

Feral Horse & Burro Management

Are Feral Horses a Priority Species on the Refuge?

National wildlife refuges are established for the protection of native wildlife and habitat, and any use of refuge lands and waters, by law, must be consistent with this purpose. Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge, located in the northwestern corner of Nevada, manages over 575,000 acres of high desert habitat for native plants and wildlife. This refuge was set aside in 1931 by Executive Order, primarily for the conservation of pronghorn antelope and other native wildlife species. The purpose was defined “as a refuge and breeding ground for wild animals and birds.” Horses are not native to Sheldon NWR, so they must be managed consistent with the refuge's purpose, which gives priority to native animals and plants.

What is the History of Horses in Northwestern Nevada?

Prior to these lands becoming a national wildlife refuge, ranchers raised European horse breeds as working stock and as remounts for the U.S. Cavalry. When the need for saddle horses diminished at the turn of the 20th century, these horse herds were not harvested and were released on lands that are now the Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge and other public lands where they became feral animals.

Why Should Horses Be Removed From the Refuge?

The feral horses at Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge are not native wildlife, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service policy requires that we manage feral animals to prevent damage to native wildlife habitat and other resources. These animals have no natural predators and their populations increase at a very high rate when compared to populations of deer, antelope and other native species for



Water sources such as springs and streams on Sheldon NWR are being impacted by horses. This springhead above Catnip Reservoir is severely impacted by horse grazing, causing loss of riparian vegetation such as willows and other plants that provide cover and shade for fish and other water organisms. The Lahontan cutthroat trout, an endangered species, relies on this spring for reproduction and is being negatively impacted by this loss of habitat.

which the refuge was established. During the past 10 years, the feral horse populations have increased to an unacceptable level, causing damage to upland areas and water sources on the refuge. The herd's growth rate is very strong, averaging about 23% net increase per year. With an estimated current population of about 1,500 animals, 345 animals must be removed just to keep the current population stable.

The horse population level on Sheldon is causing negative impacts to native wildlife and their habitats. Conflicts over scarce water in this desert environment include trampling of vegetation along stream banks and at spring heads, physical exclusion of other species by dominant stud horses and burros, and contamination from feces and urine. Horses also cause habitat degradation by removal and trampling of vegetation in the upland areas. These areas provide important habitat for native species such as pronghorn, mule deer, big horn sheep, sage-grouse, waterfowl, many species of native songbirds, and resident mammals. This habitat is most valuable to wildlife when it is not grazed by livestock and has healthy native vegetation. Removal of this natural cover allows native predators to more easily locate and kill the species that depend upon that cover to hide, especially during the fawning and brooding seasons.

Cattle grazing was permanently removed from Sheldon NWR in the early 1990s because of these same conflicts with wildlife. At that time, the population of feral horses was much smaller (200-300 animals) and the impact was not as severe. However, the population has increased significantly in the past 15 years and habitat damage is now occurring at an unacceptable level.

During horse removal efforts, careful consideration is given to the horses to ensure their well being, including onsite support by a veterinarian and horse experts. Horse gathers are conducted after the peak of foaling. Injury rates on horses during the roundup have been less than one percent.

How Long Has Horse Management Occurred on the Refuge?

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has managed these herds for more than 70 years, and the current program to control horse and burro populations is simply a continuation of that effort. The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and Service policies have been followed in implementing horse management. Horse removal has been addressed in earlier management plans (1977 Sheldon Horse Management Plan, EIA; 1980 Sheldon NWR Renewable Natural Resources Management Plan, Final EIS; 2000 Environmental Action Memorandum to update previous documents), and will be further addressed in the Sheldon NWR Comprehensive Conservation Plan which is getting underway in 2006. These documents are available for review in the Lakeview Office for the Sheldon-Hart Mountain National Wildlife Refuge Complex. Horses on Sheldon NWR are not subject to the Wild Horse and Burro Act. In fact, removal of horses is specifically required under U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service policy (7RM6.1) following federal regulations (50 CFR 30.11-12). Additional authorization to use aircraft to round-up horses has been provided by Congress in appropriation bills since FY 2003. Although

federal law requires the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to control these feral animals, the agency is making every possible effort to gather and transport them in a humane manner. As previously stated, during horse removal efforts, careful consideration is given to the horses to ensure their well being, including onsite support by a veterinarian and horse experts. Horse gathers are conducted after the peak of foaling. Injury rates on horses during the roundup have been less than one percent.

How Will the Horse Removal Program Affect Visitors?

Some refuge visitors enjoy seeing feral horses, but a much larger percentage of our visitors travel from diverse domestic and international locations, through miles of lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management for feral horses, to Sheldon NWR to view pronghorn, sage-grouse, mule deer, bighorn sheep, and the other native wildlife species in their natural habitats. In fact, many visitors express concern about the impacts these feral horses and burros are having on native plants and animals. There are more than 30 BLM herd management areas within a 200 mile radius of the refuge where people can view feral horses and burros on BLM and Forest Service lands managed for this purpose.

How Does The Refuge's Adoption Program Work?

Horses on Sheldon NWR are recognized for having good temperament, conformation, and coloring, and a very successful program exists for finding desirable homes for these beautiful animals. These horses are distinguished by being preferable for adoption. In addition, we realize the difficulty in finding adoptive homes for older horses, so we are assessing the viability of using contraceptive techniques that will allow un-adoptable animals to live out their lives on the refuge while lowering the reproductive rate of the herd. Refuge staff seek to ensure all horses receive good homes by working with organizations and individuals such as Forever Free Mustangs, Gary Graham, and private contractors who serve as adoption agents for the Service. Before any horses are released, a rigid screening process and a thorough background investigation are completed on the adoption agents. They are then responsible for screening potential adopters to ensure the horses will be taken to good homes. A cooperative agreement or contract is negotiated and signed by both parties to ensure that it is clearly understood that these animals must be adopted to qualified homes and that they will not end up in the slaughter market.

Persons interested in adopting these beautiful animals can contact one of the certified adoption agents below:

Carr's Wild Horse and Burro Center, 4844 Coutts-Carr Rd, Cross Plains, Tennessee 37049, E-mail: carrsholding@aol.com,

Forever Free Mustangs, Flora Stephen, P.O. Box 1528, Sisters, Oregon 97759, E-mail: mustangs@outlawnet.com, Web Site: www.foreverfreemustangs.org .

Gary Graham, 440 W. Highway 6, Las Lunas, New Mexico 87031, E-mail:
grahamhorses@msn.com

Contact: David N. Johnson, Deputy Project Leader, Sheldon – Hart Mountain NWR
Complex, 541-947-331