

RIDING THE MUSTANG TRAIL

story by ED DODRILL, photos by DAVID NELSON



City's sprawl closes in

It wasn't exactly another day at the office. It was 6:15 a.m., a time when most people are making their second reach across the pillow for the snooze button. But Bob Stager was leading three horses into a trailer. Saddles were placed in the bed of the pickup. Then he headed south.

After a quick stop at the Bureau of Land Management office, the rig headed toward Blue Diamond Road. There the horse management specialist turned west, keeping a sharp eye out for the day's objective: wild mustangs.

"This is an important trip," he talked as he drove. "There is no better way to collect data on the range than to either walk it or ride it. Not even a four-wheel-drive truck will go where we have to go," he said.

Just past the Blue Diamond cutoff on Highway 160 he pulled off the road. "There they are," he said, his excitement building. Quietly he got out of the truck. The five wild horses turned and watched.

"They are curious and won't let us get too close. But they are not afraid," Stager said. As the horses walked away, they spread out, revealing a young colt or filly trailing a palomino mare, the thinnest in the group.

"She's nursing, that's why she looks thin. But she'll fill out if the range holds out," he said.

But then he pointed out where these

horses are. "They are on the north side of 160. They have to cross the highway to get water and to eat. We can't fence off the road because that would be cutting off a lot of acreage, even if we find water on the other side of the road. But cars kill about one horse a month," his enthusiasm faded.

"We need an underpass or something but the highway department can't afford it. The BLM can't afford it and the Wild Horse Commission can't afford it. So drivers kill one horse a month. It's sad," he said.

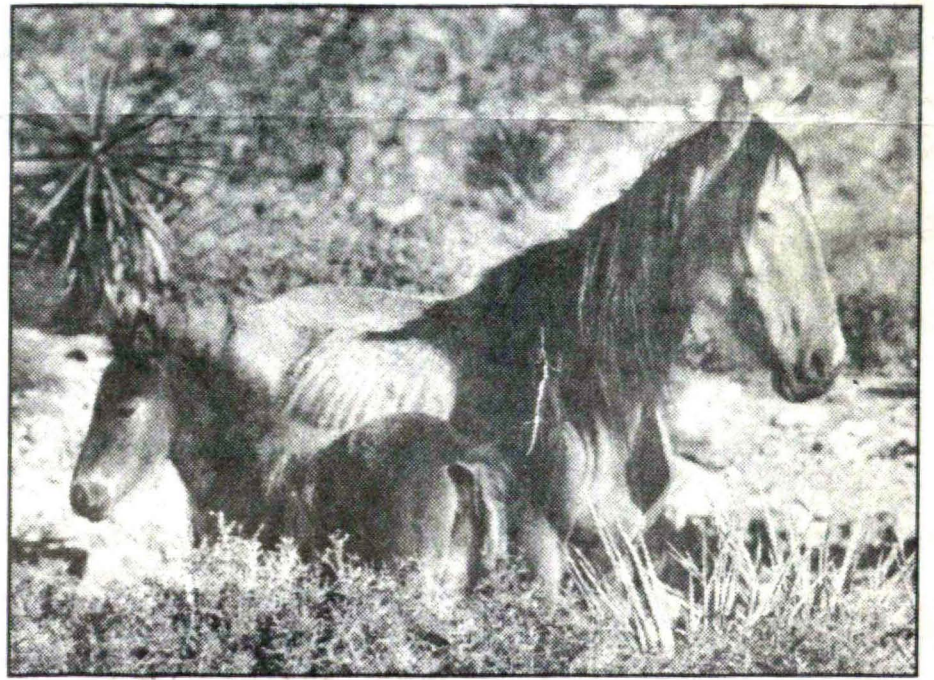
"We want to make this a showcase wild horse area," he said as the truck turned south to the unpaved road that leads through Cottonwood Pass and into the community of Goodsprings.

He brought the rig to a halt and there to the west were three more wild horses, grazing.

He marked their location on the map and then knelt to point out a tuft of grass neatly shorn to about two inches off the ground. "That's utilization. The grass has been neatly cropped. That's the way horses eat. This will grow back."

Turning to another plant, he adds, "They missed this one. That means there is enough. If it were overgrazed, we would not find plants that were missed. I've seen that around here when we had it open to cattle grazing."

More notes were taken and he re-



turned to the truck. Halfway to Goodsprings he pulled off the road and the horses were unloaded and saddled. They were once wild mustangs that Stager adopted and trained.

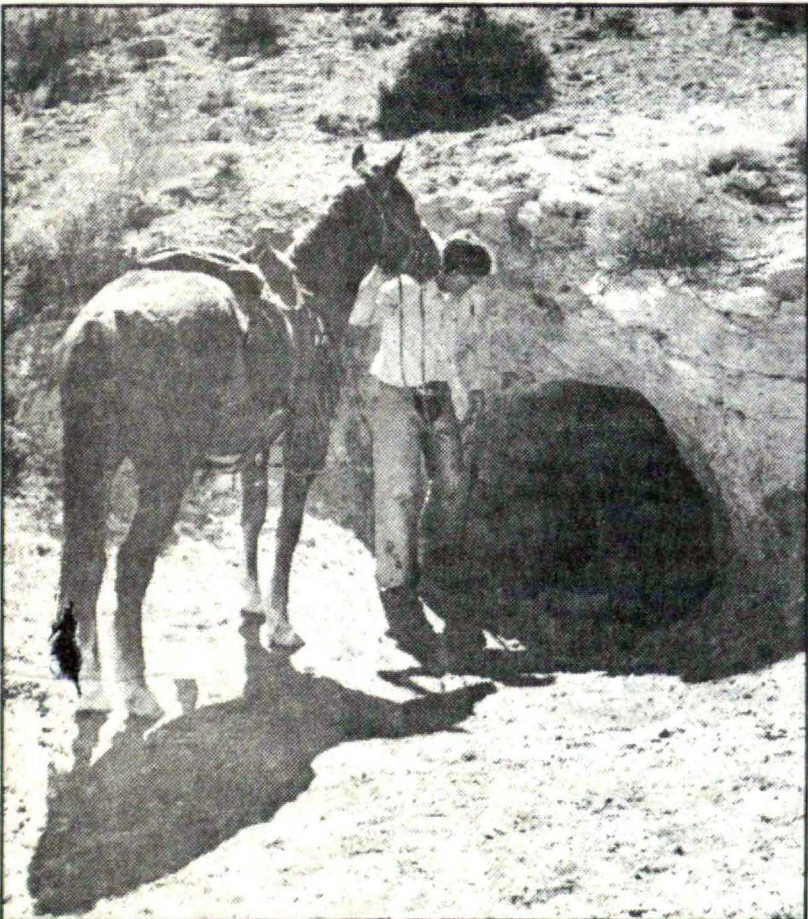
"Others have done it. Frankly, I was surprised at how smart these horses are," he said.

Later in the day the horses would show how well they accepted domestication and training. When dismounted, the untied mustangs didn't move a step. They responded to light cues from the reins or a weight shift in the saddle.

They remained on their good behavior even as they approached another trio of wild horses.

Following a well worn path made by the wild horses, the trio steadily climbed the Bird Spring Range, an imposing row of mountains that, with the Spring Mountains, form a valley. The horses, however, roam on both sides of the Bird Spring Range enjoying the vegetation and water in another valley between those mountains and the McCullough Range.

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A band of wild horses heads near Goodsprings toward Las Vegas, at top, while a mare and her foal cautiously stand watch. At left, Bob Stager of the BLM checks cave springs where horses seek water and above, a rattlesnake blocks a mustang trail.

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SUNphotos by DAVE NELSON



Stager can tell age of horse when it died by teeth in skull.

Wild horses graze in the Red Rock Canyon Recreational Area, above. Right, BLM wild horse specialist Bob Stager.

Mustangs

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Along the trail the riders almost collided with a huge palomino stallion racing up a rise. The stallion was startled by the chance encounter and kept a short yet safe distance of 15 feet.

The stallion trotted off, but remained in sight. Later he was joined by a copper colored mare. As they met they stood on their hind legs and rubbed necks in greeting. They slowly walked off toward the springs, occasionally stopping and turning to locate the position of the horsemen.

The range is in good condi-

tion this day because the herd of 30 mustangs was cut down by someone who shot 11 of the horses two years ago.

"But if we don't have more rain soon, the horses will find less to eat," Stager cautioned.

"More than half the horses in this herd are palomino," he explained. "The rest are chestnuts and buckskins. They are from the old ranch in Red Rock Canyon." That ranch is now Spring Mountain Ranch State Park but at one time was a working ranch. The owners raised palomino quarter horses and some of them got away.

"These are not related to the

Spanish explorers as far as we know, but they are now wild horses and are protected by the law," he notes.

They are not, however, considered an endangered species. Killing a mustang is a misdemeanor. "This is the only herd in the country close to a highly populated area. People can come out from Las Vegas (just 30 miles to the east) and see them from their cars. This is something we have to preserve," he said.

"But it is scary. Look how far south the Las Vegas community has grown. And look at the growth in Pahrump and the

traffic on the road between them. That's a danger to the horses. They have no place else to go," he said.

As the horses headed back to the trailer the sun was sinking behind Potosi Mountain. "I'm worried about land swaps, development and grazing. If someone wants to start building around here, I wonder if the horses will have enough support to stop it."

"These horses belong here. We are managing them along with the burros in Red Rock Canyon. It's working. But as Las Vegas keeps spreading out, I get worried."