



*“Congress finds and declares that wild free-roaming horses and burros are living symbols of the historic and pioneer spirit of the West; that they contribute to the diversity of life forms within the Nation and enrich the lives of the American people ....”* excerpt from the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971.

Congress then gave the BLM and USFS the authority to manage, protect, and control wild horses and burros on the nation’s public lands in order to ensure healthy herds and healthy rangelands.

Last week Blade’s story was told. Was his death a harbinger of worse things to come? What happened to his family and herd-mates? Why is his herd special?

Blade was a member of the Carter Reservoir Wild Horse herd which roams over an approximate 25,000 acre Herd Management Area (HMA). These lands are located east of Cedarville along the Calif.-Nev. state line, and highway 299 and 8A to the south, running approximately 11 miles by 7 or 8 miles north and east.

Prior to Blade’s capture, the herd had been gathered in 2003. Samples were taken and tested to determine whether these horses were just domestic saddle and work horses turned loose on the range.

“The Carter herd is likely derived in part from north American stock, but the herd does have an Old Spanish heritage component that is quite rare and is not through north American breeds,” states Dr. Gus Cothran, Clinical Professor of Veterinary Integrative BioScience, College of Veterinary Medicine at Texas A &M and often times BLM consultant.

Scientifically the Carter herd represents descendants of the Spanish Barb horses which appeared in the 1600s.



The Carter wild horses also exhibit physical color characteristics known as the "dun factor," which was also common to a major portion of the horses which the Spaniards reintroduced into North America. Color classifications of the dun factor are: dun, red dun, grulla (mouse gray), buckskin and variations of these colors. Markings on horses having the dun factor include dorsal stripes, zebra stripes on knees and hocks, chest, rib and arm bands, outlined ears, top 1/3 of the ear on its back side darker than body color, fawn color inside of ears, multi-colored mane and tail, cobwebbing on face and face masks. A horse having the dun factor may have many, but not all of these markings.

Blade and his offspring exhibited these desired characteristics, characteristics which the BLM wants to preserve.



*Blade with his yearling offspring on his left and his mare on his right. Note the stripes down his shoulder and back.*

The question of whether these horses are feral or wild has been raised in recent years. “Whether a horse is feral or wild depends on who owns them. By definition if they belong to the state the horses are feral, as are feral dogs, cats, or any other animal that is un-owned or unregistered. Wild horses are those that exist on federal lands in areas where they were in 1971,” explains Shane DeForest, Surprise Resource Area Manager for the BLM.

By definition the Carter Res. Herd is a wild horse herd.

But what about Blade’s family and herd mates?

During the gather of 157 Carter wild horses, four horses died at the gather sites, including Blade.

“One stud was loaded in the trailer at the trap and then she (his word) ran back out of the trailer, flipped over backwards and hit her head. As she regained her senses she fell backwards again and hit her head on a panel killing her instantly,” said Steve Surian, wild horse manager at the BLM Surprise Resource Area office in Cedarville.

After the horses were gathered they were loaded onto trucks and transported to the BLM’s facilities at Litchfield north of Susanville.

The Carters were processed and readied for adoption, or for the older horses, to be sent to sanctuaries. Then a few weeks later 60 horses fell ill with Strangles.

Strangles is a highly contagious and serious infection of horses. The disease is characterized by severe inflammation of the mucosa of the head and throat, with extensive swelling and often rupture of the lymph nodes, which produces large amounts of thick, creamy pus. It can be passed by direct contact with an infected horse, or by indirect contact through grass, or drinking water or by flies.

Dr. Don Crum of the Modoc Veterinary Center states that a horse with Strangles needs two doses of vaccine over possibly a two week period to help him through the infection and perhaps develop some immunity.

“It is similar to scarlet fever in humans. Most horses recover,” explains Crum.

Most horses recover, but this was not the case for the Carter herd.

According to Jeff Fontana, BLM’s public relations officer stationed at Litchfield, nine of the Carter horses died from Strangles, six of them were younger than 10 months old. Another nine Carter horses died at Litchfield from various causes, bringing the total dead horses to 22.

Another 18 Carter mares were taken to Pineywoods, Miss. and adopted.

“The remaining 108 Carter horses will either be adopted or go to long term holding facilities in the mid-West,” said Fontana.

The saga of the Carter herd seems over except that four Carter horses were processed at the Litchfield facility and returned to the Carter herd east of Cedarville.

These four horses were most likely exposed to the Strangles. What could happen if they came down with Strangles or carried the disease?

“These horses would probably carry the Strangles back to the herd,” adds Crum.

“Yes, most domestic horses wouldn’t die from Strangles, because we feed them to keep up their strength. With a wild horse in the winter when their stomachs are empty most of the time, they might not be so lucky,” said one long time Modoc County rancher.

Even with the possible threat of contracting and surviving Strangles, what is the outlook for the Carter herd?

The future looks grim according to equine geneticist Cothran and Dr. Cecilia Penedo of U.C. Davis Veterinary Genetics Lab.

“In order to maintain genetic diversity (and not become inbred) in a closed herd, the herd size should be a minimum 100 to 150 head,” said Cothran.

“If the herd size is at 36 this is not a number that will be viable for a very long time. The herd may never recover above that number. I’m speaking of genetics now. Of course their numbers will increase, but the genetic variability does not. I would say the herd is operating at a very risky number,” said Cothran.

Both Cothran and Penedo offer a slight glimmer of hope. If two studs from other areas having the same genetic characteristics, similar DNA, and are from a nearby area environmentally, are introduced into the herd every five years, the herd might have a chance.

“We could test and look for the best match for re-introduction into the herd,” adds Cothran.



*Inbreeding may result in horses having long ears, jug heads, sway necks and backs, weak hips and pasterns, and round ears. Some of these inbreeding characteristics are present in this wild horse found in another Herd Management Area under the management of the Surprise Resource Area office.*

In his April 2004 report to the Surprise Resource Area BLM office Cothran warned that the Carter herd was in danger without introducing new blood. Since 1985 the BLM has, after gathers, reduced the size of the herd to numbers ranging from 15 to 36 horses.

When asked if outside stallions had been introduced into the herd to provide genetic diversity/viability at any time, BLM's Fontana stated, "We have never introduced any stallions from the outside into the herd."

With what could be considered mishandling and mismanagement of the wild horses by the BLM, in their herd management, in their gathers, in their holding facilities, and in their genetic monitoring, one can only ask just what the BLM is doing to "manage, protect, and control wild horses on the nation's public lands in order to ensure healthy herds."



*Carter mustang*

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