

Wild Horses

3-27-05 Pete Ramey Copyright 2005

After all these years, my family and I made our first trip to see the wild horses of the western United States. My work has been dramatically influenced and inspired by the study of these horses and their hooves. The reason I waited so long to go there and see for myself, was I thought that by studying the works of others I had picked up most of the information I needed.

I was first, and most influenced by the work of Jaime Jackson. He paved the way for an overwhelming number of us to learn how to forge rock crushing bare hooves and dramatically improve the health and performance of domestic horses. With this came the ability to unlock the mysteries of founder, navicular syndrome, white line disease, and hoof wall cracks. I later studied the wild horse research of Gene Ovnicek and Dr. Robert Bowker. I picked up more information from their work, and valuable confirmation of what I had already learned from Jaime.

So, I walked into wild horse country thinking that I was on a tourist trip; confirming what I already knew. I could not have been more blind. I could not have been more wrong. They were much, much more than I had ever imagined. What I write here, will probably sound very similar to what my predecessors have written. I don't know if anyone's words can get the point across to the world, but I have to try. I thought I was ready, but what I saw literally blew me away. I have worked on thousands of horses, all over the world. I spent six years of my life in the saddle from daylight till dark. I've had the privilege of working on some of the finest horses, for the finest horsemen in the world. Understand that after two minutes with the wild ones, I knew that I had never seen a true horse. I literally had no idea of their potential.



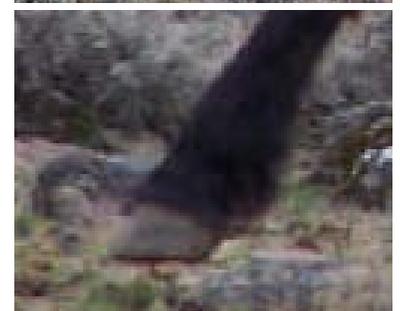
The country was solid rock; mostly baseball-sized porous, volcanic rock that you could literally use as a rasp to work a hoof if you wanted to. Every foot or so, a basketball sized rock was thrown in for good measure. Horse tracks were fairly rare, because there was so little dirt between these rocks. There were a few muddy areas from the recent snow melt, but they were littered with rocks as well. The horses made no attempt to find these softer spots to walk on. They had been walking mostly on snow all winter, so if ever the hooves are soft, tender and poorly shaped, it would be this time of year. I think it was the most critical time to see the horses.



Ivy and I observed, videoed, and photographed at least sixty horses. All of them, from the foals to the aged horses moved effortlessly and efficiently across this unbelievably harsh terrain. They were doing collected, extended trots across this obstacle course that would

shame the best show ring work of any dressage horse, with their tail high in the air and their heads cocked over their shoulder looking at us!!! I have never known a horse I would attempt to ride in this terrain. We had to literally watch every step. On the third day we got a half inch of snow (as if we weren't having a difficult time already). We could barely walk at all. It was exactly like trying to walk in a slimy, rocky stream bed. The movement of the horses was not effected by the slippery dusting of snow on the rocks. In fact, they got around much better than the mule deer and the pronghorns. The only animal I saw that rivaled the pristine fluidity of their movement was a lone coyote. The entire time we were there, we did not see a limp, or even a "give" to any rock, or a single lame horse and not one chip or split in any of their hooves. It was an unbelievable sight.

The area we were in had been under heavy snow until a few weeks prior to our arrival. The horses were eating tiny green shoots of new grass emerging from the cracks in the rocks. They would find about one nibble, among the rocks, per two steps. Our calculations confirmed they were, in fact, moving at least twenty miles per day in this rugged landscape. Interestingly, there were a few areas under wooded sections that had decent stands of grass and soft, wet footing, but it was rare to see any sign that a horse had been in there. They preferred the open spaces and high, rocky ridges where they could see around them. The mares were dropping foals while we were there and both the mares and the foals were extremely healthy. What in the world did they eat all winter? The grass would have been covered with snow, if it existed at all. I assure you I will find out next winter!



These horses were all visions of health, but this soon after the snow melt, they should look their worse, I would think. I can't wait to see the same horses in the summertime. I will do that, too.



One day, we took a road trip to a BLM holding facility. Some of the horses there had arrived from the wild only six weeks ago. We were eager for the opportunity to get some close-up photos of them, but they were not even remotely similar to their brothers and sisters in the wild. The care of the horses at the facility was great, by domestic standards; in fact it was exactly what I recommend at home. They were kept in herds, with clean, dry, hard packed footing, and were fed free choice grass hay. They had "plenty" of room and reason to move. I would consider it a perfect spot to rehabilitate a foundered horse. In spite of this, the glow, the vigor, the energy and the startling health was gone, and so were the perfect hooves.....



After only six weeks of domestication in what I would consider a "natural boarding" situation, the spell was broken. There were nice horses there, don't get me wrong, but they were only shadows of their former selves. The magic was gone. This proved to me beyond all doubt that these "magical creatures" are not a "super breed" or a separate, genetically selected species. It is the diet, the environment and the movement alone that makes them so special.

In the wild, most of the horses react to human presence just like a deer. They run and try to circle downwind, so they can smell you and so you (the predator) can't smell them. Their personalities vary, with some in a herd always a bit curious and some horrified by us. We quickly found that if a curious member of the herd happens to be the leader, the herd is much easier to get close to. Ivy would advance and retreat with these herds, and then sit quietly until they approached her. The first time she did that, the herd stallion circled her, charged up with nostrils flared and blowing, then squared up on her only fifteen feet away. She bowed her head and assumed a very submissive stance. He stood there supercharged for battle, with every vein under his skin visible. From three hundred yards away I could see and feel Ivy vibrating with an even combination of exhilaration and raw terror, but she just sat there, looking small and vulnerable; pretending to graze. The bold stallion soon decided she was no threat and started grazing beside her. After that, I could pretty much bumble amongst the heard and take pictures and observe at will. I have always been deeply impressed by Ivy's horsemanship. It has helped me on many levels, but I would soon find out that we know even less about the communication and training of horses than we do the diet and the hooves!

The horses seem to use drainages, tree lines, and even roads to identify their territories. Large "stud piles" of manure mark these lines. The road we drove in on was no exception (not one vehicle traveled it while we were there, so it came across as a natural feature, I guess). It was lined with these "markers". A young, lone stallion crossed the road one day, and headed toward a small herd managed by the oldest stallion we saw on the trip. The old stallion raced out to meet the young one. We expected a fierce battle, but got much more. They squared up, arched their necks and sniffed noses. The old stallion



squealed once and struck out at the air with one foot. They then went shoulder to shoulder in a brief shoving match that ended when the younger stallion took one step backward. Both horses then turned together and ran side by side, ¼ mile back to the road. When they got there, they stood together for a moment, with no signs of friendship or malice. Then the old stallion suddenly wheeled around and galloped back to his herd. The young one just stood there alone on the boundary and watched him go, then turned and ambled back the way he had come. It was as clear as



a bell. The old man had said, “Here is the property line, and you were on the wrong side of it. There are plenty of horses over there on that side that will just love you.”

Can you imagine a horse standing all alone while the only horse for miles ran away, just because he was rather politely asked to??? I can't, but my family and I saw it with our own eyes! We were able to approach that herd as well. The old man had three old mares, and a brand new foal. The age really showed in this one band with grey muzzles and scarred hides, but they were still completely



healthy and able. The old man allowed the mares and the foal to graze very close to us, but always he stayed between us and his little herd.



It has been debated whether mares or stallions lead the herds. In the groundbreaking book “The Natural Horse”, Jaime Jackson reports

that the mares are usually in total control of the herd. To me, it appears to happen both ways. Most herds are definitely run by a lead mare. The stallion seems to be a worthless decoration tailing along behind with little purpose. These boss mares run away with their herd following at the slightest hint of danger. The stallion is never in the lead. Other herds seem to be definitely controlled by the stallion. These monarchs are the most fun to watch. They politely push the herd from behind or sometimes step in front and everyone follows. They will arch their necks and rush between the herd and any deer, antelope, horse or person that happens by; until they are sure there is no danger. These herds seem to be much more relaxed and stable. I'm sure there is always a dominant mare in these herds, but she will be hard to spot. There is almost no ear pinning or pushing each other around. It is the vision of comfort and harmony and the youngest of foals feel

safe beside all of the horses in the herd including the stallion.

How has the horse world ignored the remarkable lessons the natural horse has to offer us? Only a few people have noticed them and very little time has been spent studying them. Yet the tiny peaks of a few people have



revolutionized hoof care, taught us to cure “incurable” disease and advanced the training world by leaps and bounds. What if real scientific study was done? Who knows what we could learn. Do they deworm themselves? Do they seek minerals and medicinal plants? Do they colic? Do they founder? How old do they get? How long are they sound? How are these mares so healthy right after foaling and a harsh winter? What exactly wrecks their bodies so much after only six weeks of domestication? What if a racehorse was raised in this environment? A steeplechaser? A barrel horse? An endurance horse? A hunter? Would it even be fair to the competition? The list of possibilities goes on and on. The true wild horse is an endangered species, because true wild horse country is almost gone. We had better learn to treat them as such and get all of the answers we can from them before it's too late.

The world has been shocked and amazed by our ability to forge rock crushing bare hooves, boost equine performance and treat “incurable” hoof disease. I don't want to diminish these facts, but I now I realize we have still set our standards and goals much too low. We haven't even scratched the tip of the iceberg. We can offer our horses much, much more, and will be rewarded by “super-horses” capable of performance, endurance and longevity beyond our wildest expectations. As for competitive performance, “The first players in each area of competition to figure this out will be at an unfair advantage. After that, when everyone else follows suit, all of the advantages will be for the horse!!!”

Jaime, thank you so much for “The Natural Horse”. After all these years, I have just now truly realized its significance to the horse world. You may not live long enough to see the day, but history will surely smile on you as the Savior of the domestic horse.



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