

Raven

America's Magn

by Ginger Kathrens. All photos courtesy of Ginger Kathrens.



Raven's band in September of 1996 atop the Pryors. "Cloud" was still with his group, but would become a bachelor the following spring.

the Pryor Mountains, he pranced forward, eyeing my sister Marian and me with suspicion. The magnificent stallion stomped a foot, snorted and shook his head revealing the white star under his long forelock. Suddenly he whirled, dipping his head low and pinning his ears against his head, signaling to his three mares that trouble was nearby. In unison they began to run away. Even the newborn gray foal dashed off, gamely dodging sagebrush to keep up with his buckskin mother. Within seconds, the band disappeared into the pinion-dotted hills.

This was my introduction to wild horses and the first of many trips to Montana and the Pryor Wild Horse Range to follow the black stallion, Raven, and his family of Mustangs.

Once numbering in the millions in the American West (Texas alone boasted of one million Mustangs in the 1800s), only a few thousand remain, living in family groups called bands. Protected by a stallion, and guided by an experienced lead mare, the Mustang family is a highly social group that includes subordinate mares, yearlings and foals. A glance, the

Raven, the black stallion.

The black stallion lifted his head from the melting snow bank. Water dribbled from his mouth as he chewed on the remnants of last week's storm. The sun had yet to rise above the Bighorns; and in the soft orange glow of the red desert below

flick of an ear, a change in body posture or position are the silent, subtle ways horses communicate what they are thinking and feeling.

Rigid rules of behavior are obeyed. If not, quick, firm correction is meted out. When Raven's two-year old son expressed affection for his father's beautiful Palomino mare, he was banished from the band. In this way, inbreeding is avoided.

Little Raven, became a bachelor stallion that day, joining other young males bursting with hormonal energy but too immature to claim their own mares. Like a gang of mischievous teens, they prowl the range, play fighting amongst themselves, even pestering the band stallions from time to time.

The Plight of the Mustangs

Wild horses are splendid examples of nature's perfection. Yet, they have been some of the most persecuted in this century.

Reacting to the cruelty of aerial hunting, sport shooting, and brutal round-ups that ended with grueling trips to slaughterhouses, a Nevada horsewoman (Velma "Wild Horse Annie" Johnston) orchestrated the passage of the Wild Horse Annie Bill in 1959 which barred aerial hunting of Mustangs. But Annie wasn't through yet. She successfully won Congressional approval of the Free Roaming Wild Horses and Burros Act in 1971 in which wild horses and burros were designated as national heritage species reflecting the spirit of the American West. Her leadership generated a barrage of letters to Congress, much of it from school children. Only the Vietnam War drew more Congressionally targeted mail.

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) was entrusted with the protection of wild horses and burros because most of these animals range on our public lands in 10 western states. Approximately 20,000



Two bachelor stallions practice the fighting skills they will need to one day win and keep mares.

grew wild

ificent Mustangs

ranchers pay \$1.35 a head to run their cattle and sheep on these same public lands and they have never taken kindly to competition from other grazers, like wild horses.

In the 1980s, reacting to pressure from the livestock industry, thousands of horses were removed and placed in the BLM wild horse and burro “adoption” program where a qualified person could adopt a Mustang for \$125. Horses by the hundreds went to a handful of “fee waiver” adopters who received the horses for free. Most of the adopters were ranchers or profiteers or both. They turned around and sold the horses to slaughter at nearly a 100% profit. America’s national treasures were being abused and killed—this time with the assistance of the U.S. government!

When the fee waiver policy was exposed to the American public, it was eliminated in the late 1980s. But the round-ups continued.

The Round-up

In the summer of 1994, I knew very little about the serious plight of Mustangs. Raven’s band had three beautiful foals. His family was headed to the high country, climbing the spiny ridges through the Douglas Fir forests to the lupine covered meadows atop the mountain.

We called the first-born colt, Diamond, for the prominent star on his forehead. He was turning into a blue

roan. His brother, born just days after him, was gray with a black stripe down his back like his mother. This primitive color is called grullo (*grew-ya*). The two playful colts were seldom far apart. The third foal, born in early June to the Palomino mare, was the color of a Pryor sunrise. He was bright orange.

I heard that the Pryor horses were to be rounded up in mid-September, and rounded up they were! BLM wranglers on horseback invaded the peaceful autumn meadows, driving any horse they could find down treacherous trails to corrals 5,000 feet below the summit of the mountain. Mares were brought in without their foals and frantic foals raced into the corrals, forever orphaned.

I began to realize that their safety could never be taken for granted. For even here, in a designated Wild Horse Range where they did not compete with ranchers’ cattle or their politics, the horses were not safe.

Raven was captured but the orange colt was missing. The wranglers said the colt ran away from its mother—an unbelievable story if I’d been more savvy about horse behavior. I persuaded the cowboys to let his Palomino mother go so she might look for her colt. Surprisingly, they agreed. That’s when I began searching too.

A month later, the truth was revealed. The orange colt had been driven over a cliff and shot. This was not the only death during that bloody

autumn. Raven’s grullo colt died in the corrals of untreated diarrhea and was dumped in the trash at the Bighorn County Landfill. A chestnut mare was torn apart then shot when the wranglers “headed and heeled” her in preparation for freeze branding. Even one of the BLM wranglers’ own horses had to be shot, its neck snapped when its reckless rider tried to rope a wild horse on the run.

Raven’s band was never targeted for adoption; yet they were held captive for over three weeks. When they were finally released in early October after three weeks in captivity, only Diamond remained of the colorful trio of foals I had grown to love.

Cloud

The following Spring, my pain was replaced by delight. Two of Raven’s mares had foaled. The two fillies, Mahogany and Smokey, explored together, never straying far from their protective mothers. Late in May the Palomino mare, reclaimed by Raven, foaled. We named her nearly white colt, Cloud, a foal so spirited and fearless he immediately stole my heart.

Not for a moment did I let myself



Raven and two of his mares rush to the waterhole in early fall of 1996.

imagine they would be run down the mountain in another Pryor round-up. Just the same, it happened this Fall. Smokey and Mahogany, now two-year-old fillies, were captured and sold. Never again would they run wild atop the flower-strewn meadows of the Pryors.

And what of Cloud? He, too, was captured but released the next day. No one has seen him since. All his bachelor friends were sold, leaving him alone, facing his first winter without the protection of Raven and the rest of his natal band or the companionship of older, experienced bachelor stallions.

So, again I am searching: this time for another one of Raven's sons.

A Record of Shame

The Fall Pryor round-up was only one of hundreds over the past few years. In fact, nearly 10,000 wild horses and burros have been removed each of the past three years!

In 1971 when the Wild Horses and Burros Act was passed, 303 herd areas were identified throughout the states where wild horses could roam free. Since then the BLM has eliminated all wild horses



Raven's band drinks at the spring-fed waterhole atop the Pryors as another band runs away. The rich palette of horse colors...duns, blue roans, blacks, bay, sorrel, palomino and buckskin can be seen.

in 119 of these areas!

The problem with wild horse management begins when BLM illegally removes the horses from their homes. That's right. . . "illegally" removes horses. The Wild Horses and Burros Act as amended in 1978 states that horses cannot be rounded up unless they "pose a threat to themselves, their habitat or other rangeland values." Only "excess" can be legally gathered—those horses that constitute an over population. Wild horse survey data suggests that in the overwhelming number of cases wild horses removed have not fit these legal parameters. There was and is no over-population. Yet, the BLM removes horses anyway.

Captured animals are placed in the adoption program. Many of these

"adopted" animals (up to 90% according to the Associated Press) have gone to slaughter. The horses are in demand in places like France and Japan where they appear on the menu in even the finest restaurants.

And the BLM makes no bones about their future plans. In fact, they state in their last report to Congress in 1995 that "if future funding allows, greater emphasis will be place on removals and adoptions of wild horses and burros from the public rangelands."

A New Day

Pat Shea, the newly appointed head of the BLM, has promised there will be no "zeroing out" (total removals) of wild horse areas in 1998 — and that's a start. Now he needs to look at the mismanagement of the whole program. In the meantime, there should be a moratorium on round-ups until BLM regulations are brought into compliance with the law. Meanwhile many wild horses are languishing in overcrowded holding facilities. Why not release them onto some of the over 100 areas zeroed out by BLM? Pat Shea has the power to make the

The **Save the Horses** Initiative (Prohibition on Slaughter of Horses and the Sale of Horsemeat for Human Consumption), sponsored by Cathleen Doyle, Sherry DeBoer and Sidne J. Long, is on the fast track headed for the California, November 1998 ballot. **Save the Horses**, a coalition of horse, animal, veterinary, entertainment and law enforcement organizations has garnered strong mainstream support gathering close to 300,000 signatures in the first seven weeks of the petition drive.

Passage of **Save the Horses** will make it a felony for anyone to possess, buy, sell, import or export from California any horse where that person knows-or should have known-that any part will be used for human consumption. Passage will have a resounding negative impact on the international horsemeat trade which accounts for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of American domestic and wild horses annually.

The American horse is a companion animal. In California, other companion animals, such as dogs and cats are protected from being killed for their pelts or

used for food. Horses, who are as much a part of some families as the kitty curled up on your lap or the dog on your bed, deserve to the same protection from harm.

Two separate public opinion polls show that people overwhelmingly oppose horse slaughter (93%) and oppose eating horsemeat (88%). Up until now, very few were aware that horse slaughter even existed, however sponsors hope to galvanize what they describe as "overwhelming public outrage" following a recent flood of media coverage surrounding the issue.

Save the Horses is the first effort to stop horse slaughter and the most effective solution to help the most horses as horse slaughter economically subsidizes horse theft, irresponsible breeding, PMU (pregnant mare urine) foal production, and the extermination of our wild horses.

Remember, as California goes, so goes the nation. So let's put California's horses back in the stable-and off the table. For more information on how you can help **Save the Horses**, please call the Campaign Hotline at (415) 273-6070. 🐾

dream of freedom a reality.

Spring is coming. Newborn wild horse foals will rise on wobbly legs to greet the dawn. My hope is that they will be granted the privilege of growing up wild. Nurtured in their caring family bands, they will learn the lessons of wild horse society. As adults they may become proud stallions and mares, running forever free on the lands that are their birth rite.

What can you do?

Express your views to the BLM. Contact: Pat Shea, Director Bureau of Land Management Washington, D.C., 20240; (202) 208-3801; (202) 208-5242 (fax). Or call your Congressional Representative and Senators. Make your voice heard!

Ginger Kathrens is an Emmy winning TV documentary producer and president of Taurus Productions, a corporation she founded in the 1970s. "Spirits of the Rainforest," her two-hour special for the Discovery Channel, was one of People magazine's top 15 programs of 1993. Her "Ultimate Guide: Dogs" premiered on the Discovery Channel to excellent reviews in May 1997. She has worked on over 20 segments of the PBS series Wild America from 1987 to 1996.

As Director/Cinematographer for Marty Stouffer's "Year of the Mustang," Ginger was introduced to the Pryor Mountains and Raven's band in early 1994. Watch for these beautiful horses in her new production "Ultimate Guide: Horses" scheduled to premiere over Thanksgiving on the Discovery Channel.

Ginger lives in Colorado Springs, with her Irish Terrier obedience dogs. She also owns a ranch at the base of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains in Southern Colorado which her registered Spanish Mustangs, "Flint" and "Sky," and her Pryor Mustang, "Trace," share with the abundant wildlife of the Rockies. 🐾