

# The Roundup of the McCullough Peaks Wild Horse Herd

By Carol Walker

Photographs by Carol Walker

I have been following and photographing the wild horses in the McCullough Peaks area near Cody, WY for the past five years. This herd is one of the most easily accessible of the herds, and also one of the most colorful, with gorgeous pintos, palominos, cremellos, buckskins, greys, bays, blacks and chestnuts, coloring the landscape.

The herd was scheduled to be rounded up last year, but due to a lack of money the BLM held off until this year. 110,000

acres to roam on sounds like plenty for 220 horses, but the BLM claimed that the range was becoming "degraded," which is their favorite cop-out term this year. The horses in this area have had a very good year and some are positively fat - so the "degraded range" explanation does not wash with me.

I had heard that one of my favorite stallions, a black and white pinto I call Washakie (know as Rerun by the BLM) was possibly going to be removed, so I made plans to attend the roundup with a great deal of trepidation.



Washakie

The atmosphere at this roundup was 180 degrees different than the earlier Pryor's roundup, where so many of the national BLM officials participated. Here, the BLM people from Wyoming were friendly, helpful, and actually answered questions and requests. Still, a roundup is nothing more than a horrible event. Families of horses, who have been together for many years, are ripped apart, probably forever. Unlike the Pryor's roundup, the McCullough horses were not rounded-up in bands and kept together - instead, they were all brought in as large or small groups, and bunched together by the helicopter. They were then immediately separated - mares from stallions and older youngsters, with the youngest foals kept with their mothers.

On the first day, the largest groups were brought in. In this area, many bands will stay close to other bands in relatively peaceful groups I call "megabands," sometimes numbering 40 or more. I anxiously waited to see a certain black and white stallion that came in with another band, along with another favorite stallion of mine, a grey named Indigo. His band includes buckskin mares and two gorgeous two-year old cremello colts I have watched grow up. I know they will be removed, as their beautiful coloring will make them good candidates for adoption.

It is so cold, and the horses are hot from running that when they arrive in the corrals, they steam in the early morning air.





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Band follows band, and it is awe inspiring, although sad, to see so many horses running together towards confinement. Three of the megabands came in from Red Point, Coon Creek and Dry Creek.

The most excitement we had the first day was when a bay stallion, poorly named Snoodle, defied the helicopter. He had a black mare and a foal with him, and the helicopter must have spent a good half an hour trying to drive them in. Finally, in a moment of breathtaking bravery, he split from his mare and foal, and stood

still, facing off with the helicopter. After a brief standoff, he ran full speed and got away. The contractor sent a wrangler out to capture the foal, which had been left behind, and a couple of other wranglers went after the mare, as the foal was too small to be weaned. The mare and foal were scheduled to be released, so hopefully Snoodle would be able to find them after the roundup. The next morning, there was a stallion hanging out near the corrals, and we wondered if it was Snoodle, looking for his mare and foal.

The first group that came in also gave the helicopter a merry chase, and one stallion named Olathe got away as I was cheering under my breath.

Once the smaller groups that were easy to find had been brought in, the decision was made to move to a smaller trap site in another area so that they could catch some of the more elusive horses from Coon Creek and the Badlands. I followed the horse

trailers carrying trap materials and the wrangler's horses. After some time spent figuring out the perfect spot for the trap, it was set up very quickly. The Cattoors are very efficient, and are contractors who have worked with the BLM the longest and have the most experience working with wild horses - which paid off with this roundup having no injuries to horses. In fact, as a stark contrast to the Cooks contractors, who I have seen drive horses directly into a trailer with no regard for safety, the Cattoors separated out a young foal so that he would not be injured when transported back to the main trap site.

After bringing in as many horses as the wranglers could find, the roundup was over. 193 were captured, 93 were removed and sent to Rock Springs Holding Facility, and roughly 120 were left in the wild. This was much better than the planned 100 to be left behind. This is, however, below the minimum number of 150 adults that are needed if the herd is to remain genetically viable. There were no injuries and no deaths and this is exactly the way ALL roundups should be held. Over the past two years, the BLM has reported 206 wild horse deaths during roundups. I was extremely relieved to see my favorite stallions slated for release - Washakie, Indigo, and Warbonnet (Medicine Boy to the BLM).



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The part of this roundup that has made no sense at all was, instead of having an adoption planned in a couple of weeks there in Cody, the captured horses were shipped to Rock Springs to be gelded, branded, and in some cases trained, with an adoption to be planned in the spring. In the meantime, we taxpayers will be paying top dollar for these horses to stay at a holding facility for six months!

I returned the next day to see the releases of the horses. This took place after blood samples were drawn and each of the mares received a shot of birth control primer and a freeze brand. The BLM will

determine which mares will receive a second shot of PZP one-year birth control this spring.

The wild horse expert, Tricia Hatle, had decided she wanted to release the horses back into the four distinct areas they had lived in, instead of releasing them all in one big group, preventing them from all staying in one small section of the horse range. This required several trailers, with mares and stallions separated, driving to different areas. I followed a group of stallions into the Badlands.

They seemed bewildered at first, and then happily ran off. I returned to the main trap site in time to see the Red Point mares released. They strolled out, grazing casually and looking curiously at the observers.

One buckskin mare from Indigo's band stopped and looked back at the corrals, perhaps looking for her lost sisters and foal, who she would never see again.



Next, the stallions were released. I knew that they would not stroll out! Washakie was first out with the other stallions hot on his heels, and they ran and ran and ran until they were out of site. I was so happy to see them go. May they remain free forever.

The ROAM Act was not passed in time to save this herd from being rounded up, nor the other 1000 horses in WY

being removed this month, as well as the thousands being removed from Nevada. However, we still have time before the end of the year to get this vital legislation passed in the Senate.

Here are some great action steps, from the Cloud Foundation, to help get this legislation passed. Go to [www.thecloudfoundation.wordpress.com/](http://www.thecloudfoundation.wordpress.com/)

**May they remain free forever.**





Colorado's own Carol Walker has traveled all over the world photographing wildlife for the past 28 years. In 2000, Carol founded Living Images by Carol Walker, specializing in photographing horses. Carol's images illuminate the relationship between horses and their people, as well as showcasing the beauty of horses with her stunning images. She teaches workshops for amateur photographers on equine photography and her commercial work includes Equine catalogue covers and numerous calendars, and she markets her fine art prints from her website [www.LivingImagesCJW.com](http://www.LivingImagesCJW.com) and at various locations around Colorado. Four years ago Carol began photographing wild horses in Wyoming, Colorado, and Montana and became aware of how precarious their situation on public lands has become. Since then, she has dedicated herself to educating people with her photographs and stories about the wild horses. Her book *Wild Hoofbeats: America's Vanishing Wild Horses* is available at [www.WildHoofbeats.com](http://www.WildHoofbeats.com). The award-winning book was released winter of 2008 and is currently in its second printing.

HC sat down with Carol for a brief interview about her work covering the BLM wild horse roundups.

**HC:** You are well known for your stunning photographs of wild horses. Describe the difference emotionally, that you have experienced, between your previous shoots of the wild horses and your shooting of these BLM roundups.

**CW:** There is a huge difference. Spending time with the horses in the wild gives me the most peaceful feeling I have ever experienced. When I am sitting quietly observing them and they go about their normal behaviors, foals playing, mares and stallions mutually grooming, and sometimes even the whole band laying down for a mid-morning nap, I feel blessed because they trust me in their world. At a roundup, the emotions are incredibly sad – as stallions and mares that have been together are wrenched apart, perhaps forever. Mares lose their foals and they call out to each other; the fear in the eyes of the horses as they run frantically from the helicopter or are pushed with a plastic bag on a stick through chutes, as I anxiously wait, hoping none of them become hung up and injured or even die. The emotions I feel at that time are so disturbing I become sick to my stomach and cannot sleep at night. The first roundup I attended, I was so upset by seeing some horses I had fallen in love with shipped off to the Rock Springs holding facility, mares separated from three-month-old foals, and watching one mare die, that I could not even look at the photos for four months.

**HC:** Your eyewitness accounts and photographs are the only opportunity for the public to see what is really going on during these roundups. What has the BLM's attitude towards you been, regarding your reporting on these roundups?

**CW:** The attitude has been mixed. At the first roundup I went to in 2005, I was the only member of the public there, and the Cattoors and the BLM field officer were courteous and answered questions, and let me get up close and observe for as long as I wanted. At the Sand Wash Roundup last fall, the contractors, the Cooks, were suspicious, didn't want me or anyone anywhere near what was going on and were not happy that we were there, and rightfully so. I documented some horrible wrecks at that roundup due to their carelessness. Then at the Pryor's roundup, I arrived the fourth day and was treated with incredible hostility, especially by Jim Sparks, the MT field office manager. The whole BLM staff treated us like potential criminals, asking for our driver's licenses, not letting us go two steps unescorted, and never answering questions. They were resentful about our presence. They became friendlier on Tuesday, after there had been some words said from higher ups, but still it was a very tense situation. At the McCullough Peaks roundup, the WY staff of the BLM could not have been more friendly and helpful, and they did let us see the horses close at the end of the day, but not while the processing was going on. So there have been a real variety of reactions.

**HC:** Your visual record of these wild horse herds may be the only thing we'll have as proof of their existence, if the BLM's ultimate plan for eradication of these horses succeed. If the public can get the ROAM Act passed, will it be enough to save the wild horses and the legacy of this country?

**CW:** The ROAM Act is not perfect but it is a very important start. The most important thing that it does initially, is stop the roundups (there are 12,000 horses scheduled for removal this year) until an accurate count can be made of how many horses actually remain in the wild. Then it provides for new ways to manage the horses in the areas where they should be. Personally, I think the very best thing that could happen would be for the management of wild horses to be removed from the BLM's hands. We need an agency managing them that has the best interests of the wild horses as their priority.



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