

White Mountain Wild Horse Territory

This description describes the White Mountain Wild Horse Territory (WHT) administered by the White Mountain Ranger District, Inyo National Forest.

Location/Habitat

The White Mountain WHT is located on the California/Nevada border approximately 7 miles east of Benton, CA. The territory consists of 149,690 acres of Forest Service land and 60,000 acres of BLM land and lies on the east side and crest of the White Mountains. The territory is bounded by Highway 6 on the north, Fish Lake Valley on the east, Cottonwood Creek on the south, and the crest of the mountains on the west.

The White Mountain range is a triangular fault block that was elevated and tilted eastward in recent geological time. Elevations range from 5,000 feet on the floor of Fish Lake Valley to 14,246 feet on White Mountain Peak, the third highest point in California. The topography is a combination of very gentle, open country and very steep-sided canyons and rugged ridges. The Sierra Nevada blocks much of the prevailing air flow and moisture from the west, resulting in precipitation of four to six inches annually in the lowest reaches and twenty inches or more on the crest. Major storms arrive usually between December and March and drop most of their moisture above 7,000 feet in the form of snow.

Four major vegetation zones occur within the territory: 1) desert scrub, 2) pinyon woodland, 3) subalpine forest and upland, 4) alpine tundra. The desert scrub zone is found on the valley floor and is dominated by shrubby species such as shadscale, four wing saltbush, Nevada ephedra, and rubber rabbitbrush. Pinyon woodland is distinguished by the presence of single leaf pinyon. The presence of bristlecone pine or limber pine characterize the subalpine forest, and subalpine uplands include sagebrush, leadleaf mountain mahogany, snowberry, lupine, and various grasses. Alpine tundra is considered to be the zone above treeline, and grasses, sedges, and rushes constitute a larger percentage of this flora than in the other zones.

Wildlife present on the territory include mule deer, desert bighorn sheep, sage grouse, and mountain lion.

Livestock grazing is permitted within the territory.

History

The origin of the White Mountain herd is unknown, but it is thought to date back to the establishment of the first ranches in the adjoining Fish Lake Valley area of Nevada. Members of the early ranch families of Chiatovich and Patterson claimed that wild horses were present at least as far back as the 1870s and were probably escaped or free-roaming

ranch horses. There have also been numerous instances reported of both common ranch horses and blooded stock escaping or being turned out into the White Mountains.

One of the more interesting stories of genetic infusions into the White Mountain herd was related by Helen McGee, niece of the Paiute Indian known as “Gray-haired Johnny.” According to Ms. McGee, Johnny was an excellent horse doctor, skilled in the use of herbal medicines. During the early 1900’s, whenever he went down to the Southern California racetracks, he was in great demand by race horse owners because he used special herbs for quickly healing newly gelded or injured race horses. In return for his services, he was given thoroughbred stallions which he would take to the Whites to replace some of the resident stallions.

Prior to the passage of the Wild Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act of 1971, wild horses from the Whites were captured for use as saddle horses and pet food. In the mid-1970’s some of the ranchers in Fish Lake Valley claimed to still possess wild horses captured prior to 1971 that became good cow ponies of much better quality, they claimed, than those found in other areas of the state of Nevada.

Herd Description

The White Mountain herd is managed for a population of 75 horses. The herd has a majority of bays and chestnuts with most other colors being uncommon.

For More Information

Contact the White Mountain Ranger District at 760-873-2500.