

March 16, 2010

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Responses to Feral Horse Feature, March 2, 2010

### Honour Alberta's wild horses

### WHOAS president Bob Henderson responds to case for 'feral problem' in Alberta

Re: "Ecology, feral horses and the West Country" by Clare Tannas (March 2).

I respect the fact that everyone is allowed his or her opinion on any issue. I do, however, want to address some of the comments about the wild horses of Alberta made by Mr. Tannas, which are hardly something one would expect from a professional, with their many unsubstantiated claims, both in regards to facts and logic.

There are many wrong and ill-informed ideas and attitudes currently prevailing around this province about our wild horses, not to mention blatant anti-wildie propaganda from so-called eco-ag experts and concerned industry groups, which is clearly a product of bias and/or ignorance of the facts.

I base most of my feedback on our own research and the opportunity to spend most of my spare time in the foothills west of Sundre over the past 40 years while observing and studying the wild horses and other wildlife. Wild Horses of Alberta Society (WHOAS), with which I am affiliated, is also fortunate to have highly qualified professionals who provide us with their research information on wild horses and the effects they have on their environment.

First of all, the whole ecosystem in the Alberta foothills is changing dramatically and rapidly due to oil exploration, but mostly due to the massive clear-cutting underway by lumber companies. The diverse system has been forever changed, with many of the native fauna being completely eradicated in some areas, due to this activity. Other native wildlife species are being misplaced by it also, as they lose their natural habitat. Consequently we have bear, cougar and elk now, more than ever, in our more populated areas adjacent to the forestry area. Some trappers are also having their traplines decimated as this happens. As well, some cattle leases and tour operators are also suffering due to these logging practices.

Reclamation mixes that promote a fast growth are replacing the grasses that were native to the area. Some native species such as the rough fescue are indeed hardy but also regenerate quickly. When grazing, horses eat the plant in a sideways tearing motion, which only trims it. This indicates that native plants with well-established root systems would simply regenerate plant growth. The bovine method of grazing is to uproot the plant. The stated "declining soil microryza and associated fauna" could be due to any biological or other cause. The not-so-subtle inference that this unsubstantiated



Wild horses run through a high mountain meadow near James River Bridge area last summer. (Photo courtesy of Bob Henderson)

problem is caused by wild horses, is a governmental and legal subliminal word usage trick to manipulate the readers' train of thought.

The comment about horses "yarding up" is not exclusive to wild horses. Other wildlife species are also forced to do it in order to survive, at times. The fact is, though: in most cases the wild horses seek out the open ridges to eke out their existence during the winter months and continue to range widely in search of feed.

One other key point on wild horses and their grazing patterns is that many U.S. scientific studies show that the horses are beneficial to the grasslands, because unlike bovines, they are re-seeders through the passage of undigested seeds in their droppings.

In many of the clear-cuts it is the horses that greatly help establish new grasses and also add nutrients to the soil thorough this process. The allegations of damage done to the grasses in early spring by wild horses, again, are not backed up by science in the Tannas article. The statement by Tannas that "accumulated damage will continue to increase until the horses are removed or drastically reduced" is ludicrous, in my opinion. As stated in his article there are only around 300-350 horses roaming in small bands in a very vast area of our Central Alberta foothills. In this same area every summer thousands of cattle are moved onto the grazing leases for the allotted periods.



This photo shows a domestic mare on the left that has associated with a wild band. She is a much bigger horse in stature and length with an elongated head compared a wild horse (right). (Photo courtesy of Bob Henderson)

A study by Rangeland Management, conducted in 2009, one of the hardest of recent years on pastures and grazing leases, with its very cold spring and then drought, actually showed totally the opposite. In it they found that the area that was supposed to have the problem due to the wild horses was in far better shape than those areas where the horses did not graze, but other commercial livestock did. Do not take me wrong – I am not against the cattle leaseholders, as I respect their right to utilize and manage their leases. Most of them salt their cattle to keep them moving throughout their lease, just as the horses do naturally.

The incidents cited by Tannas of domestic horses being driven by their owners into the forest, to be released and abandoned to survive on their own, are very rare occurrences. In my time travelling and photographing the wild horses in Alberta, I have come across two horses that were definitely domestic horses turned loose. Following the guidelines of the LIS both were rescued and given to new homes, including the one pointed out by Tannas in his article. Two others had brands and when reported, the owners removed them. Most domestic horses cannot survive the hardships that the wild horses endure, nor do wild horse bands readily accept them. Furthermore the practice of turning loose domestic horses is also illegal, according to government regulations.

Moreover, if there was a constant source of new breeding horses coming onto the range, as Mr. Tannas states, then these horses would all be very much of a Heinz 57 variety, very diverse in their features, size, build and weight. The wild horses west of Sundre, however, all have a similar look and build. These characteristics include a Roman nose, short back, feathered fetlocks and lighter coloured muzzles, all indicative of Spanish mustang bloodlines. Along with these features, they generally only stand between 14 and 14.2 hands high and weigh in at about 800-900 lb. for a large stud.

Accompanying this letter is a photograph of a stray, turned-loose horse, running with a wild herd. She is in behind the wild stallion, and at the back of her is the rest of the wild herd. Notice how she has a much larger head, longer body and is considerably taller and heavier.

Wild Horses of Alberta Society (WHOAS) has always maintained that the herds should not be procreating unchecked, and whereas the population is already well controlled by predation, we are also aware that they need to be managed by man to some degree.

In the past, our society submitted a proposal to the government as to how the Alberta wild and free-roaming horses could be humanely managed. The society was also willing to take on the responsibility for that, or assist the government in the management; however, that report was essentially ignored.

When it comes to Tannas' comments about lame or old horses and the wolves, it is a blatant grasp at the heartstrings of naive people, who tear up when Mother Nature is at work to balance the food chain. Wolves and other predators all prey upon the horses and all other wildlife that inhabit these areas. This has been going on over hundreds of years and in fact early European explorers and settlers in this once pristine area noted in their journals the fact of wolves preying on horses and moose.

Some readers of the Tannas article might become fearful that because wolves use horses as prey, they are going to attack a horse in someone's pasture. This is being done by the misplaced predators such as cougar and grizzly bear, as documented in several local incidents over the last few years, but not wolves. I would also like to point to the shootings, by humans, of wild horses. Many of these are being left to suffer an even longer lingering death, unless lucky enough to be found by the predators. Which is worse?

Finally horses are not an invasive species. It is a scientific fact that all horses, no matter what breed, originated in North America. Finds such as the 10,000-year-old Yukon horse highlight this fact.

If one studies the history of the horse and the settlement of our Alberta, one would come to respect the role that horses have played in our past. Speaking with many of the old-timers whose families settled in the foothills area, they speak of the importance that even the wild horses played in their lives. Unable to afford "fancy" horses, they caught the wild ones to use in their daily work.

At the beginning of the First World War, the army sent wranglers back into the Red Deer River area to round up hundreds of the wild horses. They were then shipped overseas to serve with our soldiers hauling equipment and artillery. None of them returned.

Instead of using the wild horses as a scapegoat for personal or financial gain or as a potential reason that the ecosystem in the foothills may be in trouble, we should honour the role they played in history and in our environment.

WHOAS maintains that the wild horses of Alberta need distinctive and better protective legislation than they currently have, in order to allow them to roam free for future generations to enjoy.

Bob Henderson  
President of the Wild Horses of Alberta Society

## Horses reclaim wild heritage

I would like to offer some comments on the “Special Report” by Mr. Clare Tannas in the Mountain View Gazette on March 2. I have researched wild horse issues in Canada, the United States, Europe and Mongolia and am well aware of the frequently emotional nature of the discussion. When reading the title “Ecology, feral horses and the West Country” I was intrigued and expected to finally come across a report that is objective, and based on facts and science rather than on prejudice, assumptions and pseudo-science. Instead I found yet another repetition of the mantra that wild horses are an alien introduced species.

Many government agencies consider wild horses as domesticated escapees and invasive species with no dollar value attached to them as either livestock or huntable wildlife. As “alien” species they must be doing what all alien species do: compete with “native wildlife” and damage “native ecosystems.” This is powerful mythology in itself and makes them a challenging cause to champion. The only scientific work ever conducted on wild horses in Alberta dates back to the 1970s and was carried out by R.E. Salter; it did not document forage or behavioural competition with either wildlife or domestic cattle. Independent and peer-reviewed research into the ecology and ethology of these animals is badly needed and provides great opportunities for up-and-coming biologists.

It must be pointed out that many scientists (paleoecologists, mammologists, range scientists) view the wild horse in North America as returned wildlife. The horse coevolved with American ecosystems over four million years, before becoming extinct 11,000 years ago, due to a combination of human overhunting and climate change. It was reintroduced by the Spanish about 500 years ago and spread throughout the Americas, in many cases reoccupying its ancient ecological niche. Despite “domestication” the modern horse *Equus caballus* is genetically equivalent to *Equus lambei*, a horse, according to fossil records, that represented the most recent *Equus* species in North America prior to extinction.

Using the 16th century as a baseline of what “natural” North American ecosystems should look like is totally arbitrary. Paleoecologist Paul Martin’s term “Columbian curtain” fittingly describes this blind spot. There is also overwhelming scientific evidence to the effect that horses did not disappear from this continent where they evolved over millions of years without the “help” of newly immigrated and very efficient stone age hunters. It is difficult if not impossible for most people to think in terms of “geological time” but this ought to be “nature’s calendar” and the time frame in which to explore the legitimacy of the horse’s ecological status in our environment. This is not Australia or New Zealand, where the horse is indeed an “alien introduced species,” its well-deserved cultural and historical status notwithstanding, nor is it a “goats on the Galapagos” scenario!

The author provides no conclusive evidence that these horses do unsustainable damage to their habitat and totally ignores ecological opportunities presented by horses.

- Where there is a greater number of species in a given ecosystem, having evolved and evolving a complementarity and a diversification of niches, there is also a healthier and more stable ecosystem, whose checks and balances are well established. The African savannah is the best example.
- From fossils we know that the grasses, forbs, shrubs, and trees of the Americas coevolved with a much greater variety of large herbivores than exist today.
- New World vegetation has evolved in the presence of herbivory by horses.
- Horses are “seeders.” Whereas cud-chewing cattle (and other ruminants such as buffalo, deer, antelope, and sheep) thoroughly masticate and destroy any seeds they may ingest, the horse does not. Its inefficient post-gastric digestion system passes grass seeds, and by “banking seeds” insures the perpetuation of its own forage, including our treasured fescue grasses.
- Due to their upper incisors, horses nip off plants above the ground, rather than ripping plants up by their roots, thus killing them (as sheep and cattle do).

- Other benefits: horse trails being used by other species; crusted snow removal by horses to access forage and water, benefitting cattle, elk, deer and antelope; removal of coarse stands of grass, reducing fire hazard and providing spring grazing for other species; providing prey for predators.

In several European countries semi-wild horses are used as ecosystem engineers, reoccupying their ancient ecological niches and in many cases boosting biodiversity. There are also potential cultural, genetic and economic (tourism!) opportunities.

I found the author's statements about the predator-prey relationship between horses and wolves totally ludicrous, and coming from a scientist, rather disconcerting. Furthermore, where is the evidence for any of his claims about the sustainability of their relationship or the lack thereof? If there are open roads to travel, all prey and predator species can take advantage of this. Wolves, capable of tackling moose, bull elk and bison, are not likely to be unduly disadvantaged by a kicking horse. In Mongolia, where I worked on a Przewalski horse reintroduction project, wolves pose the most significant challenge, even though the horses immediately developed defence strategies. I was particularly disturbed by the author's blatant resort to sensationalism. Most of us know that nature is not always gentle or pretty. The horrific deeds perpetrated by humans against these horses are more difficult to stomach than nature's cycle of life and death. Wild horses are not pets, but a species that has successfully reclaimed its wild heritage.

In this context the author's suggestion of removing the horses and replacing them with bison is particularly interesting. The IUCN report "American Bison: Status Survey and Conservation Guidelines 2010," co-authored by University of Calgary Professor Dr. Cormack Gates, is fresh off the press. It investigates the possibility of reintroducing the plains bison into the wild in Alberta, a proposition that has met with numerous challenges. Bison and horses have much in common. Just like the horse, the bison is no longer considered wildlife but classified as livestock. The only difference is the time span elapsed since their disappearance, which matters little to nature but is all important to humans.

Finally the author makes the claim that wild horse herds are constantly boosted by the recruitment of released domestic equines. Where is the evidence for this? Anyone who has spent any time with wild horses knows that released or escaped domestic animals look and act quite different from wild horses. Their acceptance by wild herds is by no means a foregone conclusion, and WHOAS has had to rescue such unfortunate creatures, who would never have survived in the wild. Furthermore, if the author's statement had any validity (which it has not) there is confusion of two different issues: the issue of wild horses, who have adapted to their environment for many generations, and the issue of "surplus horses" which is a sad testimony to our society's throw-away mentality, and which needs to be addressed not only by government, but by various sectors of the "horse industry."

The horses west of Sundre exhibit distinct characteristics. Conformation, colouring, and genetics of the animals as well as archival sources (all of which are under investigation) suggest an early origin and longtime presence in their current habitat. What they share is natural smarts and genetic diversity acquired through generations of natural selection, features no longer present in many of our domestic breeds. Management decisions for wild horses should be made based on actual observations and research findings and verifiable data, not assumptions and prejudice. We owe it to the horse's unique role in our own history and culture to acknowledge it as a biological being in its own right, not just as a servant of Man.

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## **No evidence to back CFB Suffield feral herd claim**

With regard to the article by Mr. Clare Tannas in the March 5 edition of the Mountain View Gazette (“The feral problem”), I would like to comment on his claim that the Suffield herd of feral/wild horses was removed by the military because of the “uncontrolled grazing patterns of the horses that would set up a home range and then continuously graze until damage to specific native plant communities had occurred.” The author provides no evidence for this statement of opinion, nor for his further opinion of “ecological damage done by the horses which was the primary motivating factor in their removal.” Mr Tannas did not attend any of the advisory committee’s meetings.

I was a member, the sole dissenting member, of the advisory committee that was appointed by the base commander to review the Suffield feral horse issue. I am also familiar with parts of the Suffield range. No one on that committee had any expertise whatsoever with the ecology and management of wild horses. No evidence was presented to the advisory committee of “ecological damage that would necessitate the removal of the herd” – an admission that the base later made, as did grassland ecosystem experts advising the base. I believe the horses were removed for two reasons – expediency (get rid of the problem of unfavourable news media coverage of the horses once and for all) and the dollar value of their sale. I subsequently wrote a fully documented account of the events leading to the removal of the horses (Caught in the Spin: the wild horses of CFB Suffield)) which included the deliberate corruption of the environmental review process required to assess the removal of the horses. This account is available through public libraries to anyone in Alberta who has a library card.

The author of the article in the Gazette makes the point that fescue grasses can withstand dormant season grazing quite well, but are sensitive to grazing in the period of growth occurring around April/May. Yet when Europeans first came to this region of Alberta, there were six species of ungulates that were part of the fescue grassland ecosystems and had been for centuries – bison, elk, wild horses, antelope, mule and white-tailed deer. Their grazing was not controlled and I know of no reason why they would not have grazed on fescue grasses in the spring (April/May period) if they had that opportunity. I am not aware of, and the author presents no evidence of, any early descriptions by settlers in the Foothills ranges that indicate that these ranges had been damaged by large herds of free-roaming horses. On the contrary, they mostly talked about the good grass, since they had come from overstocked ranges in the United States. See accounts by Capt. Cecil Denny, NWMP (The Law Marches West), Andy Russell (The Canadian Cowboy), Ron Lyle (Alberta Advocate, “Forest Ranger Interview”), Peter Fidler, (Journals). For example, statements that “No finer pasture could be found” and “It was ideal grazing country” are hard to reconcile with overgrazed grasslands in the Foothills region, although in mixed-grass prairie, impacts by bison and grasshoppers were evident.

Grasslands have evolved in North America under the influence of grazing by ungulates. The need to restore that influence to maintain a diversity of species native to these grasslands was recognized by CFB Suffield when the base reintroduced elk to its lands two years after the removal of the horses.

Finally, to say that the Canadian military showed courage in removing the Suffield horses is just downright silly. I have every respect for Canadian Forces’ courage, both moral and physical, as evident in Afghanistan and many other war zones (including Ottawa?) but it is not clear to me what the author thinks the military was frightened of in Suffield that they needed to display courage in a democratic country with a free press.

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