

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

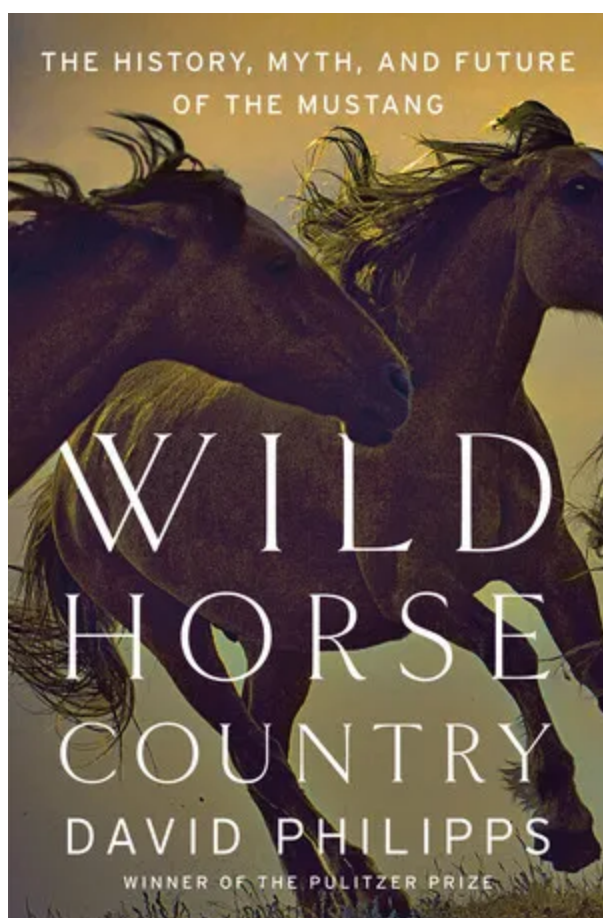
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David Philipps

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Wild Horse Country is both moving and utterly depressing. David Philipps traces the history of the mustang from the Dawn Horse to its re-introduction millions of years later to the plains of central North America. He also describes the plight of the wild mustang today, when we have far more of them than the environment can support. Philipps begins with a raw account of a herd of wild horses rounded up by Bureau of Land Management (BLM) rangers and loaded into trailers, with foals ripped from their mothers and family bonds broken. If no one adopts the horses, they are kept for the rest of their lives in “holding” areas, stored away at significant public expense. They are protected by Congress in the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act, but no one has been able to figure out what to do with them.

The government, along with ranchers and big-game managers, considers the wild horse to be “escaped livestock that are now

infesting the native ecosystem like too much kudzu.” They are labeled “not native” because they did not occupy North America immediately before Columbus arrived. But the ancestors of the modern horse were in North America during the Eocene, roughly 55 million years ago. If you happened to watch *Equus, Story of the Horse*, on the recent PBS episode of Nature, you saw the re-envisioned Dawn Horses, *Hyracotherium*. They were about the size of a large rabbit, and they were social animals, with harems of females and a dominant male.

Horses continued to evolve in North America for millions of years. They learned to eat grass and occupied the Great Plains. And, they were finally hunted to extinction by Clovis people about 10,000 years ago. Does that make the horse a native of North America?

Horses, of course, came back from extinction, courtesy of the Spanish Conquistadores. Spanish settlers brought goats, sheep, cattle, and horses in the 1500s. Three centuries later, the horse numbers were likely in the millions. Horses changed the history of the West. Native tribes coveted horses, which enabled them to change their way of life and dominate the plains. The age of the Horse Nations would last for two hundred years as the tribes succeeded in harnessing the buffalo and dominating the Great Plains.

The native tribes were defeated by the new settlers. Their horses were no longer needed to support an entire population and culture. But there were millions of them, perfect to support a new industry in horse-meat. By the 1940s, there were almost no mustangs left. Philipps describes in detail how the wild mustangs were rounded up and turned into dog food. By 2007, he reports that the last of the slaughterhouses were closed by Congress under pressure from horse welfare groups. Well-meaning citizens helped save the wild horses while creating a wild-horse mythology.

The most disturbing part of Philipps' story describes what has happened to the wild horses. Their numbers have grown so significantly that they can no longer maintain the health of the herds. The ranchers don't want them to compete for grass with their cattle. And there isn't enough open land to sustain their numbers. We frequently get reports about herds dying from the drought that is now plaguing the west. The BLM is responsible for rounding them up and storing them away, although some apparently still are sent in secret to slaughterhouses. The others are kept until they die, many times faster than they should. What should be a humane practice, argues Philipps, is not. He explores ways in which conservation groups are hoping to decrease the wild-horse numbers in humane ways. Lots of good people at the BLM, however, are looking for solutions to the problem, not trying to sweep it away.

Philipps' account of the current plight of the wild horses is discouraging to read. But it does make the reader aware of the need to do something besides roundups and incarceration. In fact, the best solution that Philipps reports is one the Colorado Audubon Chapters have worked to promote, the mountain lion. Unfortunately, Colorado seems more intent on killing mountain lions in a vain attempt to increase deer herd numbers. Mountain lions, Philipps reports, can keep wild horse herds in check so that they thrive rather than destroy their environment and themselves.

I recommend *Wild Horse Country*. It's a fascinating if disturbing account. We love to see the horses when we encounter them in the wild, but we realize that we need to understand the best approaches for helping them thrive.

