

INTRODUCTION

The Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Range (PMWHR) was created in 1968 by a U.S. Department of the Interior Secretarial Order. This designation was the second of its kind in the United States, and directed that management of the wild horses be within a balanced program that considers all public values without any impairment to the land's productivity. The current habitat objective in the Herd Management Area Plan (HMAP) is to manage for slight upward improvement in trend.

The PMWHR encompasses about 39,651 acres managed by three different agencies, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), U.S. Forest Service (USFS), and National Park Service (NPS). The area lies within two states, Montana and Wyoming. The Montana Department of Fish Wildlife and Parks and the Wyoming Game and Fish Department are primarily responsible for wildlife, fishing, and hunting regulations on the PMWHR. This represents a diversity of management philosophies and objectives for the area. Since the designation, much of the PMWHR has been included within a wilderness study area (three BLM wilderness study areas, of approximately 23,000 acres; and the western edge of the NPS Bighorn Canyon). The topography is characterized by deep, steep-walled canyons, isolated grassy plateaus, and extremely rocky shrub-dominated foothill slopes. The elevation ranges from about 3850 feet in Wyoming at the south end of the range to about 8,750 feet at the north end in Montana; a vertical rise of 4,900 feet in 13 miles.

When the first feral horses arrived in the Pryor Mountains is not known (Harvey 1974, Brownell 1999). Feral horses appear to have occupied the Pryor Mountains and surrounding area in great numbers until the 1930's (Wyman 1946, Brownell 1999) when stockman and the Forest Service sponsored roundup efforts to reduce the competition for forage. These efforts were apparently successful and few feral horses existed in Montana by 1939 (Wyman 1946, Brownell 1999). Evidence exists that a small number of unique feral horses existed in the rugged areas of the Pryors since the late 1800's and were never removed (Brownell 1999). By 1968 they numbered around 200 (BLM 1984).

Preserved records of the Pryors by the BLM (2004) show domestic livestock use, including cattle, sheep, horses, and goats was:

- 6,866 animal units between 1907 and 1920
- 5,270 animal units from 1920 to 1930
- 2,534 animal units from 1930 to 1940
- 2,286 animal units from 1940 to 1950
- today the number is 2,532 animal units

According to these records, domestic horses were not part of the grazing use record from 1930 up to the 1940's when seven permittees ran 40 horses. This period coincides with the feral horse roundup efforts in the 1930's.

In 2003, this remote, very rugged, and extremely complex range area supported 161 feral horses and about 100 bighorn sheep year around, and approximately 350 mule deer from November 1 to April 1 (Coates-Markle 2003, Schoenecker 2004, Stewart 2004, Hyde 2004).

Over the past half century, conditions of the PMWHR have been described as very poor to fair (Firebaugh 1969, Gordon and Coop 1973, Hall 1973, BLM 1984, BLM 1992, BLM 1998). High soil erosion potential has also been described (Cleary and MacIntyre 1973, BLM and SCS 1981). Due to the widespread concern about the ability of the PMWHR to support wild ungulate populations the BLM, as the lead management agency responsible for the PMWHR, and the USFS asked the United States Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to complete a comprehensive inventory and assessment of the health of the PMWHR. This inventory and assessment was the most detailed survey of any national wild horse range done to date. The field survey was initiated in May of 2002 and completed in September of 2003.



Big Horn Canyon National Recreation Area



Entering the Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Range on the Burnt Timber inventory unit.