Still Life with Wild Horses

The hours when the mind is absorbed by beauty are the only hours when we really live. RICHARD JEFFRIES

For years I have heard legends about the number of wild horses in the east half of the Red Desert. Those myths propelled me into the arid, south central region of Wyoming. I drove in great, arching loops on dirt and gravel roads, using my binoculars to scan the horizon. Small bands of horses appeared on my standard route, but in spite of my efforts, years passed without a sighting of the herds described by Bureau of Land Management (BLM) officials and the mustang advocates I know. I studied maps and took the advice that people gave me, but my searches ended without any notable success. I grew suspicious. I would even say that I turned into a skeptic. Then I bought a copy of *Tracking and the Art of Seeing* by Paul Rezendes, and decided to do more than drive around in circles with binoculars.

Last spring, I loaded a backpack in the car with the intent to hike down into the troughs that rumple the desert. With my boots on the backseat, I set out to explore the region.

...

I leave the pavement, and civilization, fifteen miles north of Rawlins. I look into the distance like I always do, but this time I change my approach. I pay attention to the dirt. The earth offers signs of wild horses – old hoof prints, windblown and weathered. I stop to take a closer look. *In Tracking and the Art of Seeing*, Rezendes describes how the process of tracking opens a window onto the lives of animals. A good tracker reads signs the way that we read books. In fact, before the advent of paper and ink, landscapes and animal signs were the first things that our ancestors made an attempt to read.

It appears that a band of three horses spent several moments walking down the side of the road. They meandered, maybe nudging each other. At the bottom of a draw they left the gravel. They were likely coaxed by the green grass, thriving in the shade where rain collects. I discover a row of grasses that appear to have been eaten, but I begin to lose the hoof prints in the foliage.

In *Being a Beast*, Charles Foster suggests, "Animals are rolling conversations with the land from which they come and from which they exist." He is right, of course, but it's a quiet conversation. Messages remain after animals make their way through a setting, but they're not the kind of messages that we usually take time to interpret. We live in cities and neighborhoods. Actually, we live inside our heads, and in our minds we find ourselves preoccupied in a world of concepts and abstractions. Ours is a world of words. When we look at a piece of undeveloped land, our brains say, "forest" or "desert" or "prairie." That is often where the conversation ends. Wallace Stevens once explained, "We live in descriptions of places, as opposed to the places themselves."

By Chad Hanson, PhD

HorseWorks
Insurance Specialists, LLC
HorseWorks Insurance Specialists
Morality | Major Medical Liability | Farms
(877) 636•8114
Fax: (866) 877•0921
HorseWorksInsurance.com
HorseWorks Handles It

Wilker's
Custom Horse Products
MADE IN U. S. A.
Memory Foam Half Pad
Look for our products at your local tack shop or shop online at Shop.Wilkers.com.
Use coupon code SHOP at checkout to get 10% off your order.
Wilkers.com 800-942-1275
Follow us on Instagram and Twitter @WilkersHorse

We carve the world into categories. We define every piece of our habitat, and most of the time we make good use of those definitions. They help us to navigate, but the categories we create also limit our ability to see nuance or details. They limit our ability to see. When we write off a stretch of prairie as, "grassland," for example, that makes it hard to pay attention to subtle features – the texture of the terrain. It's even harder for us to imagine the life or vision of the animals that move throughout a place.

A good tracker thinks like a beast. That begs a question, however. How do animals think? At some point, during the process of evolution, we retreated into our minds, but animals live in their bodies. We gained an awful lot as our brains spun off into words, and math, and science, and technology. But we lost something, too. Good tracking demands that you suspend the narrative unfurling in your mind, and return to the raw input that we take in through the senses. This project is not unique. Buddhists have been disparaging words, quieting their minds, and doing their best to live-in-the-moment for centuries. Jesuit monks do the same thing. It's typical for monks to take a vow of silence, for at least a portion of their lives. The assumption is – if you dispense with words – then it is possible to commune with creation in her own language.

Quietude.

I am doing my best to try to imagine what the horses that I'm tracking saw in this ravine. I attempt to picture how they felt. I try to predict where they could have been drawn, but the number of horse-bitten blades of grass start to run out, and eventually I lose the direction of the band in a tangle of sage.

Back at the car, I begin to ease down the dirt road again. I find more hoof prints, but wind and rain have made the signs a challenge to read. I also see horse dung on the road, but it's easy to tell that it has been there for a month. The dung is encouraging, however. The Colorado-based mustang advocate, Ginger Kathrens, coined a phrase that my wife Lynn and I like to repeat when we're looking for wild horses: "Where there's poop – there's hope."

Further on, a faint and seldom-used Jeep trail intersects the road I'm driving, and at the confluence of the two paths, I find what looks like the mother of all manure piles. Three feet high and four feet wide, it's what you could call a meta-pile. Wild horses use them as a means to communication with others – friends and enemies alike. They build mileposts and send messages by leaving dung in meaningful places. This pile has existed for years. By its size, it appears that a dozen mustangs made contributions.

We live in a world of words, but horses live in a world of aromas. Wild stallions passing by this marker dip their noses to the pile. They analyze the specimens. From a whiff of a meta-pile, a horse can tell who left samples. They can also tell how long it's been since their friends and competitors were there. In other words, horses smell time.

When two mustangs meet, they hold their faces together. That gives each animal a chance to breath air into the nose of the other. The breath of the new acquaintance is recorded as a memory. Horses come to know and remember one another by the smell of the air that leaves their bodies. They experience each other, and their habitat, differently than us. When human beings dream, for example, we tend to dream in stories made up of pictures and narratives. What do horses dream? I suspect when horses go to sleep they drift off into a vortex of aromas.

We can assume their thoughts and memories are different than ours, but we also share some similarities. For example, mustangs value freedom and they love their families. In the era when the wild horses of the West numbered in the millions, Mexican caballeros were hired to round them up for sale as stock in the Southwest. Then, as now, the act of taking mustangs from their homes and families presented challenges. Horses injured themselves in the fight. In the process of being taken into custody, some died as a result of broken legs or necks. In some cases, however, the men hired to round up mustangs described stallions dying, not of physical injuries, but of broken hearts. The old Mexican cowboys called it, *sentimiento*. The stallions became distraught because they missed their mares. What was it that killed them, then? A yearning for the smell of a lover? The thought of a future where they couldn't share the same breath anymore?

• • •

I assume that the meta-pile, placed at the confluence of two dirt roads, serves as a sign. It's a message: "We came this way." A countless number of prints pock the Jeep path leading to the north of the road I'm on, so I turn the car onto the two-track trail. After a mile of slow-motion bobbing down the trail, I see the reason for the meta-pile and the prevalence of horse hoof prints – a spring.

The BLM allows agribusinesses to maintain solar-powered water troughs in key places throughout the Red Desert. In most cases, a pump keeps a trickle of water pouring into a vessel, often a tractor tire, for most of the year. Livestock are the reason that they keep the water flowing in dry country, but horses, antelope, and herds of desert elk also partake.

This watering hole is no exception. Cow dung surrounds the spring, along with a host of animal signs baked into the soil. In between the hoof prints of cattle, I see evidence that horses moved off further to the north after a drink. The two-track path that I've been driving continues in the same direction, but the quality of the road changes. Sagebrush has grown tall on the hump between the tracks. The road also appears to have been washed out at the bottom of a draw. My Subaru Outback is an excellent vehicle, but there are certain limits. It's a station wagon, not a monster truck.

With a pack full of food, water, and extra clothes, I start to hike the road. Hoof prints lead down into a gully that sees intermittent flows. When I make it to the top of a second rise, the terrain opens up into a wide, bowl-like valley circled by hills with wild horses – more than I have ever seen in one setting.

Gardnertown Farm Horse Show
822 Gardnertown Farm Rd. Newburgh, New York 12550
Rated
Dec. 8 IEA
Dec. 13-15 "A"
Dec. 20-22 "A"
Jan. 10-12 "A"
Jan. 18 IEA
Feb. 7-9 "A"
Feb. 16 IEA Regionals 5
Mar. 13-15 "A"
Schooling
Jan. 26 WHVPHA Schooling Show
Mar. 7 Schooling/ Hunter Derby
For more information call:
(845) 564-6658
GARDNERTOWN FARM
EST. 1979
822 Gardnertown Farm Rd.
Newburgh, New York 12550
Two indoor arenas, lessons, and indoor arena polo
VISIT US AT:
www.gardnertownfarm.com

FLUFF monkey®
join the obsession!
fluffmonkey.com

I don't take time to count, but it appears that there are more than a hundred mustangs within view. A dozen bands of between six and ten horses graze the forage in the basin. For three years prior, I had driven in circles around this area. Mostly, I'd stuck to the BLM's official map and "scenic horse tour." I'd never seen more than a handful of animals. During that time, I had questioned the government, and even other horse enthusiasts, about the presence of large numbers of mustangs in the east half of the Red Desert. As it turns out, the horses found a place where they could live in peace, surrounded by roads, but never seen by anybody passing through.

Looking down onto the horses from the ridge, I am struck by a familiar feeling. For most people, wild creatures hold an allure. When we see an animal, the sight often yields emotion, but the sentiments differ according to the species. Bugs make us feel curious, for example. What is it like to be so small? The sight of a wolf nearly always produces a sense of respect, and sometimes fear. Bison impress us as stately. They have a calming effect on people, just as long as they don't charge. Fish seem like enigmas because they live in a mysterious element.

When it comes to wild horses, I think it's the beauty that strikes us most. But horses possess more than prettiness. The appearance of a mustang on the landscape in the West can be beautiful, of course. But it is more. The spectacle of wild horses surrounded by scenes of rugged topography can produce a sense of reverence so strong, it feels a little unnerving.

I crouch at the top of the ridge. None of the horses have seen me yet, but I'll need to make my presence known. It's no good to try to sneak up on horses. If they find you creeping around, they assume that you harbor ill motives. When I stand up, two of the bands take notice of my silhouette. I appear out of place on terrain without any trees. Worse, I look like a predator. My two eyes are set together, right in the front of my face, just like a cat. Our bodies evolved to help us focus on the prey in front of us during a chase.

Bands of mustangs differ when it comes to what we call their "flight distance." That is, the distance they allow a threat to approach before they flee. Some bands of wild horses run when they see a vehicle, half a mile in the distance. Others will hold a hundred yards between themselves and anyone or anything that they don't know, but horses that see people regularly without incident will sometimes allow you within forty or even thirty feet of space – just a bit farther than a mountain lion can jump.

In the wild, mustangs depend on their families, the wisdom of mares in particular, to find food and water and to elude danger. When I begin to walk downhill toward the bottom of the basin, two bands leave immediately. One saunters away over the crest of a hill, led by their matriarch. Another makes a swift move to the other side of the valley.

We removed most of the threats to herbivores on the prairies and deserts of the West. We exterminated the wolves and we drove grizzlies into the mountains to ensure that agribusinesses suffer no losses due to predation, but wild horses still run from the long-gone ghosts of predators.

• • •

The first time I saw a band of mustangs, I grabbed for my camera. As a species, human beings are attuned to aesthetics. When we see something that pleases our eye, the first thing we do is: we stare. Once we've made a mental archive of a sight we like, then it is ours to recall, over and over. Beauty demands replication.

When we are young, teachers and parents give us art supplies. We're taught to ogle things we like and reproduce them on paper. Later on, in adolescence, our culture conspires to convince us that we are "not creative," so we abandon our sketchbooks. But there are few occasions where technology is not appropriate in our society, so we carry cameras – now more than ever.

Down the hill I go, slowly, making my way toward the band of horses that stands nearest to me. It's a family of four mustangs: a stallion, two mares, and a yearling. All of them watch me. My presence gives them a reason to stop eating, but they're not bothered enough to leave. As I approach, the stallion moves to the front of the group to serve as guard, and that is my signal. I stop where I am, and while I'm still, I take a knee and focus my lens.

When male horses become band stallions they go through a transformation. Their bodies release testosterone to correspond with their responsibilities. The chests and hindquarters of stallions grow heavy with muscle, their faces develop a chiseled appearance and their jowls become prominent. I make a subtle move to the left, and then the right. I try to capture the family in a single image, but the stallion won't let me have a shot of his whole band. He keeps himself between me and them, so I decide to just sit down. It's a nice day. I have three liters of water and plenty of food. I can afford to wait.

After ten minutes, the horses start to relax. They go back to eating. I join them by nibbling on a granola bar. Eventually, the stallion drifts off to the side, away from the mares, but they're all focused on the grass in front of them. After twenty minutes, the yearling looks up and walks over to her father. When she reaches him, he lifts his head. With a nod, he rubs his cheek on hers to let her know that everything is fine, even in spite of the human tucked in the grass, crunching on a granola bar. *Click. Click.* My shutter clacks.

• • •

The horses hear the motorbike before I can. It's faint. The stallion I'm watching turns his ears toward the west, and the lead mare in the band starts to head for the opposite side of the basin. The stallion takes her cue. The other bands in the valley watch them move and it starts to make them uneasy. By this point, I hear the distant buzz of the dirt bike, and all the horses hear it, too. Some of the bands take action sooner than others, but after three minutes' worth of commotion, I find myself alone in the basin.

I gather my things and while I'm walking back, I notice a high point on the opposite side of the valley that looks like it might afford me a view to the west. It's getting late, but not too late.

On the climb up, I find signs that horses have been there: hoof prints and partially-eaten tufts of grass. I follow the tracks to the top, where my suspicion is confirmed. The high point on the hill offers a vantage point. The sun fills the valley below with late-afternoon light. I don't see any horses from where I stand, but tracks lead downhill

to the west. I follow them as far as I can with my eyes, and it appears that they lead to a set of rock formations, a third of the way down the ridge, on a terrace with an overlook.

I follow the tracks to a spot where boulders the size of mini-vans jut through the sage and the cactus. For a stretch of fifty yards, at least somewhat in a circle, every ten feet or so a boulder stands up like a pillar. It feels like I am looking at the top of an old fortress, buried eons ago under a sea of soil.

Among the rocks I find traces of horsehair clung to a rock at shoulder height – a spot where a mustang rubbed an itchy neck. Hoof prints whorl in circles on the ground as bands of horses once arranged themselves for grooming or to swat flies with their tails. Sharp changes in the direction of the prints mark a skirmish.

I also find a place in between rocks where horses rolled in the soft sand. All the signs suggest that wild horses find meaning in these ramparts of stone.

It starts to feel like I am standing in the middle of a place that amounts to something like a wild horse version of Easter Island or Stonehenge. Or, maybe it's a church. In any case – a location of substance. It's a place that mustangs hold in their memories, somewhere that they return to, a place where they roll and fight and mate and scratch their necks and groom each other. Horses don't paint pictures. They are not as visual as us. They live in a world of aromas. When they want to mark a location as significant, they leave mounds of manure. The piles contain a message: "We were here."

• • •

I sit at the base of a rock and wait. The site affords me a long view of the Red Desert. The growing shadows of early evening reveal textures on a landscape that can look vast and menacing in the middle of the day. Edward Abbey once wrote, with respect to our dry regions: "The desert lies there like the bare skeleton of being… inviting not love but contemplation."

Abbey was right about deserts and contemplation. You have to be careful, though. My experience has been, in the dry parts of our world, we walk a fine line between the reverie of solitude and something that can become ominous. Like wild horses themselves, the places where they live are more than just beautiful, they are sublime, and sublimity has a sharp edge. Deserts are pretty, but they're more.

They are foreboding. With small amounts of water, they protect privileged forms of life, but they also surround you with a geography of thirst, an unceasing reminder of your own mortality.

• • •

It's a fully formed and wholly uneaten bunch of blue grama grass that pulls me out of my ruminations. I attempt to decide if it is blue or green and I determine it is both. Right here in the middle of the Red Desert, this spiky tuft is blue and green. This unlikely plant makes me think about a passage from the work of the desert naturalist, Joseph Wood Krutch:

"Of all the green things that make up what Goethe called 'the living garment of God,' grass is the humblest, the most nearly omnipresent, and the most stupidly taken for granted… a miracle so common that we no longer regard it as miraculous."

The evening sun casts a revealing light on the blades of grass in front of me, so I crouch down and make an image, and then another. The scene strikes me as picturesque. Not just the plant necessarily, but the moment.

Time has an aesthetic. The occasion I am in feels similar to those instances when you find yourself looking at a bundle of cut flowers, or out the window of the kitchen at the last snowfall in April – there, but in a sense, already gone. I continue to follow hoof tracks on my way back to the car: evidence of horses, still enchanting, even after they've set off for something else. ■

Chad Hanson is Chairman of the Department of Social & Cultural Studies at Casper College, and he also serves as President of the Wyoming Mustang Institute. When he isn't teaching or writing he wanders the prairie making photographs. For more information on the wild horses of Wyoming, visit: wyomustangs.org. Or, follow Chad and his wife Lynn on Instagram: @wildhorses.wildplaces.

The inaugural $2500 Equestrian Voices Creative Writing Contest celebrated stories written by and for horse lovers from all over the world. We were inundated with amazing narratives about triumph, loss and the deep emotional experience that is being with an amazing horse. To learn more about the 2020 contest, visit theplaidhorse.com/write.

All photos © Chad Hanson.