

## TESTIMONIAL

### Wild Horses of the Playa

Alvord Desert, OR, 2005

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Besides searching for and observing the wild horses on Steens, another pleasure of ours when in the area is playing on the 10 mile long playa flat on the east side of the mountain, also known as the Alvord Desert. However, on this day, we didn't know the dried lakebed would lead us to a different herd of mustangs, a herd we'd never seen before. The playa flat is a stark white, parched and powdery alkali area- the remaining sign of what once was a shallow lake. It is roughly 10 miles north and south running parallel near the flank of the mountain, and runs about 5 miles east and west.

We headed east to where there seemingly is not much but the dusty playa's edge, which has only little islands of bunchgrasses, until you travel out further where it turns into the well-known sea of sage and yellow Rabbit brush. We came across a set of hoof prints... no sign of horseshoes anywhere. Initially, I didn't think much of it, other than free-ranging ranch horses, or someone had ridden out there. But why there, out literally in "no man's land"? So while my husband scanned the ground for mineral and other rock treasures, I followed these horse tracks up toward the sagebrush. The higher up I went the more pronounced the trail, with many more horse tracks and horse apples, and soon stallion piles. By this time, the "little horse trail", was obviously a major horse-highway! Apparently they traveled a regular well-used path, at it largest was approximately 8' across. Coming down over the sage lands, when they got to the playa flats, they apparently fanned out. But why? Why would wild horses- or any living creature come out here, this no man's land, with no shade, or shelter, or water? I still don't know for certain, but believe most likely, for the salt and mineral composition of the playa bed.



Farther up as we drove out of the playa and onto a single lane gravel rutted road, we came across a small band of wild horses. It appeared there were six mares of various ages and one stallion. I wasn't sure, considering the topography of the area, if this was one small band of a larger herd that split off temporarily for foraging purposes, or if this were a successful bachelor stallion that has been quite good at stealing mares. This is where my hunch chose to take residence. It most likely was a relatively newly established band within the year, as there were no foals with these mares.... yet. In my years of observing wild horses, I'm still fascinated today dispelling the myth and folklore about the wild stallion "leading his band of mares to safety"~ the shiny black stallion leading his harem. I have found that it is the matriarch, the lead mare, who chooses when to go to the local drinking hole; move to other grazing grounds; or where to run when there is real or perceived danger. The stallion often runs the flank of the herd, but mostly places himself between his herd and the intruder, whether it be another stallion, human, or other predatory animal.

Within this band on the east side of the Alvord desert, there was one rather stocky stallion, a stout mahogany bay, all neck and long dark and knotted mane. We got out of our truck

and eased our way towards the band with cameras in hand, daring to see how close we could get to these magnificent horses. The stallion whipped around with tangled mane flying with the motion of his head, as he turned to face us, snorting loudly 3 times, so loudly and suddenly it startled us. The mares quickly lifted their heads and shifted their positions nervously without taking an eye off of us. One big chestnut mare with much authority and equal grace and power, wielded around and galloped to a safer distance with others following suite, and again faced us trying to detect what we were by trying to catch our scent.

This whole time, the stout young stallion stood his ground and stayed between his herd and us, but trotted side to side with both his head and tail elevated. He too was trying to catch our scent, however, the breeze was in our favor. His high tail carriage was a sign to his mares of the potential danger, and his arched neck and elevated head turning at different angles was to get a better view of us, as well as an attempt to detect our scent. He snorted several more times, and at one point with determined demeanor and arched neck, trotted a few steps towards us. My husband and I looked at each other and I'm sure I heard myself gulp, as we were a ways from our vehicle, as where there was no trees or boulders to jump onto to get out of his way. But the better of me "slapped myself silly" and back to what I know about horse behavior, and reminded myself that they will posture to test intruders, not necessarily run over them as they will preserve themselves first and usually flee, before they put themselves in harm's way (in horses, flight usually wins over fight, unless it's another stallion interested in his mares or they're backed into a corner and scared for their life). We stood our ground, and I raised my arms in the air to make myself look bigger, and the stud decided my 5'2" stature plus waving arms was too much and wheeled around and followed his mares and stayed at their back, stopping every once in a while to re-assess us. Afterwards, I was in "awe" to see that he was trying to get us to 'show our cards'. Soon after, all we saw was a dust trail where the horses were.

Besides deep and complicated social structures, horse herds have very effective safety measures such as warning behaviors for the herd to recognize and respond to, as well as for the intruder to be aware of. They also have built-in zones of tolerance for safety, in terms of proximity to the herd.... All for herd preservation.

There are miles of fenceless deserts and no telephone poles.... nothing but natural ecosystems and room to breath. And still people ask, "You're going to the desert for your vacation... why?" If they only knew.....