

Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge has horses and burros!

Sheldon NWR is public land managed by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS), and is the only national wildlife refuge that manages herds of wild horses and burros. The USFWS is different from the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Unlike the BLM's mission to manage land for multiple use, the mission of the NWR system is to administer lands and waters for the conservation and restoration of fish, wildlife, plant resources and their habitats for the benefit of the American people. Sheldon NWR was designated as a pronghorn refuge in the 1930's, yet it has been home to many horses and burros. Sheldon's horses and burros are not protected under the Wild Free Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971. That means that captured animals may not be placed in the BLM's Adopt-a-Horse program. Unlike the BLM, Sheldon NWR does not have a large infrastructure by which to adopt animals or place them in long-term sanctuaries. All horses, including aged stallions and mares, must be placed in homes or rescues. Animals will be adopted out through Sheldon NWR or organizations or individuals acting as adoption agents for the refuge.

Herd Characteristics

Sheldon NWR has 3 main horse herd groups. Traits common to horses in all herds are 15+ hand size, bays, sorrels, and white facial and leg markings. Herd groups seldom seem to mix, so each herd has members with distinctive characteristics:

1. Catnip/Round Mountain herd: Quarter horse type horses, sorrels with flaxen manes and tails, tall white stockings and facial markings, overo pinto sorrels, palominos, some buckskins.
2. Fish Creek herd: Large bays and dark brown horses, black/white and bay tobiano pintos.
3. Badger herd: Thoroughbred/quarter horse type horses, sorrels, chestnuts, and bays, usually smaller white markings.

History of Sheldon Horses and Burros

Sheldon NWR's wild horses are the genetic mixture of original wild horses, ranch horses, and cavalry remounts. In the early part of the 20th century, most rangeland had no fencing. Ranchers turned their saddle horses loose on the range. Brood mares ran free, and were gathered at weaning time. Many saddle horses disappeared into the wild horse herds. Between 1920 and 1946, Thoroughbred-Standard bred horses were raised for the cavalry on the area that was to become Sheldon NWR. These army remounts ran free and were gathered annually to be driven overland to Alturas, CA, where the army picked them up at the railway head. Throughout the 1940's, 1950's, and 1960's the federal government leased land to several cattle companies operating on and around Sheldon NWR, and their horses added to the genetic mix of local wild horses. During the 1970's and 1980's, ranchers in the vicinity of Sheldon NWR gathered horses, keeping the ones they wanted for saddle horses, and turning the remainder loose. Horses, both wild and domestic over a large landscape mixed, creating an interesting and diverse gene pool.

Burros are thought to have come to the area with the Basque sheepherders in the 1890's. Burros were used to transport the herders' few essential belongings when they spent months at a time in the desert. Miners also used burros, and sometimes released them when they abandoned their mining claims.

Social Groupings of Wild Horses

Horses are social animals, and assemble themselves into bands. Several bands may group together into a herd. Sometimes several hundred horses may be seen in a large herd composed of many bands. A harem band is the basic family unit, and consists of mares, their young up to about age 2, and a single stallion. Less frequently harem bands have 2 herd stallions. Bachelor bands are formed of young stallions that have been driven from their band of origin, stallions that have been unable to obtain harems, or harem stallions that were defeated by younger males. The goal of each stallion is to gather mares to form his own harem. Membership in bachelor bands are not stable because individuals frequently depart alone or move to other bachelor bands. Band sizes vary widely, from 2 individuals to over 20.

Where the Equines live

Horses seem to prefer elevations about 5,000 ft. in Sheldon's high desert. horses gather on mountains and flat table tops, as well as along streams. An area of lower elevation (4,100 ft.) is home to wild burros. Burros inhabit greasewood flats and badlands area of opal mining and some geothermal activity. The territories of burros and horses seldom seem to overlap.

Why Sheldon NWR is Removing Horses and Burros

Horse and burro populations on Sheldon NWR are causing damage to some water resources on the refuge, especially near springs and streams. Unless the populations are controlled, damage is expected to increase in the future. It is the policy of the USFWS that feral horses and burros shall not be introduced, established, or allowed to become established on any national wildlife refuge (7RM6), and that such animals are to be removed and disposed of in accordance with 50CFR30.

These policies have not been fully implemented on Sheldon NWR because the horse management plan allows a token herd to remain as a result of extensive public participation and because funding has not been available in recent years to remove horses. Now, however, funding is available, and a concerted effort is planned in the next 5 years to radically decrease horse numbers.

Is there a Difference Between Wild and Domestic Horses and Burros?

No. Wild and domestic animals are of the same species. What is the difference between donkeys and burros? "Donkey" is the name usually used for the domestic *Equus asinus*, and "burro" is the name of the wild *Equus asinus*, but they are the same animal. As soon as a wild burro is tame, he is a donkey. And, a horse, *Equus caballus*, is a horse of course! The main difference between wild burros and horses and domestic ones, is that the wild ones have not had much contact and have few issues related to people. If they are treated fairly and kindly, wild equines will become as tame and trustworthy as any domestic animal. Many people who train horses prefer wild, un handled horses because they do not come into training with any issues dealing with humans.

How May I Adopt a Horse or Burro From Sheldon NWR?

You may adopt animals directly from Sheldon NWR or from organization or individuals acting as adoption agents for the refuge. To find adoption agents in your area, see the link on adoption agents. Agents may charge adoption fees.

To adopt directly from the refuge:

1. Read the refuge's requirements for adoption, fill out an adoption application, and be approved for adoption. You will be notified of you approval. No adoption fee is required.
2. When horses are expected to be available, potential adopters will be notified. Adopters are invited to visit the corrals to view the horses that have been gathered; however, because Sheldon is remote, many people will not be able to travel there. Pictures of the horses will be posted on this internet site as they arrive in the corrals, so adopters may view the horses.
3. If you see a horse on the internet that you want to adopt, or if you desire to view horses at the corrals on Sheldon NWR, please arrange your visit and adoption through Marla Bennett.

Marla Bennett, Refuge Operation Specialist

775-941-0201

marla_bennett@fws.gov

If more than one person desires to adopt the same horse, a lottery will be held and the winner notified.

4. You are requested to arrange transportation for your newly adopted animal. Horse may be transported only on certain days that coincide with brand inspection dates.



Horses from Sheldon NWR are recognized for having good temperament, conformation and coloring, and we have developed a very successful program for finding desirable homes for these beautiful animals.

