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1998 SUMMER COMPENDIUM OF WILDLIFE APPRECIATION



# Colorado's Wildlife Company

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# LIVING SYMBOLS OF THE AMERICAN WEST

In a flurry of dust and pounding hoofs, the buffalo and wild horse thunder across the American conscious, durable symbols of the American West. While these two icons loom large as part of the western landscape, they have traveled distinctly opposite paths. The buffalo, once the most numerous large mammal in North America, is now a livestock animal, while the wild horse, brought to America as a domestic animal, today roams free in several western states. Neither is technically a wildlife species. Perhaps they are best thought of as non-wildlife wildlife, two living bits of history it is a thrill to encounter in the Colorado outdoors.

## THE TRUE AMERICAN HERO

The American buffalo, also called bison to distinguish it from Old World species such as the water buffalo, undeniably represents the wild and woolly West. Buffalo head nickels, buffalo soldiers, Buffalo Bill Cody, *Buffalo Gals Won't You Come Out Tonight*, buffalo chips, buffalo wings—the animal's image is far-reaching and evocative. Before European settlement, millions of buffalo roamed the Great Plains. Early accounts reported the prairie darkened by bison as far as the eye could see. Wagon trains were sometimes halted for days, their path blocked by the passage of one of the enormous herds.

Bison were at one time found throughout Colorado, with the exception of the San Juan Mountains and the Uncompahgre Plateau. They inhabited eastern prairies, mountain parks, western valleys, piñon-juniper woodlands, arid shrublands and even alpine tundra. In a now-familiar story, the millions of bison covering the western plains were slaughtered for sport, for meat and hides, and as a strategy for destroying the economic base of Plains Indian culture. By the late 1880s, buffalo had largely disappeared from the West. The last wild bison in Colorado was killed sometime between 1897 and

by Mary Taylor Gray

1904 (accounts vary). Today the buffalo is gone from the wild—even semi-free-roaming herds

in Yellowstone and other areas are managed and kept within certain boundaries—but it is making a return of sorts as a ranched animal. Declared livestock in 1975, bison are increasingly popular as a healthy, low-fat alternative to beef.

While the commercial ranching of bison may seem an undignified fate for these magnificent symbols, it offers a future for buffalo in the West. About 16,000-20,000 bison inhabit public lands, compared to some 200,000 in private herds, says Sam Albrecht of the National Bison Association. Colorado is a leading state for bison ranching. More than 100 Colorado ranches presently manage upwards of 15,000 buffalo. Though wrangled like domestic livestock, bison are still wild animals, cautions Rusty Seedig of the Denver Buffalo Company. "They still portray wild behaviors that people find very interesting," he says. "We have no desire to tame or genetically modify these animals. Their wild nature is what makes them so beneficial to the land by improving the range." He cites a bison ranch near Kiowa where an ungrazed pasture on one side of the road is densely overgrown with yucca. In the pasture across the road, grazing bison have torn out the yucca and promoted the growth of nutritious grasses. "The animals manage themselves," says Seedig. "They migrate as they eat so they don't graze the grass down to dust."

The buffalo still has a powerful hold on the pub-

lic imagination, and the desire to see these relics of the Old West is growing. The Terry Ranch, 41 square miles spread across the Colorado/Wyoming border north of Fort Collins, has made a business of bison viewing. Horse-drawn wagon rides to see the 2,000-head herd attract visitors from around the world. "The public response to seeing bison is tremendous," says owner Dan Thiel. "The buffalo is the true American hero, a symbol of freedom and strength. People look at the buffalo as a survivor."

Bison can be seen on ranches throughout the state but viewers must respect private property and stay on public roads unless otherwise given permission to enter private land. Always remain in a vehicle around bison, which appear docile but can move very quickly and may suddenly charge humans, horses and even vehicles.

## LIVING SYMBOLS OF THE WEST

In classic books like *My Friend Flicka*, *Thunderhead* and *Fury*, wild horses gallop across a storybook West, representing the wild beauty and freedom of the American spirit.

Evidence in fossil records indicate that horses evolved in North America, drifting gradually into Asia over the Bering land bridge. About 10,000 years ago, horses died out in North America, perhaps due to climate and habitat changes or overhunting by Stone Age hunters. In 1519, horses returned to the New World with Spanish conquistador Hernan Cortes on his expedition to conquer Mexico. Mexican settlers brought horses to the Southwest. Trading, theft by native peoples, and escapes of individual animals fueled the diaspora of the horse north through the western part of the continent. Horses became established as free-roaming, feral populations; at one time more than one million wild horses may have galloped across the western range.

A public outcry against the slaughter of wild horses for pet food, spearheaded in the 1950s and 1960s by Velma Johnston, who came to be known as Wild Horse Annie, led to passage of the Wild Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act in 1971. It protects the animals from capture and killing and places them

*"...wild free-roaming horses and burros are living symbols of the historic and pioneer spirit of the West... they contribute to the diversity of life forms within the Nation and enrich the lives of the American people..."*

Wild Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act

under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Today about 40,000 wild horses roam primarily on public land in Nevada, Utah, Wyoming, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, California, Arizona and New Mexico.

In Colorado, BLM oversees four wild horse Herd Management Areas—Piceance Basin west of Meeker; Little Book Cliffs northeast of Grand Junction; Sandwash Basin northwest of Craig; and Spring Creek southwest of Montrose. Presently about 1,200 wild horses inhabit Colorado, though the appropriate management level established by BLM is 430 animals, according to BLM range specialist Johnny Riel. There are no wild burros in Colorado. Balancing wild horses, wildlife and domestic livestock on limited public rangeland is a challenge. Wild horses feed on native grasses

and shrubs like winterfat and black sage. The semi-desert shrublands they inhabit offer insufficient forage to maintain large numbers of these animals. Thus the BLM launches periodic "gathers," rounding up wild horses and making them available for adoption.

Wild horse bands are defended by a stallion that gathers breeding mares into a harem. Stallions spend much of their time fighting off other males that try to lead off the mares. Kicking, challenging and chasing occasionally end with the classic rearing-stallion battles familiar from movies and litera-

ture. The herd, consisting of mares and their foals, is led on its daily circuit of waterholes and grazing pastures by a dominant lead mare. Young stallions chased from the herd by the dominant male gather into bachelor herds.

Wild horses are quite skittish and not easily approached. Viewers should use binoculars for up-close viewing.

## SPIRITS OF THE WEST

To most Americans, wild horses and buffalo, the non-wildlife wildlife, still represent the West and, in a larger sense, the American identity. In bison we see an indomitable spirit that remains stalwart and strong even in the face of change. And wild horses, untamed and independent, still run free across a landscape that seems limitless. ■

*Colorado's Wildlife Company* and Mary Taylor Gray were honored by the Colorado Authors League with a 1997 Top Hands Award in Specialty Writing for the Summer 1997 issue "Summer's Hummers."





# WATCHING THE WILD WEST



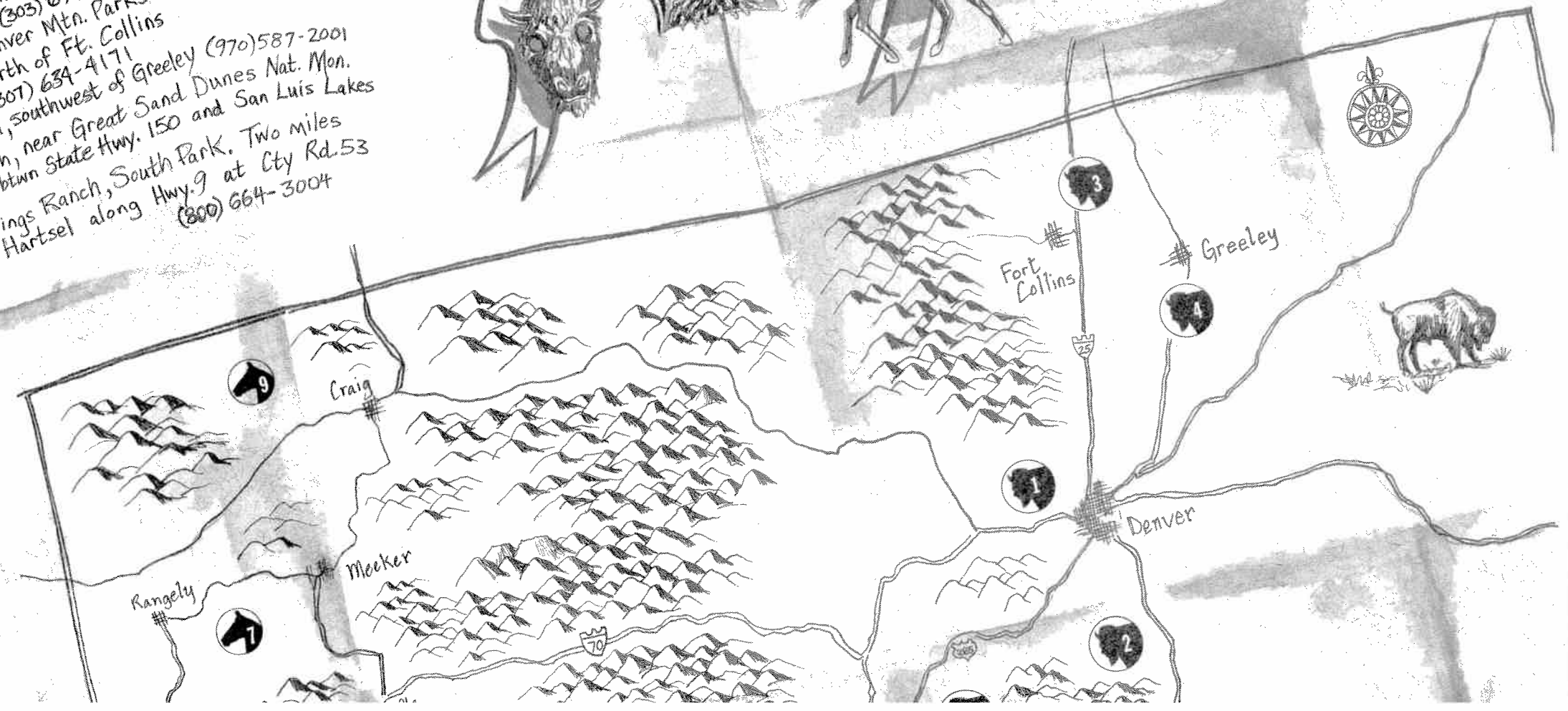
## WILD HORSE HOTSPOTS

7. Piceance Basin, contact BLM in Meeker (970) 878-3601
8. Little Book Cliffs, contact BLM in Grand Junction (970) 244-3000
9. Sandwash Basin, contact BLM in Craig (970) 824-4441
10. Spring Creek, contact BLM in Durango (970) 247-4082

## BISON HOTSPOTS

1. Genesee Park, Denver Mtn. Parks (303) 697-4545
2. Daniels Park, Denver Mtn. Parks
3. Terry Ranch, north of Ft. Collins (307) 634-4171
4. Spomer Ranch, southwest of Greeley (970) 587-2001
5. Zapata Ranch, near Great Sand Dunes Nat. Mon. Along Lane 6 btwn State Hwy. 150 and San Luis Lakes
6. Hartsel Springs Ranch, South Park. Two miles south of Hartsel along Hwy. 9 at Cty Rd. 53 (800) 664-3004

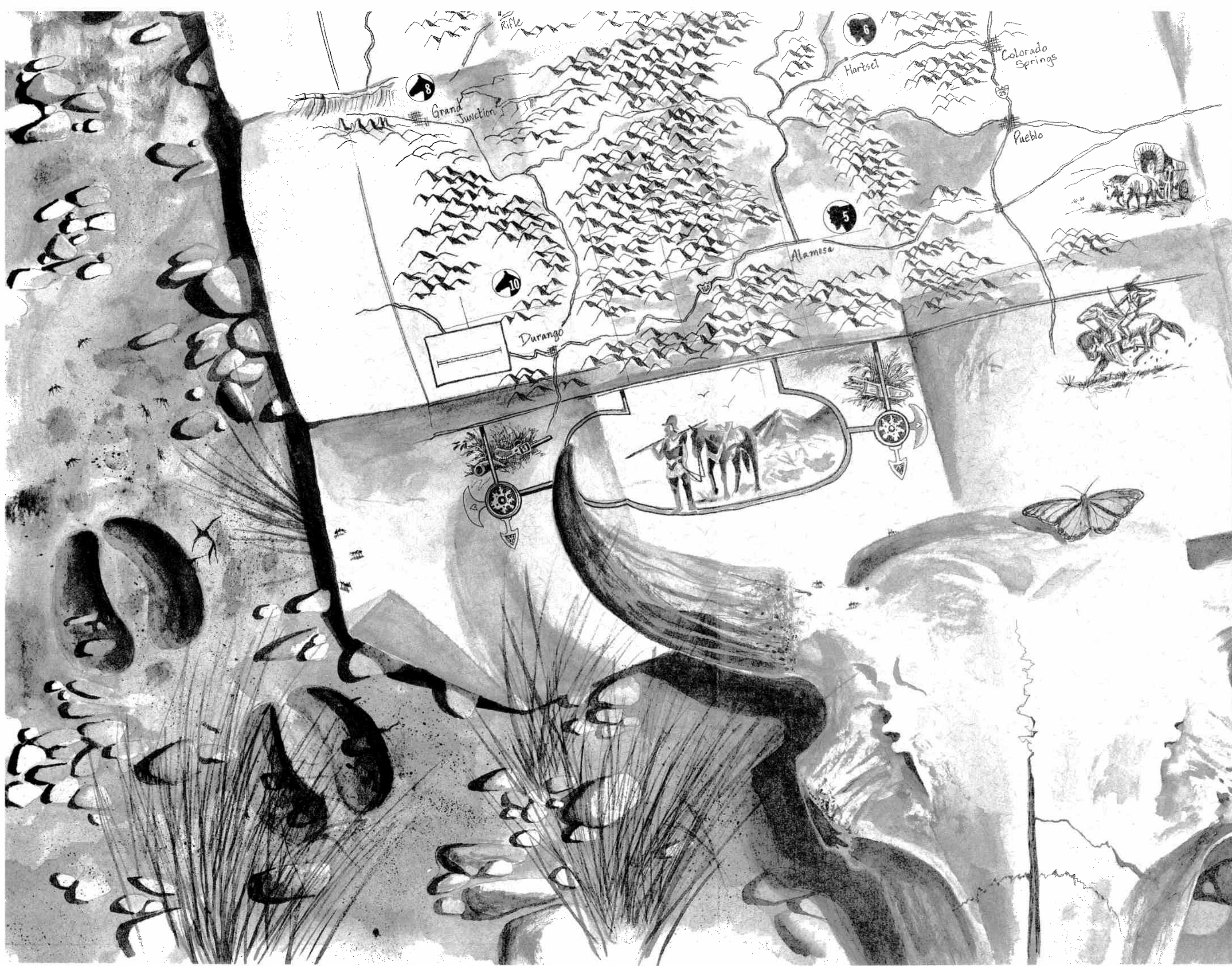
# COLORADO



## TIPS ON VIEWING WILD HORSES AND BISON

- Avoid wild horse areas in wet weather; the soft clay roads become impassable.
- Expect rough, unpaved road conditions in wild horse areas.
- Stay on designated roads.
- Do not enter private property without permission.
- Keep pets restrained and do not allow them to chase horses or bison.
- Do not chase horses or bison, with a vehicle, on horseback or on foot.
- Wild horse areas are remote. Take food, water, warm clothing and sun protection. Gas up and check your vehicle's fluid levels before departing.





- levels before departing.
- Do not closely approach the animals or attempt to feed them.
- Stay in your car when viewing bison; they can move very quickly and will charge. Never approach them on foot or horseback.
- Use binoculars and telephoto lenses for up-close viewing.
- Leave gates as you found them, open or closed.
- Watch for wildlife while viewing in horse country—coyotes, red-tailed and ferruginous hawks, pronghorn, elk, mule deer, bald and golden eagles, turkey vultures.

- When seeking horses, watch for stud piles—large piles of manure left as territorial markers by stallions.
- Avoid getting too close to waterholes. Your presence may prevent the lead mare from bringing her herd in for water.

- Bison breeding season in July and August offers interesting viewing. Bulls snort, paw the ground, shake their horns and may charge and do battle among themselves.

*For detailed information, maps and tips on viewing wild horses in Colorado, contact the Denver BLM office for their brochure "Wild Horses: A Visitor's Guide to Wild Horse Herd Management Areas" —(303) 239-3600.*



# DOW WORKING FOR WILDLIFE

## Sandwash Basin Illustrates Wild Horse-Wildlife Conflicts

Under Colorado law, wild horses are not considered wildlife, therefore the Division of Wildlife is not responsible for managing them. But wild horses can greatly affect wildlife habitat. Though the impact varies by each location, the Sandwash Basin herd near Craig demonstrates the conflicts that can arise when wild horses share habitat with wildlife.

The impact of horses, specifically on pronghorn using the Basin as winter range, can be substantial, says Maybell District Wildlife Manager Brad Petch. The horses are fenced into the area and as the grasses become overgrazed, the horses switch to shrubs like saltbush and greasewood. "Year-round use, day after day, seems to be very detrimental for wildlife habitat and forage production," says Petch. Recent evidence indicates that between wild horses, wildlife and domestic livestock, the animal use of the Basin is twice what it should be to keep the habitat healthy. Because their digestive system is less efficient than that of ruminants like cattle and elk, wild horses need more forage in proportion to their numbers.

On his monthly flights to count wildlife herds, Petch looks at horse numbers and distribution as

well. "While we're up there, we can see how the horses use different parts of the management area," explains Petch. Though BLM has designated that the Sandwash Basin can support 200 horses, the current population is around 300.

"Horses add extra layers of complexity to management," says Petch, "an extra biological layer and many more political layers." A group representing BLM, DOW, livestock interests and wild horse advocates has been meeting to address the problem. "With this information that we're probably at twice the use the Basin will support, the scrambling is on, with everyone trying to carve out their piece," says Petch.

Solutions aren't easy since federal law mandates very specifically how the horses are to be managed. Roundups, the major means of controlling horse numbers, are expensive and only happen about every three or four years. By contrast, wildlife can be managed by adjusting the number of hunting licenses, and livestock numbers can be directly controlled. Domestic sheep grazing presently accounts for about 75% of the area's use. "Some way to move the horses, using water or whatever, to other horse-free areas in the Basin may even out the use a bit, take animals off the preferred spots and let the grass grow back," says Petch. "It could be very beneficial for all the species there."

### GALLOP ON DOWN TO THE NEW WATCHABLE WILDLIFE VIEWING SKILLS WORKSHOP!

"Wildlife Watch" is an 8 to 10 hour, family-oriented workshop covering where, when and how to see wildlife; wildlife identification; ecosystems; how to use binoculars and spotting scopes; ethics; the basics of wildlife management; and a field trip. Price is \$30 per person or \$40 per family (not recommended for children under 12 due to length and intensity of class sessions). Workshops will be held around the state. To find out about classes, call (303) 291-7258 or fax (303) 291-7110.

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