

On the Trail > wild horses

PROJECT NOBLE MUSTANG

A unique BLM/Colorado Department of Corrections partnership turns adopted mustangs into useful mounts for U.S. Border Patrol agents on the Canadian border.

STORY BY HOLLY ENDERSBY

DON SEABROOK/WENATCHEE WORLD

A U.S. Border Patrol agent and his horse, a mustang trained at a Cañon City, Colorado, prison, patrol a remote portion of the U.S./Canadian border.

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IT'S A CRISP MORNING ALONG a remote portion of the 4,000-mile U.S./Canadian border when Steven Kartchner cues his horse to stop, then dismounts to get a better look at what appears to be a crude path trailing off into Washington's rugged wilderness. With careful, knowing eyes, he studies the area around the primitive trail for any signs of illegal traffic.

Armed with the decade of experience gained while working on the U.S./Mexico border, Kartchner draws upon a decidedly American, historically Western resource to aid him in his service along the northern border—the mustang. Kartchner and “Kootenai,” a mustang trained at a Cañon City, Colorado, prison, are one of eight agent-mustang teams assigned to border stations in eastern Washington, Idaho and western Montana.

A Grand Idea

With increased security stretching the limits and resources of government agencies nationwide, Lee Pinkerton, assistant chief patrol

agent for the Spokane Sector, wanted to be sure his horse-patrol agents were equipped with hardy animals that could handle the unique demands of the 308 miles of border stretching from the Cascade Mountains to the Continental Divide. This spring, after years

of leasing “domestic” horses from local contractors, Pinkerton enlisted some mustang replacements.

For Pinkerton, the breed's dense bone structure and natural resiliency made them a natural choice for miles of daily horse-back patrols in the back-country.

“Nature has produced a horse adapted to the rugged places we need to go,” he explained. “They can get us into areas no other mode of transportation can, and

they can do it stealthily.”

To help put the program, dubbed Project Noble Mustang, in motion, the lifelong horseman joined forces with the Bureau of Land Management and the Colorado Department of Corrections.

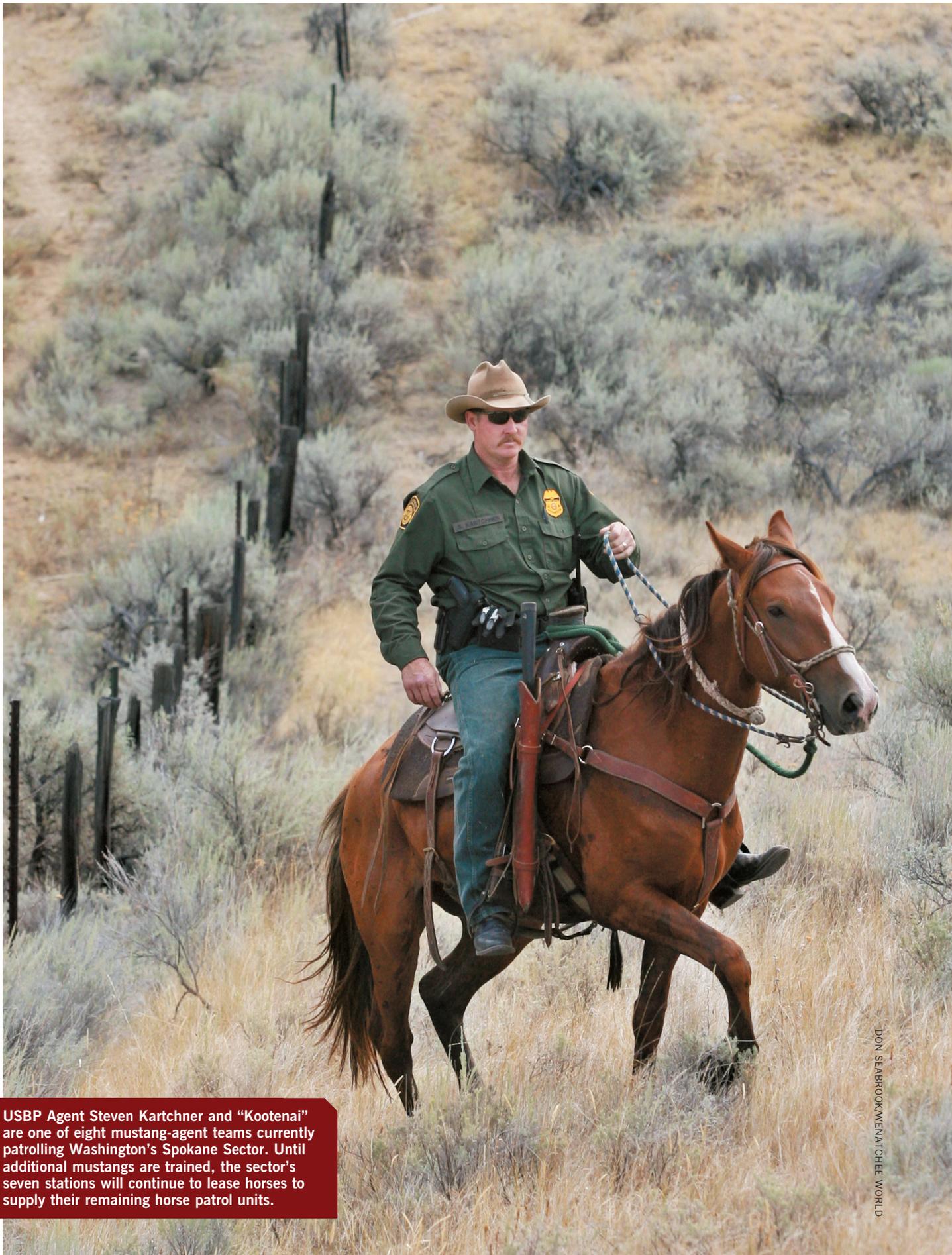
BLM manages wild horses and burros on government land. Most of this land is in the arid West, where the range's grazing



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A two-hour trailer ride to their patrol area starts the day for mustangs assigned to the Whitefish, Montana, Border Patrol Station. Horses and agents can log long hours on this rugged, 60-mile stretch of border.





USBP Agent Steven Kartchner and “Kootenai” are one of eight mustang-agent teams currently patrolling Washington’s Spokane Sector. Until additional mustangs are trained, the sector’s seven stations will continue to lease horses to supply their remaining horse patrol units.

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capacity requires careful monitoring. When wild horses and burros exceed the limits of their range, either in terms of forage or water, BLM officials gather the animals and offer some of them for public adoption to qualified individuals.

Over the last 21 years, a portion of BLM horses has gone to the Colorado Wild Horse Inmate Program. Established by a cooperative agreement between BLM and the Colorado Department of Corrections, the program enlists inmates to gentle mustangs and start them under saddle. Now, it also serves as the initial training program for mustangs selected for the Border Patrol's Spokane Sector.

Work Ethics

Colorado Correctional Industries, a private firm, is responsible for training the inmates who work with the horses. The Border Patrol, like any adopter, pays a \$125 BLM adoption fee and a \$1,000 training fee. The correctional program offers personal growth opportunities for low-risk, non-violent inmates, while supplying the public with a source for well-started horses.

"A lot of guys learn how to really work for the first time through this program," explains Brian Hardin, lead trainer for CCI at the Four Mile Correctional Center in Colorado. "They also learn about patience and making the right decisions. It's a chance for many of them to do something right for the first time in their lives."

The program's success begins with trainers, such as Hardin, selecting prospects from gathered BLM mustangs. Mares and geldings between the ages of 2 and 5 are chosen, with an emphasis on correct conformation and size.

Initially, instructors teach inmates how to handle, ride and train the horses. Then, when each has demonstrated his ability to put these skills to use, he is assigned a personal herd of three to six horses. The inmate feeds them, cleans their stalls and develops their trust.

Mustangs are started in a round pen and, once under saddle, are worked in a larger outdoor arena. A typical horse spends three to four months with his trainer prior to adoption.

Pinkerton has the final word on which horses join the Border Patrol program. Animals selected for the Spokane Sector are between 4 and 5 years old, at least 15 hands tall and weigh 1,000–1,100 pounds.

CCI trainers helped Border Patrol agents learn about mustangs' unique handling needs.

"They're not the same as domestic horses because of their fear level," explains Hardin. "They're truly wild animals. But, once they trust you, they make tremendous horses."

Well-Equipped

Pinkerton says the eight mustangs in service for the Border Patrol have proven better than he anticipated. The Spokane Sector has already placed an order with CCI for an additional four horses.

During a recent patrol in northern Washington's remote Pasayten Wilderness, Pinkerton was able to observe firsthand the differences between the mustangs and domestic horses.

"The mustangs were significantly better at moving over rough ground," he recalls. "I have never ridden a horse that was that careful and conscious of where he was going and where he was putting his feet."

James Perkins, head wrangler and senior patrol

Not only does this cooperative relationship help the agencies involved, it provides caring homes for wild horses.

agent at the Whitefish, Montana, station, affirms the mustangs' suitability for Border Patrol service.

"These horses don't need as much special care as domestic ones," says Perkins, himself a mustang owner. "They don't seem to colic like domestic horses, and they have a heavy-duty build. Some are more cautious than others and have taken longer to trust humans. But, they've all blossomed since we got them."

Using horses for patrol reduces the impact on wild-life and land, he adds. In environmentally sensitive areas, this is a huge benefit over the use of motorized transportation.

Best of all, incorporating these sturdy, naturally resilient mustangs into the Border Patrol program saves the government money. Pinkerton has found that purchasing mustangs for his patrol units costs far less than leasing stock, even after paying adoption and CDOC training fees.

Brighter, Safer Future

Today, with seven Spokane Sector stations utilizing horse patrol units, the need for additional mustangs is clear. However, until there are enough trained mustangs to go around, the agency will continue to lease horses, as well. The Spokane Sector is currently



the only one to use mustangs in its horse-patrol units, but Pinkerton believes it won't take long for others to follow suit, as the Border Patrol hopes to add 6,000 new agents before the end of the Bush administration.

Not only does this cooperative relationship help the agencies involved, it provides caring homes for wild horses. BLM always has more adoptable horses and burros than it has homes. Recently, the Spokane Sector agents extended a helping hand to the agency in hopes of placing more mustangs. At the Monroe, Washington, Wild Horse Adoption, four border patrol agents appeared in full dress uniform, riding their mustangs and answering questions from potential adopters. According to Rick McComas, a BLM wild horse specialist, it was a hit.

"The agents demonstrated to the crowd the type of willing, reliable, calm horses these mustangs can be," he says. "Their presence had a positive impact on the adoptions."

According to CCI's Hardin, adopting a horse that's been started by a prison horsemanship program is the best way for an individual to get a mustang.

"The average adopter does not know a lot about horses," he explains. "When they pick a horse we've worked with, we try to help them as much as possible. They can call us to discuss concerns or come to visit us. Our doors are always open to help the mustang owner."

For Pinkerton, Project Noble Mustang is proof positive that great things can be accomplished when agencies work together.

"I was pretty nervous starting out with this program," he shares. "I didn't want anyone to get hurt, and I didn't know how the mustangs would work out. But, because of the potential advantages, I really wanted to give it a chance."

Now, he says, the agents mounted on mustangs have no intention of switching back to domestic horses. However, there's another reason patrolling with mustangs resonates with Pinkerton and the Spokane Sector agents.

"These mustangs are an American legend protecting America's borders," Pinkerton says.

There is, he claims, something inherently right about that. 🐾

Holly Endersby is an Idaho-based writer. Send comments on this story to edit@westernhorseman.com.



JAMES BRUNNER



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Top Right: Senior Agent James Perkins, on Sisko (front), and Agent Steven Kartchner, on Hidalgo, patrol the Canadian border in western Montana.

Right: Like other agents stationed along the Canadian border, Darrel Williams began his service patrolling the U.S./Mexico border before he was allowed to transfer north. The Border Patrol veteran is one of several involved in Project Noble Mustang.