



Wild horses showing off on the open prairie. (Wikimedia Creative Commons)

A horse lover’s paradise

Little Book Cliffs has a resident herd of up to 150 mustangs

By TIPS FROM THE POSSE
By MARK RACKAY

Many people consider horses to be spirit animals that can touch the soul of their owners. These people believe horses are kind, gentle, healing, and make great friends. I am not one of them.

It's not that I don't like horses, it is the other way around: horses hate me. Every horse I ever had a relationship with went out of its way to buck me, kick me, bite me, and in some instances, leave me stranded in the woods. It all started with a rescue horse, named Ralph, that my grandfather brought home.

Ralph, the horse, was sentenced to a glue factory, probably for crimes he committed against his prior owner. My grandfather brought Ralph home, with the idea that a horse would be good for me. Problem was that Ralph had two distinct personalities.

Whenever my grandfather was around, Ralph was clean, hardworking, kind, even tempered, and honest to a fault. Whenever he was with me, away from my grandfather, Ralph was dirty, lazy, mean, violent tempered, and an incorrigible liar. I am sure that Ralph smoked cigarettes, sold dirty magazines and stole lunch money from school kids.

Ralph hated when I rode him. When he saw me coming with the bridle, he ran away. When I caught him, he would bite me. Some days, Ralph would act like he wanted

to be ridden, and allow me to saddle him up without the usual argument. We would ride off, far away from home and it would begin.

That horse would walk under low hanging branches, sending me flying high heels over tin cups off his back. Then Ralph would look at me and laugh out loud and take off running, all the way back to the barn. Sometimes it would take hours for me to drag my injured carcass back home.

Colorado is truly a horse lover's paradise. Aside from the many horses privately owned in our state, we also have a sizable population of wild horses, called mustangs. A mustang is a free-roaming horse of the American West that first descended from horses brought to America from the Spaniards. Because they are descended from once domesticated horses, perhaps feral horses would be a better term to describe them.

In 1971, the United States Congress recognized that "wild free-roaming horses and burros are living symbols of the historic and pioneer spirit of the west, which continue to contribute to the diversity of life forms within the Nation and enrich the lives of the American people."

The present herds of mustangs vary in degree to which they can be traced to original Iberian horses. Some of them contain a greater mixture of ranch stock, and more recent breed

releases, while others are unchanged from original Iberian stock.

Mustangs are medium sized horses, measuring up to 15 hands tall, and weighing in at up to 800 pounds. On the prairie, wild horses can live up to 30 years. Mustangs live in large herds. The herd typically consists of mares, foals, yearlings and are guarded by a stallion.

The population of mustangs has been decreasing for several decades. It is estimated that 72,000 wild horses roam freely in 10 Western states. It is estimated that another 43,000 mustangs live off-range in corrals and pastures while another 250,000 of them have been placed in private care.

If you want to view these beautiful animals, you can do it in western Colorado. The Little Book Cliffs Wild Horse Area is just 8 miles northeast of Grand Junction. This area spans 36,000 acres and has a resident herd of up to 150 mustangs, including palominos, paints, grays, blacks and many others. Spring and fall are the best times to find the wild horses here grazing on the plateaus and canyons.

Another place to view mustangs in our neck of the woods is the Spring Creek Basin Herd Management Area in Disappointment Valley, located between Norwood and Dove Creek. This herd contains bays, sorrels, grays and pintos dating back to the early 1900s.

According to legend, these horses descended from those of a Montana

rancher who originally came to the valley to sell off a herd of stolen horses to the U.S. Cavalry. The herd is now managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and roams freely on 21,932 acres of open rolling hills and mountain terrain.

If you decide to visit these areas and view the mustangs, check with the local BLM office before you go for current conditions and current information regarding the wild herds. There are other places in Colorado where you can visit mustangs and information is available on the BLM website at blm.gov.

Old Ralph lived with us for many years. I went away to school, and upon returning home, Ralph was gone. My grandfather said that Ralph got old and passed but I often wonder if Ralph showed his true colors to my grandfather. As mean as Ralph was, I miss him, maybe just a little.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press and the Delta County Independent, an avid hunter and world class saltwater angler, who travels across North and South America in search of adventure and serves as a director and public information officer for the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse. For information about the posse call 970-252-4033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org

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Beware:

Some plants may be more dangerous than you think

By LINDA CORWINE MCINTOSH

Knowing what plants are growing in your backyard or around you could be extremely important. I'm sure you're not planning to eat a plant that you can't identify, but the danger may be secretly looming.

A few years ago I told you a story about some kids in the Montrose area that ate the extremely poisonous plant known as western water hemlock. Luckily the kids received the medical attention that they needed and are happy, healthy kids today. The reason I'm telling you this is because once again samples of water hemlock have been brought into the extension office for identification.

Water hemlock, or "cowbane" (*Cicuta douglasii* spp.) is considered one of the most deadly poisonous plants in North America. It's not only toxic to children if they take a bite of it, but it can be toxic by merely touching it.

Water hemlock was suspected of killing horses in the Ridgway area a few years ago, and some have questioned the death of a horse or two in recent days. So if you have livestock or pets you need to be aware!

With that said, some of us have been seeing this weed growing near the ditch banks in various parts of town. The poison from the hemlock plant is mainly in the roots, but the entire plant should be avoided because any portion of it could cause vomiting, convulsions, fever and delirium. Death can soon follow.

This plant, which I think looks somewhat like a carrot's top that's going to seed, is actually a member of the parsley family. It has a hollow stem, which is one way to identify it. Just be sure to wear rubber gloves when you're working with it. You can check the stem to see if it's hollow and look for the tuberous roots to identify it. There are several species of "poison hemlock" but nonetheless, all are poisonous.

Water hemlock is native. The white flowers usually appear from June to July, but I've seen them still hanging in there in many areas. The fruit matures in August-September and as you probably guessed, the seeds are toxic. If you're unsure about what you might have you could bring a sample to the CSU Extension office, in a sealed plastic bag for an ID. Just be extremely cautious when handling this plant!

See GARDENING page A11



Some plants such as this water hemlock are extremely dangerous. Knowing what plants are growing in your area and teaching children not to eat any plant unless you tell them it's safe to eat is wise. (Linda Corwine McIntosh/Special to the Montrose Daily Press)



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