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One night this trip, I camped on a high plateau about a quarter mile from a generous spring that maintains its flow throughout the summer. The plateau is riddled with horse trails, so I decided to walk down to the spring early the next morning to see if I could find them drinking at the break of day.

There are tens of thousands of wild horses in Nevada (not to mention a smaller number of wild burros), the descendants of stock that escaped from Spanish explorers and settlers in the 1600s. Like antelope and deer, they compete for the grass that cattle eat. But unlike antelope and deer, they are not game animals, and thus are seen by many as a nuisance that competes with more desirable animals for available forage. Others, both local and from away, admire their beauty and spirit.

According to a guidebook I have with me (but no Internet access -- the wilderness does require a few sacrifices), there were about 23,000 wild horses in Nevada in 2001, a number that the BLM has decided is about 5,000 to high. As a result, the BLM culls the herd from time to time, setting traps around water holes to catch some, and using helicopters to chase others into confined areas where they can be caught.

Under this plan, 52,000 horses have been taken since 1971. Under the management plan, the younger horses are to be put out for adoption, and the older ones sent to refuges in Texas and South Dakota. However, according to an AP report published in 1997, the BLM had "lost track" of 32,000 wild horses, many or most of which may have been sold to slaughter by pet food companies, confirming the long-standing allegations of animal rights activists (the BLM vigorously denied the claims of the report). In a court settlement ending a case brought by two such groups following this report, the BLM agreed to clean up its act.

Despite these efforts to limit their numbers, wild horses are prolific breeders, and hence still a proud part of the Southwestern experience. But they are also reclusive, and will therefore likely only see them at a distance of a mile or more, grazing on a hillside, unless you make a deliberate effort to see them at closer range.

My trip to the spring was not successful, so I continued my walk up country, looking at this and that along the way. Ten minutes later, I heard an abrupt snort, and saw a tall roan with a white blaze on its forehead come to an abrupt halt about 25 yards away, standing at attention between two pinyon pines, and looking straight at me. After a few moments, it trotted to one side, and then another, stopping at each turn and staring at me as I in turn looked at it, watching without moving. Each time the stallion turned, it let out a single explosive snort that carried clearly across the distance. At last, it had had enough of me, turned on its heels, and galloped away in a cloud of dust. I could feel its hoof beats reverberate through the dry ground as it traveled off, hidden by the trees.

After the hoofbeats died down, I began to walk again, and soon glimpsed a half dozen or so horses through gaps in the trees, trotting parallel to my path. They stopped and started, their muffled hoof beats floating through the air, just behind a low, forested rise.

I walked as quietly and quickly as I could to where I thought the sound of hoofs had last ended, but there was nothing more to be seen.