

BLM MUSTANGS ON "THE FEARFUL CROSSING"

By Nancy Kerson, CA BLM Wild Horse and Burro Volunteer
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***Mike & Nancy Kerson in the vast Forty Mile Desert.
Mike is ponying their mule, Eleanor, and riding his mustang, Ruby and Nancy is on her mustang, Sparky.***

Dry, dusty, with no potable water and very little game, "The Forty Mile Desert" was the most deadly and feared stretch of the Old California Trail. Historians estimate that for every 17 feet of this 65-mile stretch of trail, there is one buried human, horse, mule, or ox. (It is called the Forty Mile Desert, but the trail through it is 65 miles).



"The Fearful Crossing" wagon train and trail ride, organized by Bill Adams and Kathy Davis from Fallon, Nevada, aims to re-enact (without the death and starvation part!) the Westward Migration experience. The group this year consisted of six wagons pulled by mules or draft horses, and 36 people, either riding in wagons or riding their own horses or mules. The trek is almost entirely over BLM land, except for the last couple of miles through Fallon.

Four and a Half Mustangs: Eleanor Mule (out of a mustang mare), Mike Kerson on Ruby, Nancy Kerson on Sparky, Petra Keller on Charlie, and Dave Frazier on Tonopah

This year, four adopted BLM mustangs participated in the event. Mike and Nancy Kerson of Napa, California, rode their mustangs Ruby, from California's Twin Peaks herd management area (HMA), and Sparky (from Nevada's Calico Mountains HMA), and Mike ponied their daughter's young half-mustang mule, Eleanor. Petra Keller of Reno, Nevada, rode Charlie (a mare born at the National Wild Horse and Burro Center at Palomino Valley), and Dave Frazier of Paradise, California, rode his large dark bay from the Tonopah area, named – what else? – Tonopah. All four were barefoot, and all four completed the trip 100% sound, and with energy to spare.



Since lack of food and water was the thing that killed the pioneers, this group was safe, because water and food were delivered at lunch time, and a truck brought in big water tanks and hay at night (we even had a shower as well as a caterer!), so the trip was less “fearful” than for the pioneers.

But it was certainly awesome! It was also humbling, to think of those poor pioneers who struggled across it without water, with very little food, and no end in sight. The most “fearful” part for Nancy was Day Three, when the trail followed along Highway 95 next to the Union Pacific railroad tracks. Sparky did not like trains, especially long ones!

The desert landscape was varied and incredibly beautiful. It's BIG out there! Vegetation ranged from salt grasses along the sinks to a variety of tough, prickly bushes – no trees, no shade anywhere. The trail ranged from easy hard-packed dirt or gravel to one stretch of truly nasty shale and sharp rocks through the willows, to deep sand dunes that required the horses to bunny hop, to crunchy, crusty alkali flats. The latter was sort of like walking on snow that has melted and re-frozen a few times. You go along fine until all of a sudden your horse steps through the crust and falls down a few inches. It kept things interesting. The terrain was mostly flat, though we did go over a few hilly passes.

Our mustangs did so well – they hardly even broke a sweat. I gained a new appreciation of just what these horses are made of. I was worried that it might be too much for them. Ha! Not to Worry!

The last day we saw a band of riders coming toward us from another trail at full gallop, dust rising behind them – just like a Wild West movie. Luckily, instead of bandits, it was a group of friendly local horse and mule riders, who came to join us for the last few miles. One of those riders had a branded BLM mustang as well - unfortunately I did not catch her name.

Riding into Fallon on Sunday afternoon, we had mixed feelings: On the one hand, we felt absolute exhilaration that we had made it. On the other hand, sadness that it was over, and we would soon be back to our ordinary lives. At the trailers, a car alarm went off - a fitting signal that we were undeniably back in the 21st century.

Our Mustangs took great care of us, and all four of us remarked to each other how privileged we felt to be part of "The Mustang Club."

Bill Adams and Kathy Davis have been operating this wagon train for 13 years. They can be reached at 775-867-3590 for more info about their wagon trains.