

MUSTANG

IS CONCEPTIONS

A COLLEGE COWGIRL SPENDS FOUR DAYS AMONG THE PRYOR MOUNTAIN MUSTANGS AND DISCOVERS THAT STEREOTYPES ABOUT WILD HORSES DON'T MATCH UP TO THE ANIMALS IN FRONT OF HER EYES.



BY WESLEYANN JOHNSON

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KELLY WIENMAN

If there was ever a cold place in the lower 48, the Pryor Mountain wild horse range fits the bill. It's late August, but above 8,000 feet that looks like callous wind accompanied by rain that's only a handful of degrees away from morphing into snow. Ten young women from the University of Montana Western are scrambling to set up camp, drawn to the mountains by the prospect of studying a herd of mustangs as unique and surprising as the Montana weather.

Two days before stepping onto the mustangs' chilly front porch, I sat in my Dodge truck, talking on the phone. The person on the other end of the line was an unrefined cowboy I'd met my freshman year of college. Any logical person knows that the cowboys portrayed in old western movies aren't accurate. Clint (his name has been changed in this story) isn't exactly a logical person though, and he'd probably be offended to hear that he isn't supposed to exist.

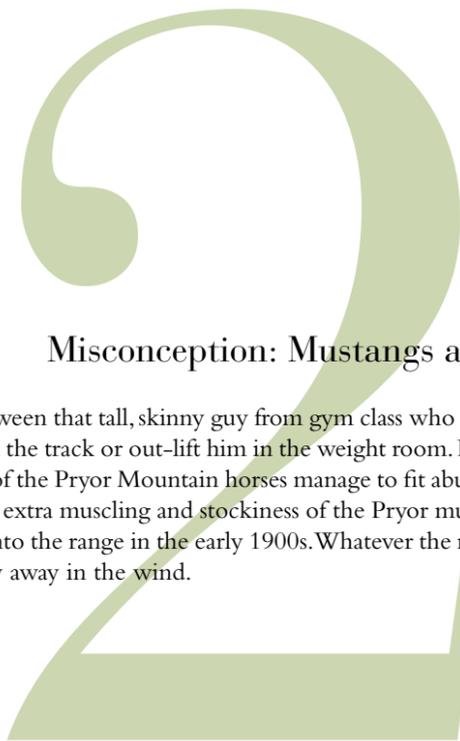
"Bunch of mangy, calf-kneed, inbred mustangs aren't worth looking at for four days," Clint mumbled as I tried to explain why I was participating in the field study. I had long since given up trying to understand why Clint thought he was such an authority on mustangs—after all, he'd never actually seen a live band of them. Yet his general opinion of what I would see in the Pryors was an echo of so many horse trainers' words, so many cowboys' opinions. I filed Clint's description of mustangs in the corner of my mind.

Dawn rose on camp in the Pryors and I pulled out that mental file, wondering. The next one hundred hours were a flood of mustang observations, photographs, and discussion. I had deeply hoped that Clint would be wrong about the Pryor Mountain mustangs, and I was not disappointed. I began to jot down comparisons between the horses Clint had described and the Pryor Mountain mustangs that I observed. Aside from species, there were no similarities. I turned to a fresh page in my notebook and scribbled, "Misconceptions," at the top...



1 Misconception: Mustangs are all inbred

The term, “inbred,” is often slapped on mustangs like a cuss word. If myth were fact, offspring would be breeding back to their sires and dams. In reality, the Pryor mountain management keeps records of individual horses on the range, noting which foals are born to which parents. Bloodline tracking on the Pryor Mountain range has shown that these horses are anything but an inbred bunch.



Misconception: Mustangs are always scrawny

Imagine the difference between that tall, skinny guy from gym class who had no coordination and the shorter jock who could lap him on the track or out-lift him in the weight room. Put in a gym, Pryor mountain horses would be that jock. Many of the Pryor Mountain horses manage to fit abundant lean muscle into a short body. There are theories that the extra muscling and stockiness of the Pryor mustangs came from a Percheron-cross stallion that was released onto the range in the early 1900s. Whatever the reason, there is no denying that these horses aren't about to blow away in the wind.



Misconception: Mustangs are mangy

Every horse that our group came across on the mountain had an undeniably healthy summer coat. Do the horses in these pictures look mangy? Case closed.



Misconception: Mustangs are terrified of people

According to our guide, there are some horses on a lower part of the range—called the Dry-head—who won't be caught within close range of a person. However the bands we came across in the mountains were either curious or indifferent to human presence. Before the trip, I had been worried that we might not get close enough to the mustangs to observe them in depth. By day two, I had realized that keeping a safe distance between myself and inquisitive colts was a more valid concern.

5

Misconception: Mustangs don't live as long as domestic horses

It's not outrageous to assume that the harsh conditions of the wilderness would shorten a horse's natural life span. That's not always the case in the Pryor Mountains though. In 2015, the range was home to nearly 40 horses born before the year 2000. Of those horses, 8 still roam the range at over 20 years old. The reservation even boasts one matriarch named Tonopah who was born in 1987, making her 28 years old!



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Misconception: Mustangs are poor movers

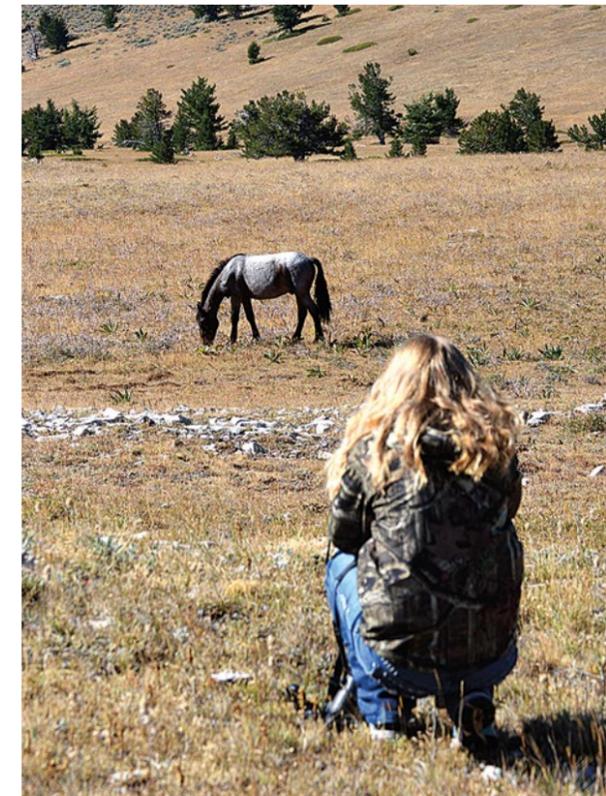
From a judging perspective, I was pleasantly surprised to find that the Pryor Mountain mustangs I observed tracked up perfectly. Their step has a slightly higher action to it than that of a Quarter Horse, suggesting their Spanish heritage. Aside from being straight and correct, the movement I observed in these horses had a smooth, almost floating quality.

Misconception: Mustangs aren't desirable

There are countless ways to measure worth and some ways that can't be measured. To keep things practical, let's focus solely on the numbers. The Pryor Mountain mustangs have a 100% adoption rate. That's no misprint. A perfect 100% adoption rate.

2015 is the first year that mustangs from the Pryor Mountains have been available for adoption via the BLM's online auction. The Pryor mustangs brought in record-shattering numbers. The BLM sets the minimum starting bid on all individual horses at \$125. Leaving that minimum price in the dust, several of the 19 horses captured from the Pryor mountain herd brought in three-digit figures. The high selling horse, a 2012 filly named Mesa, was adopted out for \$4,005. Numbers don't lie. The Pryor Mountain mustangs are certainly desirable according to bidders.

Clint's unfounded opinions crumbled a little more with every mustang that trotted past camp in the Pryor mountains. A part of me wishes that he would go looking for his imaginary inbred horses in the Pryor Mountains. He wouldn't find them. Then he might come to appreciate the real Pryor Mountain mustangs. Misconceptions can't stand up to the thundering hooves of living horses.



The author, WesleyAnn Johnson, is a natural horsemanship student at the University of Montana Western.