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## Ten Days in Disappointment Valley

'Culling' 77 Wild Horses From the Spring Creek Herd

**By David Glynn**

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DISAPPOINTMENT VALLEY, Aug. 30, 5:38 p.m. - The Spring Creek herd of wild horses in Disappointment Valley was scheduled to be rounded up on Monday, Aug. 20 - a herd estimated by officials at the Bureau of Land Management to number about 114 horses.

Too many horses, in the eyes of the BLM, which considers these horses' Appropriate Management Level, or AML, to be at 35 to 65 head of horses sharing the range with 125 head of cattle, December through February. A contractor had been hired and the wheels were in motion.

Because I spend a lot of time on horseback with these horses and have gotten to know the herd quite well, I wanted to arrive a few days early, to see them one last time before the gather.

### DAY ONE

My horse Buck and I trailer into the preserve on the afternoon of Saturday, Aug. 18, where I saddle up and we head out. The area is wide and open, and is cut with a system of arroyos that make straight-line travel difficult at best. The ride bears out what I already know:

This place is a high desert paradise. The colors are warm and clear; the horses are beautiful and healthy. The reservoirs are full from the monsoon rains. There is water everywhere in Spring Creek and there is lots of desert feed. Such beauty and grandeur, truly amazing - it moves the spirit, quiets the mind and softens the heart. We ride for about 12 miles, encountering about 45 horses. It seems like there are fewer foals than last month. Predation, perhaps? We head back to camp.

After the sunset, which has a summer monsoon beauty, with thunderstorms lurking in the west over Utah's Abojo mountains, the colors recede and my gaze drifts to the north. There on the top of the ridge stands, fully lit, a gas-drilling rig. It will be our silent company for the rest of the night, with its upper most light flashing a warning - a warning of what? Aircraft, certainly, but perhaps also to the horses. A warning that man's footprint is growing larger and that we are coming their way.

Ignorance can be bliss. Perhaps it is so for the horses. They do not know what the appearance of gas rigs portends, or what awaits them Aug. 20. They are so wonderfully lost in the beauty of the moment, lost in their horse-ness. I give thanks that they do not know that there are too many of us and not enough room for them and their kindred.

I am awakened by visitors in the night. Horses, very near camp, maybe 50 yards away. Buck panics and after snorting and rearing runs down the picket line, wrapping himself around the dead cedar at its end. The horses run off and I get Buck calmed down. How easy it would be to find oneself afoot and horseless. No wonder they used to hang horse thieves; in days past a man without a horse in the desert may well have been a dead man.

### DAY TWO

We leave camp at about 8 a.m. and cover about 25 to 30 miles, encountering horses scattered throughout the preserve. They all look great. We head back to camp to meet up with James Kleinert, my friend who is doing a documentary about the wild horse. James, a dedicated wild-horse advocate, is here to film the gather and get the final footage for his film, *The American Wild Horse*. The film is scheduled to screen on Capitol Hill in the LBJ Room in late September to garner support for two bills in front of Congress: HR503 and the Senate version, S.311. Both bills are attempts to reinstate the Free Roaming Horse and Burro Act of 1971, which outlawed the slaughter of wild horses and burros. Montana Senator Conrad Burns attached an amendment to the 2005 appropriation bill, passed without discussion or review and signed into law by President Bush, effectively gutting the 1971 law, that mandates the removal of all "excess" horses from public lands by any means, including slaughter.

After a good break we head back out, me on Buck and James on wheels. I head down to Spring Creek and we canter up the stream bed to intercept the two bands visible from camp. What a great ride: The shadows are growing, the footing is good and Buck is in the groove. We stay in the stream bed for mostly, popping out occasionally to keep an eye on the horses. After a couple of miles, we spot some more horses down in the flats by the stream bed. We drop back in, counting the turns to know when to ease out of the canter and into stealth mode. We drop into a walk after the fifth meander, and slip in quietly from there. As we approach the last turn, just 80 yards from the horses, a satellite stallion peers over the top of a 20 foot bank. Busted! He turns and heads to the herd.

No need for stealth now, so we move into a trot and around the bend into the heard. They see us and are on the move. We take it easy, and spend the next 30 minutes within 30 to 100 yards of the horses. Patience! We follow at a distance as they move out and meet up with another band. They run back and forth; the two bands merge briefly. A short fight between the dominant studs break out and the bands separate; the one we were with moves off and the other band lingers, then moves to water. We remain, watching until they are all out of sight. We head back to camp at a slow canter, running into a band of brothers. Five young studs we have been watching for the last couple of years, each one a different color. I give thanks.

### DAY THREE

More miles and more horses. I spend most of the morning looking for the band of paints that hang out in the far East End, find them in the distance and approach, out of sight. When I get to my marker to take a look, they are gone. Time to get back to camp. It's 10 a.m., and James leaves to pick up the rest of the film crew. I slip out of the preserve and head over to my friend Ron Knuckel's place, looking for his lost gelding on the way. He's also missing a pig, but I don't see either one. There's a lot of new fence and locked gates, so we give up and head back to the preserve. I spend the rest of the day scouting film locations and meeting the mustangers. Dave and Sue Cattoor are the owners; it's a family affair, and they prefer to be called contractors. We set up an interview for the evening.

As requested by the BLM, I move camp to outside the preserve to be out of the way of tomorrow's gather. When James and his crew show up, they set up camp and we head back in for the interview. The Cattoors are one of only two outfits doing this kind of work for the BLM. It's hard work, and they've been doing it since 1971. As a matter of fact, Dave, 65, has been mustang-ing since he was 12 years old.

The interview goes well; the Cattoors are relaxed and open as they explain their work, their beliefs, why they use a helicopter for their gathers and how, if done correctly, it is less stressful for the horses than a gather on horseback. The Cattoors believe too much money is being spent maintaining wild horses that are removed from the range and placed in sanctuaries (currently more than 30,000 wild horses are living out their lives on these sanctuaries) and that efforts at fertility control (such as the contraceptive porcine zona pellucida, or PZP) don't work. They are strong advocates of killing, in their words "a humane way to dispose of excess horses," and support the Burns Amendment.

We stay for some storytelling, then head back to camp.

We have grown to respect these people and their work ethic, but something does not sit well. Humane slaughter is too often an oxymoron. We have seen the video.

### DAY FOUR

We cannot access the preserve on horseback; the gather inside has been put off for a day as they round up six horses on the outside. We spend the day outside the preserve riding and exploring new terrain. James's crew finalize camera positions and prepare for tomorrow. We meet many more people here for the gather – photographers and media personnel, many advocates of the Spring Creek herd who have worked tirelessly over the years with the BLM to improve range conditions here. Because of them, the herd is still here. We ask for and get another interview with the Cattoors. The interview goes well again, with better lighting, backdrop and sound. The answers are the same. It also comes out that they wish the public would let the BLM do its job and manage the horses how it sees fit and that if ranchers were allowed to manage the herds, it would be even better, because it would be cheaper and cut through all the bureaucracy. Even though their arguments are compelling, there is the feeling that that something is being overlooked. Something is forgotten. We break camp and spend the night at Ron's cabin to recharge all the batteries and go over all the gear. Buck is given free roam of the yard; the pig shows up in the middle of the night and causes a ruckus. Buck doesn't like pigs but he got used to him. Another one of Ron's horses shows up about 2 a.m. and is exciting Buck to the point I'm afraid he's going to jump the fence, so I tie him to the trailer and bed down in the truck, where I can keep an eye on things. I can't imagine what kind of a nightmare a snorting rooting pig could bring on as it rouses me from the dead of sleep; lying in the truck, I'm wishing I was under the stars until a skunk walks by and all of a sudden, the truck is a pretty good place to be.

## DAY FIVE

Up at 5 a.m., we head back up to the preserve. Buck stays behind, loose in the yard. No sign of the pig. The rest of the crew heads into their locations; I'm stationed outside the fence and won't see them for the rest of the gather. I set up on top of the horse trailer for the first part of the morning, then move down the fence to a high spot for the rest of the day. We all get good footage, and theirs is superb. I recognize many of the bands as they come in. The excitement, however, is tempered by the knowledge that life for most of these horses is over as they know it. Some horses make an escape and the pilot has to give up on them or risk losing the others. We are always rooting for the horses. The band of paints is one of the last to come in. They're tired and wet but in good shape. What a good-looking bunch. Their pilot is good – never seems to stress them unduly. The last group in was the band of brothers, minus one. Yes! The sorrel got away. Fifty-nine horses are gathered. They are sorted according to age and sex.

## DAY SIX

The gather continues. One horse jumps over the wing fence of the trap and others follow. Their freedom is short-lived after the contractors mount up and bring them back. Twenty-eight more horses brought in, for a total of 87.

## DAY SEVEN

Ten of the 87 horses are selected for release. Five are mares and are treated with PZP, which will not affect the foals they may be carrying. Four are stallions and the other is a weaned paint foal. The other 77 horses are removed from the herd; 32 of them will be auctioned in Cortez. None are over the age of 3; they're all nice-looking with good temperaments – good candidates for adoption. The remaining 45 will go to Canon City's prison program. They are all freeze-branded and vetted; the stallions gelded.

## DAY EIGHT

The gentling clinic starts at 10 a.m. with trainer James Morgan from Bennett, Colo., who works with three different horses – two geldings and a mare, one at a time.

The horses go from trying to climb out of the 40-foot round pen to being gentled to the point that Morgan can touch and then halter them in about three hours. His patience, technique and attitude are phenomenal. Anyone wanting to work with horses like these should attend a clinic like his. He stresses patience and not having inflexible goals, so as to not open the door for disappointment. "Get with the horse so that the horse can get with you," he emphasizes. He uses a coiled lariat as his main training aid. "Don't be in a hurry," he says as he works the horse patiently. His technique can be like watching paint dry, but it gets the job done – and produces a willing partner and friend from a once wild horse. He grants James an interview at the end of the clinic. It will help tell the whole story of the wild horse.

## DAY NINE

The silent auction runs from 10 to 11 a.m. The horses look good but uncomfortable – no-one can get even close to touching one. It shows the importance of the previous day's clinic, Patience, patience! I spot a young gray stud from the band of brothers. He's a gelding now.

Eighteen of the 32 – the gray among them – find new homes with people who are excited to work with these wonderful horses. Good luck to them all, on both ends of the lead rope. The rest will head to Canon City. In the evening it's back to Disappointment Valley. A nice night under a nearly full moon. A couple hour moonlight ride before bed. No horses running by camp.

DAY TEN In the saddle by 7 a.m. A lot of ground to cover hoping to find what's left of the herd. The herd has gone from 114 to 37 horses. Disappointment Valley has been my favorite place to ride because there is nothing like hooking up with a band of wild horses and having them let you move along with them. It feels empty here now. The herd has been decimated.

After an hour I find a band of five. They are nervous, and dart around a group of trees, spooking at something but not us. We move in through an arroyo, hidden as we approach. At a hundred yards we lose our cover, but move in slowly. They spot us and move away, but they're not panicky. We do not follow.

We move on and after awhile come by a lone stallion who seems curious, but keeps us out over a hundred yards and stays with us as we move. After 15 minutes he loses interest and leaves. He's the sorrel from the band of brothers. It's good to see him, but sad to know that his four companions are gone.

We move on. No more horses for quite some time. Then we see what I think is Phantom (a beautiful gray stallion

we named earlier in the summer) and his band, down to seven from 13. The foals are gone. They run away, but Phantom stops and turns, from time to time, protecting what remains of his band. Standing proud and snorting his defiance with nostrils flared and tail raised. It's good to see him free.

We move on in a different direction after Phantom takes his band away at a gallop, and next find a group of three studs – they're are new to me. Off they go, no stopping, taking no chances at capture. We watch them go.

We move on, settling into a nice canter to cover more ground as the morning disappears. We round a corner in the terrain and I see movement to the left. A band of three darts out from somewhere. They run at a full gallop broadside to us at 40 yards. A big buckskin with a beautiful paint and a paint foal, both black and white. We pull up and let them have their escape. They are magnificent. We see no more horses. We have seen 19 of the estimated 37. On the way back to the trailer we see vultures circling low, but never find what's drawing their attention.

My heart is hanging on the ground as we ease our way back to the trailer. Yes, there were still horses, but not many. The memory of those now gone haunt me as we moved along. That which did not set well with us after the interviews with the Cattoors has come into focus: It's our debt to the horse.

Those who advocate the removal of wild horses and the killing of "excess" wild horses have something in common: Their bottom line is money. That's the underlying economics behind the reasoning that we cannot afford to care for these horses. The money should be better spent elsewhere.

Many wild horse advocates have come to realize that the issue involves a deeper economics, however, and it's this simple: We owe the horse! Where would we be without the horse? Horses have carried us through history. We owe them an enormous debt. Without them, we would be thousands of years removed from the present – and we would certainly be afoot.

What are those thousands of years of advancement worth?

We have a debt to pay and our failure or refusal to pay this debt would be an indictment against our society and culture. At the very least, our debt includes whatever it takes to keep these magnificent animals off of the killing floor. We are morally obligated to keep them from meeting such an unholy end.

If you are moved by the plight of the wild horse, please contact your state representatives and ask them to support bills H.R.503 and the S.311

David Glynn has worked with filmmaker James Kleinert on the upcoming documentary, Save the Wild Horse. For more information, or to donate to the project, contact [jameskleinert@mac.com](mailto:jameskleinert@mac.com).