

Quite a ride: A history of Sahuarita's wild horses

By Susan E. Swanberg Wick Communications Science Intern | Posted: Wednesday, March 12, 2014 7:44 am

The hoof prints of unshod horses punctuate the wash between Rancho Resort and the Mission Mine in Sahuarita. The prints vary in size, but all are smaller than the feet of an average-sized quarter horse.

It's early March, and the wild horses of Sahuarita are back – though some wonder if they ever really left.

Jodi Cervantes, associate manager for Lewis Management Resources, the company that manages Rancho Resort, saw them herself several weeks ago.

“There were four full-grown horses and two colts,” Cervantes says. She likes the horses, but advises residents to be careful around them.

“We let residents know not to pet them or feed them.”

Her favorite is a horse she calls Buddy; she could get within 10 feet of him. She hasn't seen Buddy for some time.

Rancho Resort residents report frequent horse sightings; they were seen on both ends of Rancho Sahuarita in December and January. Elaine Wood says she's seen the horses on and off for about five years. Like many of Rancho Resort's residents, she enjoys watching them. Earlier this year, Wood got close enough to take a few photographs with her cell phone. One year, Wood says, a wild horse gave birth in the wash near the subdivision.

Wood also remembers a small bachelor herd of stallions that was removed several years ago and wonders what happened to them.

Nobody's horses

Local legend has it that the horses wandered away from the nearby T'ohono O'odham reservation, but nobody is certain. Residents of Sahuarita who've seen the horses say they didn't notice any identifying marks or brands on them.

Questions from a reporter posed to the T'ohono O'odham Nation about the horses were left unanswered.

Although Sahuarita's wild horses often roam the grounds of the Mission Mine on the west side of Interstate 19, they are not owned by Asarco, owner of the mine.

“They are not Asarco horses,” said mine spokeswoman Sandra Elizondo. Wild horses have been seen occasionally on the grounds of the mine, however, since at least 1997.

What the people of Sahuarita do know for sure is that the horses remind them of the Wild West.

Wild horses

Thundering herds of wild horses once roamed the prairies and deserts. Many of the horses that ran free in the West for generations were descendants of horses brought to this country by Spanish explorers and European settlers, horses that strayed or were abandoned to the wild where they survived and reproduced.

How to deal with the remnants of historic bands of horses or horses that have strayed more recently is complicated. Depending upon where they're found, individual "wild" horses are labeled and treated differently.

In the 1970s, Velma Johnston — known to supporters and detractors alike as "Wild Horse Annie" — began a campaign to protect wild horses in the United States. Her efforts culminated in the passage of the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971, which passed Congress unanimously and was signed into law by President Nixon in 1971.

Under the law, wild horses and burros were protected wherever they existed at the time the law was passed. The act defined wild, free-roaming horses and burros as "all unbranded and unclaimed horses and burros on public lands of the United States," including lands administered by the BLM and the U.S. Forest Service.

The free-roaming horses of Sahuarita are far from BLM or Forest Service lands and therefore do not come within the protection of the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971.

Somebody to help

There are, however, people who want to protect Sahuarita's wild horses. Karen Pomroy, of Equine Voices Rescue and Sanctuary is one of these people.

Equine Voices, a horse rescue organization certified by the Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries, takes in as many wild, stray or abandoned horses and burros as it can handle. With the recession and the cost of hay rising, the numbers of abandoned horses have increased, putting a strain on rescue organizations.

Equine Voices is one of the rescue organizations that continues to thrive. Its horses and burros are fostered as long as necessary to keep them healthy and safe. A fortunate few find permanent homes.

Equine Voices will soon complete the purchase of five additional acres. Pomroy hopes that soon there will be room for more horses and burros in need.

Horse of Sahuarita

At a cost of \$20,000 per month, Equine Voices currently cares for more than 50 abandoned, stray or abused horses and five BLM burros. One of those lucky animals is Blaze, a wild horse from Sahuarita. Several years ago, Pomroy says, Equine Voices received a call about seven horses in need of help. The horses were part of a bachelor band of stallions, young males ejected from a group that already had a mature stallion. The horses were wandering around Rancho Sahuarita neighborhoods, raising concerns for their welfare and the welfare of Sahuarita's residents.

Equine Voices found a home for six of the stallions, an idyllic ranch setting near Globe, where the horses could live out their days. Four of those horses are still on the ranch.

According to Pomroy, the seventh stallion, now named Blaze, "missed the bus" and ended up staying at the Equine Voices sanctuary.

On a pleasant day in March, Blaze shared hay with two other horses at Equine Voices sanctuary. Blaze, now a gelding, fits right in, according to Pomroy. Although he previously ran with a wild band, Blaze now socializes with domesticated horses and humans.

Blaze, like many of Sahuarita's wild horses, is small and dark with white markings on his face and several white feet. At Equine Voice's sanctuary Blaze roams freely in a large enclosure he shares with other equine companions. His story is one of the happy endings.

The Rest of the story

Not all of Sahuarita's wild horses have happy endings. In 2012, Pomroy was returning from the airport at 5:30 in the morning when she saw a loose horse on the side of Interstate 19 near Sahuarita. She called 911.

Arizona Department of Public Safety and local law enforcement arrived quickly. Pomroy could see that the horse wanted to rejoin its band across the freeway. She offered to help, but was told the situation was under control.

Later she read in the newspaper that the horse had been shot by AZDPS.

Pomroy wasn't present when the horse was shot. She understands that it could have been a danger to freeway drivers, but the death of that horse still haunts her, especially when she interacts with Blaze.

That same summer, a corral set up in Rancho Sahuarita by the state Department of Agriculture was knocked down and a note left behind by residents who didn't want the horses captured.

Pima County Sheriff's Deputy Joel Bealert has a friendly, open face and a professional bearing. He breathes a sigh when the topic of Sahuarita's wild horses is mentioned.

Bealert and other local law enforcement officers would like to find a solution to Sahuarita's wild horse problem, but their hands are often tied.

Arizona law prohibits animal cruelty including cruel neglect, abandonment or failure to provide medical attention. There's a catch, however. The law applies to "any animal under [a] person's custody or control." If law enforcement doesn't know who has custody and control of Sahuarita's wild horses, they can't hold anyone accountable.

According to Pomroy, Rudy Acevedo, a former Arizona Department of Agriculture livestock officer, was helpful in dealing with wandering horses. He would often call Equine Voices if a horse was in trouble, and Pomroy had the number to Acevedo's cell phone. Now Acevedo is retired, and the lines of communication have become blurred.

A call to the phone number for the current livestock officer now goes to a dispatch center with the Arizona Department of Agriculture. The AZDA has the authority to send an officer out to deal with a wandering horse. After attempts are made to locate its owner, a wandering horse that is captured might be adopted or sent to a horse auction, after inoculations for four equine diseases.

Pomroy worries about the auction option. She says that many people who buy horses at auctions export them to Mexico or Canada for slaughter.

The lack of a permanent solution for the wild horses of Sahuarita means that horses and humans might continue to be endangered. Until ownership of and responsibility for the horses is determined, Sahuarita will probably continue on as before, allowing the horses to roam until they cause problems serious enough that law enforcement and the Arizona Department of Agriculture have no choice but to act.