

Wild Horses

Supporters want science and studies

By Pam Asheton
Special to the Times

Silkscreen artist Norene Proctor telephoned Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) one January afternoon in hopes of rallying support after hearing allegations of a possible cull of wild horses west of Sundre. She was told that AWA was one of 15 stakeholders invited by Alberta Environment and Sustainable Resource Development (ESRD) to sit on their consult committee regarding 'Alberta's Feral Horses, Managing Populations.'

AWA spokeswoman Carolyn Campbell confirmed AWA - as do many wildlife groups - regard horses as "an introduced species", where the association would lean towards "a thorough study of habitat" noting their reason for sitting on the committee was to voice a strong opinion, to advocate "sound scientific research...and what impacts the feral horses may be having on the native flora and fauna of the South Eastern Slopes which is a highly sensitive and valued ecosystem."

AWA Director Vivien Pharis, an accomplished horsewoman with backcountry packing skills, said, "The problems are that few in Alberta have the skills to become permitted to capture, it is not a lucrative business and few people want to adopt feral horses so most go to slaughter."

Nikki Booth, Issues Manager for ESRD, answered telephone questions last Friday. She expressed surprise on being asked about the defacto assumption of feral horses to slaughterhouse destinations. Booth emphasized the sales of these animals to trainers and riders for pack and mountain trail and recreational horses.

"We don't track the statistics," she remarked, "We work closely with the permit holders, who anecdotally tell us they have buyers, the majority are not going for slaughter."

Last weekend Dr Sandie Hucal, of Free Spirit Sanctuary, was informed by an equine transportation specialist that three mares from Sundre capture pens had indeed gone south for 'processing' to the Bouvry slaughterhouse facility at Fort MacLeod, a fact independently confirmed by ESRD's Rob Kessler. Dr Hucal had had extensive newspaper coverage in central Alberta and online social media sites, saying she would undertake to home either in-foal or pregnant 'capture' mares and was on a waiting list for taking on 'wildies'.

Justin Bradley is one of two permit holders for the Sundre capture pens, and general manager for the Red Deer River Ranch. Bradley also sat on the steering committee that developed the consultation report for 'Alberta's Feral Horses, Managing Populations' (chaired by ESRD's Helen Newsham).

The Alberta Equestrian Federation and Alberta Horse Welfare Alliance of Canada



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF DUANE STARR

Illustrators, writers, photographers are lining up with artistic and educational ideas for wild horses.



were represented by Bill desBarres. "The role of the AEF is to get others to think about options and to educate the population about what they can do to help," remarked AEF President Les Oakes.

Another stakeholder is Alberta Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, although that was disputed in a statement by Roland Lines, the SPCA's Communication Director, earlier last week in an interview with Leduc Wetaskawin Pipestone Flyer, a local newspaper, where he remarked,

"Despite what has been reported in some media stories and on the ESRD website, the Alberta SPCA is not a member of the Feral Horse Advisory Committee. The Alberta SPCA had no role in the committee's recommendation for a 2013/14 capture program."

The horse capture program is operated under the Horse Capture Regulation, which is attached to the Stray Animals Act. Alberta SPCA peace officers do not have appointments under that act, which means they do not have the authority to monitor the horse

capture program. Once a licence holder takes possession of a horse, however, the licence holder becomes that animals caretaker. The licence holder is then required to meet animal care responsibilities set out in the Animal Protection Act. It is believed that the SPCA will now be sitting in on the next committee meeting.

Proponents of a longer-term solution with scientific studies and research, without the emotional context, include Dr. Claudia Notzke, associate professor of University of Lethbridge's international management plan. Surprisingly she's talking about equine perceptions - and reproduction rates. Higher rate herd number alterations can, she remarks, "actually cause an increase in the animals' rate of reproduction, a phenomenon called "compensatory reproduction ... much younger and immature animals start breeding, uncontrolled and unguided by more mature ones, as the leadership of the family groups as represented by lead mare and herd stallion is often disrupted by captures. Where under normal circumstances -- with strict enforcement of discipline by the leadership -- wild horses often only start breeding at an age of 4 or 5 years (and males even later), population loss and severe social trauma will induce breeding of 1-2 year olds, with young immature animals trying to raise young. It also contributes to in-breeding. Many people don't realize just how complex wild horse society is."

Rancher Darrell Glover, flying pretty much into the present controversy with his beloved Cessna 172 that could autocue over Williams Creek these days, was, he admits, exasperated after listening to ESRD's initial explanations for the capture that included EIA (Equine Infectious Anemia), originally brought in as a possible veterinary concern for the wild horse gather. ESRD's public handling of the proposed cull has been widely criticized. Glover's the brainchild of Facebook hot-hit 'Help Alberta Wildies', along with new BFF recording artist Jann Arden and photographer Duane Starr, and is very clear on where objectives and solutions could be.

"First thing," he remarks carefully, "is determine how many horses are too many. If we can have control of the population, through contraception (the PZP vaccine advocated by award-winning Bragg Creek veterinarian Judith Samson-French)-- and financial support coming on board now (estimated costs of a darted dose lasting up to two years is approximately \$75), then go for pilot studies over four or five years."

Bob Henderson, president of Wild Horses of Alberta Society (WHOAS), echoes that, adding "legislation so the Province has to take responsibility of these animals and proper management, get rid of the feral tag and its relationship to the 'Stray Animal Act'. After pilot studies, whether populations need monitoring with more easily trained youngstock

MORE pg. 17

Wild Horses

FROM pg. 16

perhaps taken out of managed areas he'd like research taking into consideration weather, predation, reproduction rates.

Asked why the capture was so late, when some possible capture pen mares were near full-term pregnancy and capture and relocation a high-stress factor, Booth replied "we've always done the capture March every year."

Former Panther River outfitter and wild horse aficionado Duane Papke disagrees, remembering back when operations would take place December and January. A mountain man of the first order, he understands these herds and was involved with two Canadian Geographic film studies. "In summer," he recalls, "you'll find them on the green grass side-hills, then warmer up in the pine trees when seasons change, muskeg in the winter. The old studs, booted out by young stallions, you'd see them educating young bachelor herds, it was a site to see."

Edward Bork, (an independent rangeland expert, and consultant for ESRD) will be presenting a talk on 'Feral Horse Ecology within Alberta's Eastern Slopes' this Friday Feb. 28 at 5 p.m. at the Cochrane Ranchehouse (Tickets include dinner, trade show and evening presentation by Peter Sherrington, founder of the Rocky Mtn Eagle Research Foundation).

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What exactly are Feral Horses?

Alberta Environment and Sustainable Resource Development define them officially as 'feral' which puts them fair and square under 'The Stray Animals Act. Sometimes referred by others as 'free-roaming', the science community states "a feral horse is a once domestic animal that has reverted to its natural state, that remains untouched by humans. However if that once domestic horse produces any offspring, that remain untouched by humans, then it and any of its offspring are defined as wild as long as they remain untouched by humans."

In her excellent book 'Wild Horse Wild Wolves' wildlife artist and photographer Maureen Enns goes further, detailing areas where horses have adapted to eco-systems and predation to 'rewild', describing other more feral populations, and domestic stock sometimes on Eastern Slopes too.

Artists, promoting ethical wildlife photographic courses, literary and film-making schools, even prison educational and youth therapeutic programs, eco-tourism are avenues yet to be explored.

PHOTO 101C

A few more things you'll need to know

Patrick Price
Cochrane Times

There are a couple of things I didn't mention in the last column that perhaps I should have.

One is camera shake. Even with image stabilizer, which is fairly standard on most DSLR lenses these days, you still have to hold your camera still or you will get camera shake, especially if you are shooting at a slow shutter speed like 1/60th or 1/30th of a second or slower. If I am shooting at a slow shutter speed, I usually prop myself against a wall to help me steady the camera, and as I grow older every day I need all the help I can get.

There have been many, many occasions where I am shooting the hills surrounding Cochrane as the setting sun casts its beautiful light on whatever subject I am focusing on. The light may be low and sinking fast, but rather than increase my ISO to compensate for the failing light, I'll first decrease my shutter speed, and my aperture, if need be. I'll leave my ISO at 200 and dial down my shutter, let's say to 60th of a second from 250th. This way I'll still retain the quality, colour and less noise, (noise, or pixilation, is created by using higher ISO's like 1600, 3200, 6400) at 200 ISO than I would if I increased my ISO to 400, 800, but because I lowered the shutter speed I have to be careful to hold my camera steady, or I will get camera shake. Camera shake is where the exposed frame looks like it's moving when you view it on the back of the camera. Another name for it is camera movement. Also, you really have to be steady when you use longer lenses, like a 200mm or a 300mm zoom or telephoto lenses, especially at slower shutter speeds.

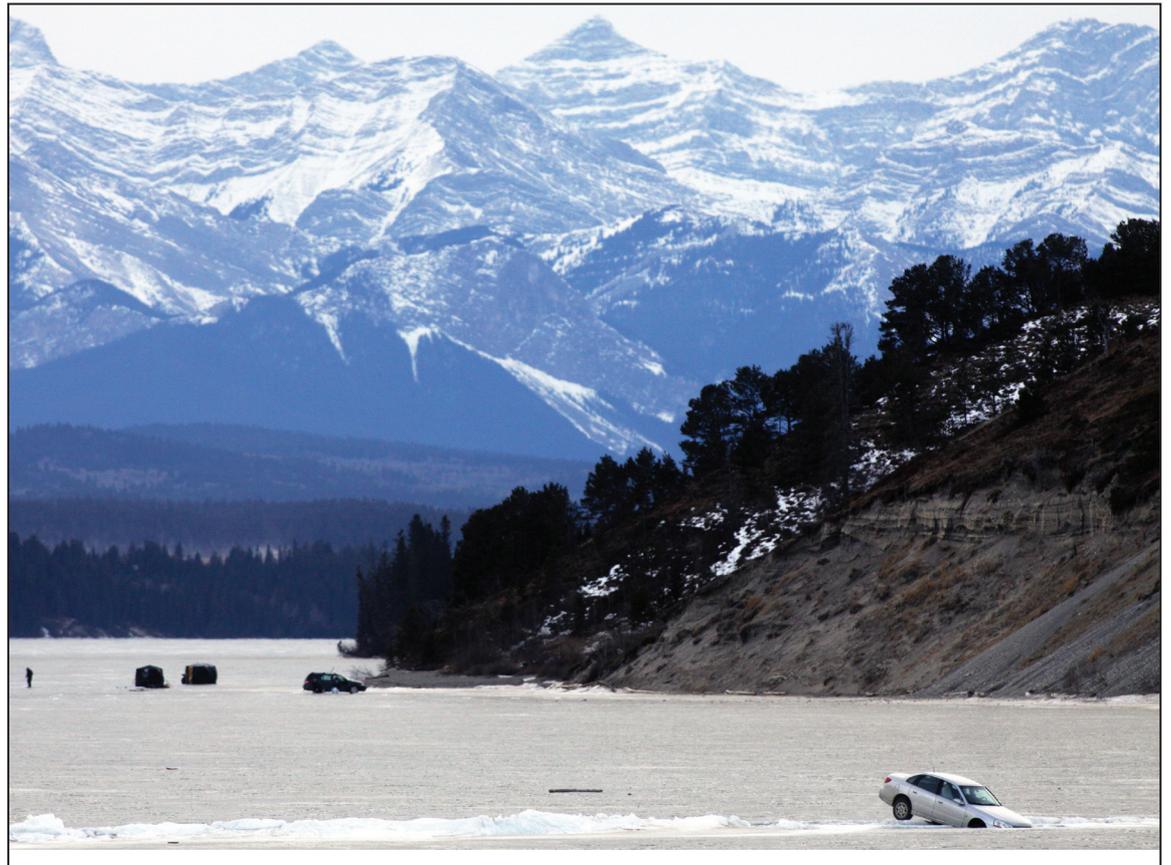
The other point I want to touch on is depth of field. It is true that the higher the aperture, f8, f11, f16, the greater depth

of field you'll receive as the aperture is increased. A wide angle lens makes everything appear fairly sharp when you look through the camera, whereas a telephoto lens's focal point drops off dramatically, thus impacting your depth of field. Sound confusing, it does to me too. Let's say your lens is a 70-200mm, and you're taking pictures of deer feeding on the hills while the mountains serve as a backdrop. If you focus on the deer using the lens fully extended at 200mm, the background will become less in focus at a lower aperture like f4, but the mountains and hills will appear closer in the frame because you are shooting at 200mm and everything is compressed. The longer the lens the more compression there is. I shoot a lot of mountain pictures with my 300mm lens, which is actually equivalent to using a 486mm on a 35mm film camera because

of the sensor on my digital camera. Most of Canon's DSLR cameras have 1:6 or 1:3 sensors, which is one sixth or one third the size of a 35mm camera frame. Those equations are then added to your lenses, depending on the body you possess, and therefore are added on to your lenses when you are taking pictures. On my camera it is 1:6, and my 100mm lens is now 162mm, or 200mm is 324mm. There are also full frame cameras, which I can't afford.

Again, be very steady if you are shooting with a 200mm or 300mm lens, especially on low shutter speeds. It is easier to hold a camera with a wide angle lens than it is holding a camera that has a 300mm lens mounted on it. Anyways, the mountains are beckoning me, and I want to get out there before the night pulls down its shades. Happy hunting!

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Shot with a 200mm, which appears to have more in focus because of the compression from the telephoto lens, even though the picture was made 1600 at f.4 at 200ISO, and yes, not a great way to start the year at Ghost Lake.

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