

Wild Horses in Western States are Domesticated

Our topics for this week are:

- **Wild horse history**
- **Practical benefits of adopted trained, previously wild horses**

The domestic horse was brought to the New World (Hispaniola: Dominican Republic and Haiti) with the second voyage in 1493 of Christopher Columbus and introduced to the Americas by the Spanish conquistadors. Hernando Cortez landed on the coast of Mexico in 1519 with 13 horses, the first domestic horses in the Americas. Small numbers of horses may have become feral soon after the Spanish settled New Mexico in 1598, but many were left behind when the Spanish were hastily driven out of the southwestern U.S. by the Pueblo Revolt of 1680. The horses were captured by the Pueblos, who began trading horses with Plains nomads resulting in the spread of horses throughout western North America. The horses which remained in the wild were called mustangs from the Spanish word *mesteño* for “wild and free.”

Wild horses and burros are defined by federal law as unbranded, unclaimed, free-roaming horses or burros found on public lands in the United States. Today, the Bureau of Land Management protects and manages wild horses and burros in balance with other public resource values on 177 herd management areas across 26.9 million acres of public lands.

Original feral horses of the West were of Spanish descent. Most feral horses living today are descendants of animals that were released or escaped from ranchers, miners, the U.S. Cavalry, and Native Americans. Few are now of Spanish ancestry. Other horses predominated in mustang herds by 1930. Although these Spanish horse descendents have been feral for up to about 350 years, they are genetically still domesticated. Regardless of origin, mustangs of the American West come from stock that was domesticated for 6,000 years. Mustangs still carry the genetic makeup that their ancestors possessed and were selectively bred for. Assuming they are healthy and not in-bred, mustangs can be fully domesticated, trained, and have the ability to perform for human purposes, if socialized and trained as other domesticated horses.

In 1800, huge feral horse herds were particularly present in West and South Texas, East Oklahoma, West New Mexico, and South Kansas. Most are now in Nevada.

In 1971 Congress passed the Wild and Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act which protected feral horses from unnecessary killing practices. However, over-population has become big problem. To protect the environment 45,000 mustangs are kept in government holding facilities managed by the Bureau of Land Management. Since 1978, captured mustangs can be adopted by individuals or groups who will provide humane, long-term care. Until a safe and effective, practically administered contraceptive is used for control of the numbers of mustangs, adoption to humane private owners is the best option although it is a viable option only for a small percentage of the overpopulation of feral horses. Since 1971, the BLM has permitted private care to nearly 290,000 mustangs.

Careful selection of mustangs and low-stress training and yield an excellent saddle horse. Mustangs born in the wild have continued to go through nature's selective breeding based on survivability and have resulted in tougher, more resilient, and in some cases, smarter horses. Horses that remained in domestication being selected for breeding based on hair coat color, conformation without meaningful purpose, and extreme placid dispositions that fail to protect them from natural dangers. Mustangs tend to be more brave and physically tougher than most domestic horses. Feral horse behavior does not always predict the behavior of domesticated horses, but the similarities are greater than those between wolves and dogs.

If you are interested in mustang adoptions, google "BLM, wild horse adoptions".

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects, contact us at CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com

Now let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- 1. Mustangs can be trained as excellent saddle horses**
- 2. Adoptions are managed by the Bureau of Land Management**
- 3. Adoptions are not the total answer for controlling the overpopulation of mustangs**

More information on animal handling can be found in my books, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling*, and *Concise Textbook of Large Animal Handling* all published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: www.betteranimalhandling.com . This website has more than 200 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

Don't forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.