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Caging wild horses

Published: Tuesday, October 9, 2007 7:26 PM CDT

A Ridgway horse painter visits a roundup

By Caitlin Switzer

For years, she painted the wild horses of Disappointment Valley, translating their wild beauty to canvas. But Ridgway artist Karen Keene Day had avoided attending the annual Bureau of Land Management roundups — until this year.

"I have heard such horrible stories," Day said. "For a while, I could have the pretense of feeling comfortable, just painting the horses, and sending out letters. I was scared to go. But I finally realized that if I was truly dedicated, I needed to get more involved — and that meant seeing some of the more gruesome things."

So this August, Day joined reporters, filmmakers and other concerned citizens at the annual BLM roundup of the Spring Creek wild horse herd in Disappointment Valley.

Wild horse advocates worry about the roughness of the annual roundups. Helicopters deploy to get the horses running, so contractors can chase them into a fenced area.

And public concern for wild horses has grown since U.S. Sen. Conrad Burns (R-Montana) attached a rider to a bill allowing wild horses once again to be sold for slaughter. Burns' 2004 legislation ran counter to the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971 which was designed to protect the animals.

"I think things have really changed," Day said. "People were just stunned, which has brought about such outrage and organization."

And that extra scrutiny may have put the BLM on notice.

"It turned out to be a lot better than I thought it would," Day said. "But a big reason for that is that the National Mustang Association has worked very hard to get people in the general public to attend. It was huge — there was one small hill covered with people, and we saw another group on the other side, with writers and photographers everywhere. And of course there were a lot of people on the ground, writing and filming and taking pictures, acting very much as eyes and ears.

"One reporter broke down and cried," she said.

Although she has been an artist for many years, Day has not painted anything but the horses since 1999.

"I hope to be able to continue to paint them for many years," she said. "I have been so touched by them since I first saw them in 1999. I am really sort of attached at the hip — and it is the only way I know to get the horses out in the public eye."

Colorado's wild horse habitats include not only the Disappointment Valley but the Little Book Cliffs in Debeque and Sandwash Basin near Meeker and Craig.

According to the BLM, the biggest challenge in maintaining these herds is overpopulation.

The agency says it "gathers thousands of wild horses and burros from the public rangelands each year, then puts them up for adoption to good private homes. (Those not adopted are cared for in short- or long-term holding facilities.) By placing these living symbols of the Western spirit in private ownership through adoption, the BLM helps ensure that wild horses and burros thrive in balance with other public land resources and uses."

When wild horses are adopted by capable and loving trainers, the results can be very successful. According to Day, some of the horses are even adopted and trained by prisoners in state correctional facilities.

Ridgway resident and equestrian Dana Ivers tempers her interest in the fate of the horses with the practical outlook that comes from being a fifth generation Coloradoan.

"Mankind has basically trashed the plains where the horses used to live," Ivers said. "The collection system may not be perfect, but they have to do something to thin the population — it really is a quandary, just another scratch on the surface of what is happening on this planet."

Day hopes that anybody with an interest in the wild horses will continue to educate themselves and others. Attending her first roundup was an experience that changed both the artist and her work, which can be viewed locally at Ouray's Skol Studio and Design Gallery.

"I don't know where I am going with my work," Day said. "When I first started painting the horses, I was painting beautiful horses, with their majesty. Now, with the close-up pictures I was able to get, I could see their eyes, see the sweat and the huge, wide-open nostrils. One group of horses ran for miles with the helicopter, and they came in almost at a walk because they couldn't run anymore.

"When I came back, I found a piece I had been working, a big 4' by 5' piece," she said. "I could not continue. I painted over it, and tried to paint what was in my heart after the roundup, but I couldn't do it."