

While watching the gather from various overlooks in the Basin, I got to know the lifestyle of the horses and the community that is so fascinated by them. Members of the High Plains Mustang Club, a local friends group, come regularly to watch the horses and follow their lives. The local press also come to report on the health of the Basin and cover the stories about horse gathers.

Sitting behind a ravine at a new viewing area, we watched as a band of horses passed right by the trap and headed toward me and my group of on-lookers. We stayed low, not moving or saying a word as the horses passed by. For the safety of the gather, it is important to stay out of sight so that we don’t spook or distract the horses.

By the time I pack up and head back to the hotel that first day, 113 horses were captured.

For John Husband this was his fourth gather as BLM field manager of the Little Snake Field Office. “I can’t think of a thing that didn’t go well [during this gather].”

Overall, the gather lasted three days within the HMA, and a final day was spent outside the HMA finding horses that had left the Basin. A total of 253 horses were captured and sorted, ranging in age from weanlings, born this spring, to a 27-year-



A BAND OF HORSES RUN ALONG THE INSIDE WALLS OF THE TRAP TOWARDS THE HOLDING CORRALS.



THE HELICOPTER GUIDES THE HORSES TOWARDS THE TRAP SITE.



old stud. That stud and 32 of his friends and family were released back into the wild, allowing the office to reach its target of 220 horses gathered.

The Cattoors and Dobrich sorted the horses, deciding which horses in the corrals should be released and which should be removed from the Sandwash Basin.

“I work to assure that out on the range the herd stays healthy with a good age structure,” Dobrich said. Horses released back into the herd were either very old (over 10 years), or what she classified as prime young horses with good size and color to maintain the herd’s diversity.

Sandwash horses are known for unique colors, large stature and gentle dispositions. Their colors include unusual pintos to red roan, flaxen mane and sorrel tail, and unique greys, as well as more traditional colored bays and sorrels. These horses are usually 15 to 16 hands and weigh 900 to 1,100 pounds.

On the range, wild horses live an average of 15 years. They have few natural predators; however, drought and fire play roles in the survival of these horses.

Recent drought conditions in the region have taken a toll on the HMA. Through the drought, the horse herd has continued to grow, and the wintering elk herd has become larger each year. Livestock permittees have voluntarily reduced their use each year to the point that for the last two years they did not graze livestock in the Basin at all, but rangeland health has worsened, making this gather all the more important to manage for available water, forage, and shelter for all inhabitants of the HMA.

This is the second gather to take place in the State of Colorado this year, with the Spring Creek Basin gather having taken place earlier in the summer. Statewide, there are four HMA’s: the Piceance – East Douglas Creek, west of Meeker; Little Book Cliffs, northeast of Grand Junction; the Spring Creek Basin, southwest of Montrose; and the Sandwash Basin, the largest of the four.

BLM Colorado manages for up to 800 horses on nearly 412,000 acres in these four HMAs. Nationwide, BLM manages for about 28,000 wild horses and burros roaming on public lands in 10 Western states.

As spirits of the West, these horses symbolize our nations’ history and bring out strong emotions in citizens. There are horse advocates who strive to protect the wild horse’s way of life; there are ranchers who are interested in restricting the numbers of horses that graze with their horses.

Despite any controversy, Husband enjoys overseeing the HMA. “I enjoy getting out and looking at the horses at the Sandwash Basin,” he said. “It presents a challenge working with all of the interests – ranchers and advocates.” But to him, it is worth it.

Editor’s note: Twenty-five of the Sandwash Basin horses were adopted at a local adoption the weekend following the gather. The rest were sent to the BLM’s wild horse and burro facility in Cañon City, Colo. There, they will be branded and vaccinated. Some of the horses will be adopted out of that facility while others go to adoptions across the country. A select few may be placed in the saddle training and halter training program in Cañon City. Those horses over 10 years of age will be eligible for sale or sent to a sanctuary in Oklahoma or Kansas where they may live the remainder of their lives.



HORSES WAIT TO BE SORTED.