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Wild West in the flesh

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BURNS -- Nine galloping wild horses crested a sagebrush-covered knoll in the afternoon sunlight on Oregon's southeastern high desert, just ahead of a pursuing helicopter.

The Kiger mustangs were running flat-out toward a skillfully concealed horse trap. Behind them flew an old Bell 47 helicopter with a bubble canopy, its air horn and sirens blaring, and its rotors thrashing the air.

Suddenly, the mustangs whirled, ran beneath the helicopter and stampeded away from the burlap-covered steel fences.

"They're getting pretty sly," said Ron Harding, rising from his nearby hiding place a camouflaged blind. "Once those horses turn under that chopper, you know you've got problems."

The Kiger mustangs are part of a now-famous wild herd thought to be descendants of 16th century colonial Spanish horses brought to the New World by the conquistadors.

Harding discovered the herd of Kigers in 1977 while working as a Bureau of Land Management wild horse management specialist. Now retired, he showed up Thursday to watch the modern-day roundup.

Kiger mustangs are distinctive for their uniform light coloring, and black manes and tails. They range from a nearly white "claybank" to mouse-brown "grulla" to dun brown, spiced with a few honey-gold stallions and mares.

Many are linebacks, which have dark lines running along their spines, and some carry primitive stripings and zebralike markings on their backs and legs.

The Kigers and the roughly 37,000 other wild horses roaming the Western ranges reproduce at a rate of 18 percent to 20 percent a year, said Mark Armstrong, a BLM spokesman from Burns. In Oregon, as many as 500 wild horses must be rounded up each year to prevent overgrazing of the fragile desert and mountain ecosystem.

On Thursday, helicopter pilot Cliff Heaverne, owner of High Desert Helicopters of Fallon, Nev., was supervising a contract crew working for the BLM. By day's end, the low-flying helicopter and the crew's horseback

wranglers had corralled about 40 dun-colored horses behind the trap.

For Heaverne, it was a good day's chase. But on Friday, he crash-landed near the trap shortly after 9 a.m. and had to be flown to St. Charles Medical Center in Bend, where he was treated for minor injuries, a hospital spokeswoman said.

Heaverne's crew has a contract to round up about 180 Kigers this year from the agency's 37,000-acre wild horse management area 60 miles south of Burns.

After the BLM roundups, the Kigers and other wild horses are sold to the public by competitive bidding through the federal government's adopt-a-horse program, Armstrong said.

Old or unattractive horses often go unclaimed and are trucked to five government-owned sanctuaries in Nebraska and Oklahoma, where they live out their lives, he said.

Until 1977, only a handful of ranchers and cowboys knew about the Kigers on Oregon's high desert. That year, BLM riders gathered about 29 horses in a roundup near Beatys Butte and trucked them to Burns, 50 miles to the northeast.

"The first three truckloads that came in had these little dun horses," Harding recalled. "I go up to this truck and peek through, and what do I see? A lot of zebra-striped horses. I got excited."

The horses had the primitive markings and conformation of colonial Spanish horses, he said. The Kigers became a sensation in the horse world.

By 1993, a BLM sale of 100 Kigers attracted 544 prospective buyers to Burns, said Kiger owner Rick Littleton of Bend. Three years later, 1,353 people showed up for an offering of 100 Kigers.

"There were so many people, we put them in the grandstand at the fairgrounds," Harding said. "It was the most people I've ever seen at the fairgrounds."

In 1999, a 6-month-old Kiger filly brought $19,000 at a BLM auction in Burns.

That same year, Littleton sold a 3-year-old Kiger stallion to film producer Steven Spielberg's DreamWorks production company for a price variously reported as $36,000 to $50,000. The stallion became the model for the starring horse in "Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron," a popular animated feature film released in 2002.

The Kigers' origins are murky. When they were discovered in 1977, the horses appeared suspiciously untainted by crossbreeding, a remarkable feat because

by 1916, according to federal records, 300,000 to 400,000 wild horses roamed Southeast Oregon. Such a sea of wild horses should have swallowed up the tiny band of distinctive colonial Spanish mustangs.

Those early day wild horses were regularly gathered for use as cavalry remounts or slaughtered for pet food and "pony coats" -- a fad at the turn of the past century. They were also marketed to the British for use in the 1899-1902 Boer War in South Africa, Harding said.

The number of wild horses in the Oregon desert dwindled to 48,000 by 1948 and now stands at about 2,800, Armstrong said.

Kigers are unusually intelligent, and in the wild tended to mate only with other Kigers, Harding said. When captured, they bunch together in the corrals and scorn the company of other wild horses, he said.

"I do adhere to the theory that horses will segregate according to color. I've seen it again and again," he said.

Early horseback "mustangers" who made their living catching free-roaming horses to sell to the Army and for pet food knew about the Kigers, Harding said. But they didn't go after them because the area where they ranged was too rugged.

For years after the Kigers' discovery, the least attractive horses were auctioned to the horse-buying public, Harding said. The best were carefully turned back into the sprawling BLM herd management areas to "breed up" the herd.

"Now you got the bleeding hearts that say, 'You screwed up nature, the free-roaming horses,' " Littleton said.

Harding said he thinks as many as 12,000 formerly wild horses taken off the Western ranges now languish in sanctuaries, at a cost of about $3 each per day, because the public won't adopt them or allow them to be destroyed.

Kigers, on the other hand, are in demand and nearly always are adopted, he said.

But breeder Nancy Pearson of Benton City, Wash., said the Kigers are overpriced.

"The BLM has done an exceptional job of promoting them. That's why they bring such high prices," said Pearson, who once owned eight Kigers but now breeds only Spanish mustangs.

The Kigers' value is judged by color alone, she said, and many good Spanish horses that lack their distinctive color are passed over or sell for much less.

"A good horse is never a bad color," she said.

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