

CityLife Article

-Date Unknown

The majestic, free-spirited wild horses of northern Nevada had sure made a mess of Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge.

They'd stomped all over the creeks, muddying the delicate gravel spawning grounds for the Lahontan cutthroat trout. They'd nibbled away at much of the upland vegetation, robbing the native pronghorn antelope and mule deer of habitat and cover against predators. Sensitive grasslands had been turned to muck from so much of their trampling. Forget for a second that whole idea about horses being some noble, stirring symbol of the West. As U.S. Fish & Wildlife officials tell it, the herds that roam the 575,000-acre Sheldon refuge are more like a bunch of klutzy Clark Griswolds that, for all their harmless intentions, leave destruction in their wake. But it's hardly a laughing matter.

"It's a desert out here, and the problem we're having is that too many horses concentrate on all the water and damage the resources," says refuge Manager Brian Day. "They're taking all the vegetation off and turning it into a big mudhole." Not exactly what Mother Nature intended. "These horses are not wildlife," says Day. "What we consider them is feral domestic livestock." Today, refuge bosses figure there are about 1,500 of these "feral domestic livestock" lording it over the area.

Thus in recent years wildlife officials began chipping away at the growing herd of wild horses at Sheldon. In the past two years, they took out about 1,100 of them. It's not a terribly controversial decision in itself. Unlike the Bureau of Land Management, which is bound by law to manage horses on its lands, U.S. Fish & Wildlife is charged with keeping things comfortable for native species -- and are required to regularly remove horses for the benefit of those species. In the case of Sheldon, a half-million-plus-acre refuge at the northwest border of Nevada, that includes the sage grouse, pronghorn antelope, mule deer, bighorn sheep and other animals. No spirited symbol of freedom on the list here; horses are deemed invaders.

"The BLM in my opinion does a good job of managing wild horses, but that's not part of our mission," explains David Johnson, deputy project leader for the Sheldon/Hart Mountain National Wildlife Refuge Complex. "We're accountable to the American public by following the processes in place and meeting our mission of managing this place for wildlife."

The June 19-20 roundup of about 330 horses was part of a broader plan. After officials rid the area of destructive cattle in the '90s, it was now the horses' turn to go -- not completely, but almost. In a bow to the public's appetite for oohing and ahing at wild horses, officials set a goal of keeping about 100 horses on the range.

But what was supposed to have been just a routine culling sparked a stampede of outrage -- and accusations of carelessness, callousness and cover-ups. Wild-horse activists say

that in their zeal to curb the number of horses on Sheldon, federal officials ignored pleas to postpone the removal and needlessly ran to death several colts and foals. Further, they claim that the department's scheme for mass adoptions will surely send some horses to the slaughterhouse.

Why hate on the horses? advocates wonder. It's nothing personal, officials say; it's part of the preservation program. Critics characterize the management culture of the wildlife refuge as a place where the view of wild horses isn't that different from the way most people view rats. And the fact that wild horses are tough to rein in -- they're fast breeders with no predators to keep them in check -- has given way to a dismissive, get-rid-of-'em attitude.

"They arbitrarily said they wanted 100 horses on the refuge because that's what they can tolerate and get away with," says Jerry Reynoldson, president and founder of preservation group Wild Horses 4Ever. "If they had determined 100 is the right amount due to scientific research, I would support that. But how did they arrive at 100? What is the science behind that?"

But even if wildlife officials' reasoning was sound, some say their timing of the removal was tragically unsound.

HEAD 'EM UP, MOVE 'EM OUT

The June horse removal at Sheldon was the latest round in a long, exhausting game of catch-up for U.S. Fish & Wildlife. For the past decade or so, the region's wildlife managers had focused their work on 278,000-acre Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge just over the border in Oregon, where the horse population had gotten out of hand.

"Due to limited funding, we had to make a conscious decision to determine where we were going to do our roundups, and we decided to concentrate on getting Hart Mountain horse-free. In the meantime, this population [in Sheldon] went through the roof," Johnson says. Officials figure that in the mid-'90s, there were about 250 horses in Sheldon; over the next decade, the herds would supersize to more than 1,500.

Day explains: "They don't regulate their own numbers, and there's nothing out that regulates them. We just didn't have the time and resources to do it." The roundup was a bit of long-overdue housekeeping for the sensitive land.

Depending on whom you talk to, the June 19-20 capture at Sheldon either went off without a hitch or was a vision of horse hell -- even to veteran cowhands who've seen their share of roundups and adoptions. The timing was controversial from the start. While the breeding cycles of wild horses vary, by most accounts June is the tail end of foaling season, and the grim prospect of running merely weeks-old horses to death didn't sit well with wild-horse activists, and even refuge workers were nervous about bad press. Despite pressure from animal welfare groups, including the American Society for the Prevention

of Cruelty to Animals, Fish & Wildlife went ahead -- after all, the contractor upon whom they relied wasn't available later.

Paul Steblein, project leader for the Sheldon/Hart Mountain refuges, says only two foals died -- one in the corral from injuries, one in the refuge from dehydration and exhaustion.

Not true, says another eyewitness who wished to remain anonymous. Calling it a "disaster," he says he saw six dead foals; they had apparently strayed during the roundup, got lost and presumably died of exhaustion. Three more found alive were taken to an Oregon veterinarian. It only proves, the witness says, the bad decision to round up near foaling season. He says not even the BLM, whose job is to gather horses, will round them up at such a sensitive time of year. Little wonder, he says, that security for the gather was tightened up this year -- guarding the corrals and the horse trap -- for fear that activists would try to document an episode in which bad timing becomes animal cruelty. He says that among the 330 or so horses gathered, nearly 60 were foals -- about 18 percent -- giving the lie to officials' claim that they're well out of horses' birthing season. Despite that tight security, the witness managed to take photos, which are on the website of the American Wild Horse Preservation Campaign, an umbrella group of more than 30 horse-welfare organizations. The photos include what appear to be dead foals.

"The numbers [of dead foals] purported [by critics] is very unlikely," Steblein says when asked about the website's photos. "We covered the area of the gather three times by helicopter [to check for lost foals]." He says that many horse-advocate groups are against any type of gathering, and will spin and distort information for alarmist ends.

"Irrespective of the politics of horse roundups, there were some major problems with this one," counters Virginie Parant, the preservation group's campaign director. "You're just looking at pure animal cruelty. They did not have to let it come to this. There are responsible ways of handling things, but instead they let things go awry, and then conducted a completely irresponsible roundup."

Steblein disagrees. "If you look at their [American Wild Horse Preservation Campaign] web pages, there are seemingly dozens more dead and injured, and that's not the case. The injury and mortality rates of this gather are easily comparable to anything previous."

CAMPFIRE STORIES

If the timing of the roundup initially sparked the indignation of horse activists, the web fed the flames. In weeks leading up to the removal, a viral storm of angry e-mails and Internet postings took shape among wild-horse advocates -- and was directed at federal officials.

Talking to wildlife bosses, it's clear this is largely a bitter propaganda war in which they find themselves hastily posting documents online to counter the sometimes-hysterical claims of overzealous horse advocates. Virginia-based wild-horse campaigner John Holland, for instance, has written that Sheldon broke federal law by not doing proper

"environmental evaluation" studies before the June roundup. In response, last week Susan Saul, a regional outreach specialist for U.S Fish & Wildlife, posted three documents online to prove they're following the National Environmental Policy Act -- the 1977 Sheldon Horse Management Plan, the 1980 Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge Renewable Natural Resources Management Plan Final Environmental Impact Statement, and the 2000 Environmental Action Memorandum. "We're not required to do an individual document for every horse gather," she explains. She's also put up fact sheets and articles explaining why the feds need to periodically cull the horses. The government will try to get the last word when it gets started on the Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan later this year.

And if every last horse happens to disappear from the refuge? Officials point out there are more than 30 BLM herd-management areas within a 200-mile radius of the refuge.

Other critics have said federal officials are being pressured to radically lower the horse count in order to raise the number of game animals -- which brings in sought-after hunting-tag revenue. But wildlife officials point out it's the state, not the federal government, that reaps the benefits, and the state denies leaning on the refuge to get rid of the horses.

"We have always cooperated with our federal partners and provided input into their land-use planning process," says Dave Pulliam, habitat bureau chief at the Nevada Department of Wildlife. "We have exerted no pressure on them to remove horses, but have identified horses as having a negative impact on Sheldon in the past."

A SEMANTIC CAN OF ... HORSES

According to BLM figures, in 1971 -- when the Wild Horse and Burro Act was passed -- there were 17,300 wild horses in the United States. Their number peaked in 1981 at about 52,000 -- and then it plunged again. As of 2005, there were more than 27,000 wild horses roaming the states, mostly in Nevada. But it's not as though wild horses are in danger of riding off into the sunset ... right?

CITY LIFE- Article

6

July 6,2006

Jerry Reynoldson of Wild Horses 4Ever says it's not such a far-fetched notion. He says in 10 states, wild horse populations have dropped by 50 percent -- not due to cautious horse management, but due to overzealous gathering that stems from flawed science pegging wild horses as the culprits for all sorts of environmental damage (whereas Reynoldson blames factors such as drought and previous cattle damage).

But he cracks open a broader can of philosophical worms when he questions how government officials can arbitrarily decide what counts as a native species and what counts as a feral invaders. Gee, goes the reasoning of the devil's advocate, can't humans

be considered feral invaders, too? Such cheek aside, the rift in terminology reflects a rift in philosophy. According to officials at Sheldon, which was established in 1931, wild horses aren't native. This particular refuge's feral stock took root largely from escaped and freed U.S. Cavalry horses that were no longer needed as the military was gradually mechanized. By Reynoldson's reasoning, the horses were there before the refuge was officially established, so why aren't they considered native? Moreover, their connection to horses that evolved in North America over millions of years (and then disappeared about 10,000 years ago, then returned to the continent thanks to Spanish explorers) gives them a sort of grandfathered VIP pass to exist.

"Any species that's been there for thousands of years, born without any kind of human intervention -- what kind of qualifier do they need?" Reynoldson says. "What kind of ecosystem would we be creating if we picked a winner and a loser in certain geographical areas? If something lives out there, was born out there and has been out there for thousands of years, how do you deny it's wild?"

Case in point: Reynoldson got in an argument recently with a friend over a skunk that lives in the woodpile behind Reynoldson's house. Reynoldson called it a "wild skunk"; his friend balked at his definition of wild. But to Reynoldson, those all-too-human concepts of time and distance are silly yardsticks by which to judge what's wild, what's domestic, what's feral, what's natural and what's not. "How far does the skunk have to live from town before he's wild?" Reynoldson says. "I don't know the answer, but it's a question worth asking."

Virginie Parant of the American Wild Horse Preservation Campaign calls wild horses a "reintroduced native wildlife species."

"The argument that they're nonnative is an old and silly argument," she says. Since their reintroduction to the continent by Spanish explorers, she says, "horses have been evolving on this continent for the past 500 years. These aren't feral cats we're talking about here."

Feral or wild, invaders or natives -- it's all the same to a Frenchman's palate. Indeed, the most immediate fear of horse advocates is that the 300-plus horses gathered last month from the refuge are in danger of meeting their end not as the surprise birthday gift of a squealing pre-teen girl, but the slaughterhouse. To handle the load of horses, Fish & Wildlife has hired three bulk adopters, who are charged with finding homes for the equines -- and are expected to do their own background checks and follow-up work.

"It's easy to accuse someone of sending horses to slaughter, even if it's not true," says the refuge's David Johnson, anticipating the accusations. In order to counter the image that federal wildlife officers view the horses as mere vermin, he admits that on a previous horse roundup and adoption, 21 horses did end up at a slaughterhouse -- but Johnson discovered the mistake in the nick of time, and spent more than \$20,000 of his own money to buy them back. "I've had people accuse me of not caring, and that's not true.

Our whole staff is very committed to seeing these horses don't end up in slaughter. We've worked with these adoption agents and we've screened them."

One adoption contractor, Gary Graham, has received particular scrutiny from wild-horse advocates, because in the past he rented a corral in New Mexico that had been previously been used to sell horses to "killer buyers," or slaughterhouse agents.

"If I moved into a bank robber's house, would that make me a bank robber too? The fact I leased down there had nothing to do with slaughter." Graham says he's tired of the shrill accusations and hysteria. "It bothers me that people would stoop so low to make up something like that. I know what the real truth is, and I sleep well every night."

At least, perhaps, until the fall, when Fish & Wildlife has another roundup planned. This time, officials will be braced for criticism, whether it has a basis or not.

"I think most everyone in the end cares about horses, but some of them want to stop the gather no matter what," says Steblein. "They think all the horses should be out on the range and doing fine by themselves, which is not the case. They will eat out house and home."