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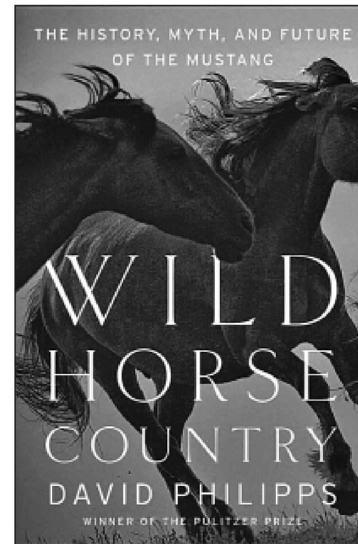
Book Review

Wild Horse Country: The History, Myth, and Future of the Mustang

by David Philipps
2017, W.W. Norton & Company
New York, New York
316 pages



Review by Seth Dettenmaier

As a teenager growing up in the West, my literary diet often included the works of the popular American storyteller, Louis L'Amour. Contained in many of these popular Western novels was the myth and legend of the cowboy and his ever faithful companion and American icon, the horse (*Equus* spp.). There is perhaps no animal that better symbolizes the wildness, freedom, and independence of the West than does the wild horse (*Equus ferus caballus*). However, despite its legendary fame, it remains without a doubt one of the most controversial animals to occupy these arid lands. In his latest book, *Wild Horse Country*, Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter David Philipps guides us through the intricate controversy and history of wild horses in the West.

To get a sense of the importance that the wild horse has played in American history, one must only refer to their current federal protection. On only 2 occasions in the history of our nation has the U.S. Congress passed laws specifically protecting a species: the bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) in 1940, and second, the wild horse in 1971. However, not all Americans agree with these protections. We learn from Philipps's account that American views of wild horses are quite polarized and include those who revere it as a symbol and icon of the West that should be protected and others who consider it a destructive and invasive pest.

The history of horses in the West is long and controversial, and Philipps takes great effort to ensure it is told in its entirety. As a counter to what he describes as the often expressed criticism from the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), ranchers, and some conservationists that horses are introduced, the author begins with a visit to paleontologists in the Bighorn Basin. It is here that the story of horses on the North American continent unfolds over millions of years. It ends abruptly when horses suddenly disappear from the fossil record around the same time that effective hunting tools, specifically the Clovis spear point, is found. While not addressed within the book, scientists still debate the proximate cause of the disappearance of megafauna (e.g., mastodon [*Mammut*], giant ground sloth [*Megatherium*], etc.) in North America. Regardless of the cause, Philipps makes the claim that the disappearance and subsequent reintroduction of horses in the West is comparable to that of populations of elk (*Cervus canadensis*), bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis*), buffalo (*Bison bison*), mountain goats (*Oreamnos americanus*), condors (*Gymnogyps californianus*), and falcons (*Falco peregrinus*). To further that point, he highlights how these ecosystems remain relatively unchanged from the time when horses and grasses coevolved, and he argues that the West is still well suited for wild horses. Unfortunately for the wild horse, their life history and adaptation to these Western ecosystems might ultimately be their downfall as their ability to adapt and capitalize on limited resources allow them to outcompete livestock for limited forage.

Philipps spends a considerable portion of the book covering the management and subsequent treatment of wild horses. While the myth of the

Western novels and movies portray the cowboy and the wild horse as faithful partners, Philipps explains that "they were often adversaries." During the early settlement of the West, wild horse numbers were estimated from several hundred thousand to 6 million. At these large population sizes, Philipps states that the wild horse was soon considered a pest by ranchers and cowboys who would kill them with "wanton abandon." Ranchers even began to take up collections to pay bounties for wild horses and hired professionals to track and kill any horses they found. The problem was considered so severe in Nevada that ranchers lobbied the federal government to enlist the help of the U.S. Army, requesting they spend 60 days of each year in an attempt to exterminate wild horses from the state. Nevada's own response to the management of wild horses was to pass a law in 1893 allowing anyone to shoot mustangs on sight.

Despite the sustained efforts of some to exterminate the wild horse, it wasn't until the turn of the twentieth century that they faced true annihilation. It was at this time that meat factories began to spring up across the country. These were often located near rail lines that extended deep into wild horse country. Many of these factories would process hundreds of horses in a single day. A journalist in 1928 reported on a single effort in New Mexico where thousands of horses were rounded up and driven to a fertilizer plant in El Paso, Texas. As these meat factories began incentivizing ranchers to round up more and more horses, their populations began to plummet. By 1950, the Department of the Interior estimated that only 20,000 individuals remained and could only be found on the harshest parts of the range.

It was also in the spring of 1950 that Velma Bronn Johnston, often referred to as Wild Horse Annie, became a wild horse advocate. It was in large part her efforts that galvanized support for the protection of wild horses in the latter half of the century and eventually led to the Wild Horse and Burro Act of 1971. This law resulted in the development of the BLM's own Wild Horse and Burro Program. Since that time, as Philipps acknowledges and writes about extensively in the book, the BLM has found itself sinking in the quagmire of its highly contentious and at times corrupt program. In 2012, it was Philipps's questioning of that program that led then Secretary of the Interior, Ken Salazar, to threaten Philipps, saying, "You know what, you do that again...I'll punch you out."

Philipps argues that continuing with the status quo of wild horse management is guaranteed to lead to an even bleaker future for wild horses in the West. When we account for the growing financial burden of the Wild Horse and Burro Program on the taxpayer ($77 million in FY15), the ecological damage caused on areas of the range from unchecked populations of wild horses, and the need to consider the intrinsic values these horses hold to many Americans, there appear to be few acceptable options that satisfy those involved.

This does not stop Philipps from concluding the book by offering his own unique solution to the issue of wild horse management: the encouragement of a native predator, specifically mountain lions (*Puma concolor*). This is likely a case where the treatment is as controversial as the problem it is designed to solve. It is fair to say that while Philipps's own suggestion may stoke the fire of some readers, he readily accepts the limitations faced by such a polarizing suggestion. If nothing else, his novel solution provides the perfect segue for the next book. *Cougar Country*, anyone?

Despite the author's controversial solution to wild horse management, what I found of greatest value in *Wild Horse Country* was Philipps's ability to dissect a complex issue while allowing the reader to evaluate the issue from other perspectives. All too often, we allow ourselves to be blinded by our own beliefs and perceptions while losing sight of the complex reality surrounding the management of species. Philipps helps us to remove these blinders, if only for a page or two, and asks us to see the issues of wild horse management from an objective, historical, and ecological standpoint, while considering the values and opinions of others.

Seth Dettenmaier is a wildlife ecology doctoral candidate at Utah State University. His current research focus is on the effects of livestock grazing on greater sage-grouse populations. He is passionate about using science and collaboration as guides for wildlife conservation.