

# TESTIMONIAL

## Sparring Stallions

Steens, OR, 2005

By Sonya Spazian

We headed to Steens Mountain range and camped near the top, at Fish Lake. With much detail aside, we drove to the top and stood overlooking Kiger Gorge, the giant U-shaped glacial carved valley on the 30 mile long mountain, that is home of the geologically isolated mustangs known as the Kigers. The next day was overcast and somewhat cool, a nice break from the usual searing heat. As we drove, I was immersed in conversation; so much so that my husband had to remind me we were approaching the vicinity of our beloved mustangs. It caught my attention, but thought... "Oh, but how likely to see them this easy and quickly off the road!".

Not a minute passed when I saw three, and exclaimed my excitement, jutting my arm across his chest as I pointed them out. I exclaimed without holding anything back, so much so that Rick almost drove off the road! We stopped our vehicle and watched in amazement 3 young bachelor stallions playing, chasing, and sparring. One, a palomino was larger, and appeared somewhat older than the other two by body maturity and steady demeanor. He was a bit weary of us and watchful, while the two younger stallions, though stopping momentarily to assess us, went right back to having a vivacious ball. They took turns chasing one another, but always returned to where the palomino was "stationed". They reared at each other, threw front legs over the back of the other, and then had a fabulous game of biting at each other's legs, bringing the other to the ground (both front and back ends to protect their own appendages).

These were young bachelor stallions, run out of the herd by the main stallion, so they were older than two year olds. Their soon-to-be missions in life, will be to steal mares and begin a band of their own. But for now, they had a magnificent and innocent time sparring~ clearing playing, but more importantly, testing their own strength, should some day the need arise. Once the handsome palomino became accustomed to our vehicle's presence sitting there, once in a while he joined the others running around, but was still watchful. We chose not to get out of the vehicle as they were less concerned about the big "metal box", than had we gotten out. Their behaviors would have changed, if not disappeared in the vast hills of sage. We got them on videotape, and some stills.



Their mock battles and play took them farther and farther up the flank of the mountain, so we continued our own journey to scout for the larger herd which should be nearby, based on these three youngsters. We turned off on the Steens loop road just a mile or two further. We drove a couple miles when the mustang radar of my peripheral vision, picked up a band of about twenty to our north. These horses were on a farther hill, but we got out and walked

to the edge of the closest hill to see if we can see another part of the herd in the small valley below, where they tend to rest.

We walked between the wet sagebrush where our shoes, socks, and pants were all saturated- but that was the last thing on my mind. I kept my eye open for mustang mane-hairs to use in drawings of wild horses. We got to the edge, but there were no horses below as we had hoped, just across on the other hill, too far to recognize distinguishable markings. But even as far as they were, it was so quiet, and along with the nearby hills (which created something similar to an amphitheater) we could still hear a couple mares squealing, either establishing or re-establishing their placement in the herd with another ("the pecking order"). That, or putting an interested stallion in his place. When mares are near, but not in estrus, and are approached by the stallion recognizing the olfactory signals, the mares will typically squeal and strike the front legs towards him indicating they are not ready for his offer. A few days to a week later, the mare will then usually accept the stallion's advances. Even as far as they were, I was thrilled to see the herd again. They were about a hill away from the three bachelors, or roughly  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile away, for those of us accustomed to judging distance in miles. After I was satisfied filling my sight of these horses, and breathing their same air, we continued our way to their local watering hole where I searched for more horsehair.

This week-long trip was much too quick, but we were able to experience so many wonders of nature. Besides the horses, we were fortunate to see two different herds of antelope, one of which had young; a great horned owl sitting on a window sill of an old weathered and sagging barn from days-gone-by; coyotes, red-tail hawks, golden eagles, and a two barred owls who circled over our heads a couple times to get a closer look at us, before we headed for home. But it's the horses, their social dynamics, and their wild flying manes that are forever burned in my memory.