



WILD HORSES

of America Foundation

Sinbad Wild Burro Gather – Utah (Day 1)

DATE: 11 April 2016
LOCATION: Temple Mountain Road (Exit 131) and I-70
BURROS GATHERED: 23

INTRODUCTION: Yesterday, I traveled to the small town of Green River, Utah and checked into a motel. I met up with the BLM escorts early this morning and we drove out to the gather site. My intent is to observe the first three days of the “Sinbad Wild Burro Gather, Removal and Research,” which could go on until the 20th of April. To give you some background I’ll start with some information taken from BLM sources, and then follow that up with a summary of my observations and conversations from the field. I did my best to take good notes, but my shorthand is deficient and my memory is not far behind.

If you have any specific questions about the gather or studies, please post them in the comments section. I’ll read them Tuesday evening and will do my best to get answers from the BLM employees at the gather.

Jim Schnepel
Wild Horses of America Foundation

SUMMARY OF BLM PUBLIC INFORMATION RELEASE: The Bureau of Land Management Price Field Office will soon be gathering and removing excess wild burros from within and outside the Sinbad Herd Management Area (HMA) in east-central Utah.

The BLM expects to gather approximately 200 wild burros while removing about 130 excess to reduce the population to the appropriate management level of 50 to 70 animals. The current population is estimated at 220 animals.

A contract gather crew has been bait trapping animals since early March. Approximately 125 burros have been captured to date. The burros are widely distributed across the HMA, and new spring forage growth is increasing

this dispersal, making it difficult to bait the remaining animals into capture pens. Thus a helicopter drive-trapping contractor is being brought in to complete the gather.

In addition to removing excess animals, the BLM will conduct research to improve population survey methods and increase knowledge about the wild burro herds. A new “hybrid double observer sightability mode” survey method will use information gathered from helicopter infrared surveys, traditional observation flights and tracking information from 30 burros fitted with radio collars.

The Sinbad Plan calls for the collection of data including noninvasive analysis of fecal DNA for genetics and pregnancy testing, estimation of burro survival, fertility and recruitment rates, movement patterns, forage use, habitat selection, and social behaviors.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE STUDIES:

http://www.blm.gov/ut/st/en/prog/wild_horse_and_burro.html

BLM GATHER UPDATES:

http://www.blm.gov/ut/st/en/prog/wild_horse_and_burro/SinbadGather.html

JIM'S NOTES:

- The public viewing area offered a pretty good view and we were about ½ mile from the trap. There were 8 observers from the public and 2 BLM employees who were tracking the progress and answering many questions from us.
- I asked about the 1 burro who had died during the bait trapping portion of the gather and was told that a solitary “jack” had been caught in the trap and when the contractor backed up the trailer and opened the gate the jack panicked and ran into a panel and broke his neck. He died as a result of the injury and was not euthanized.
- The BLM explained that while most burro herds foal year-round, the two herds in Utah predominantly foal in the Fall months. Thus, it would be unlikely that they would end up gathering any foals. Some of the burros may have “split ears” from locals going out and lassoing them – this apparently does not happen as much any more.
- The body condition (Henneke) scores for the 23 gathered burros were mostly in the 4 range, with a few rated at 3 (including one “old” burro), and one was a 5. In other words, they appeared to be in fairly good condition for coming out of winter.

- The 23 gathered burros were taken to the Axtell facility (Utah) where they will join the others who have, and will be, removed. Later, some will be returned to the range.
- The first burro was pushed toward the trap at about 8:30 am when it was cool. 72.3 degrees was the hottest temp I saw in the afternoon.
- Burros seem to be a lot more difficult than wild horses to round up via helicopter. They are “cagey, smart, agile and fast” and tend to go everywhere except where the helicopter is trying to push them, and they often break ranks and run off in opposite directions from their comrades. Contractors on horseback play a big part in picking up the slack where the helicopter fails. The helicopter can often get the burros close to the trap, but once they elude it then the mounted contractors give chase and try to lasso the animals. Burros are surprisingly fast and it’s not uncommon for them to outrun a mounted horse, especially in rougher terrain. They are determined and very good at escaping from the ropes, but once the rope settles on their necks this group tended to quiet right down and it looked pretty easy to work them toward the trap site. The contractor does not “choke down” on the rope and let’s the burro lead with another mounted horses lightly guiding it toward the trap. If the lasso occurred more than about 1/3rd mile from the trap site they would send a truck and trailer out to pickup the animal.
- This contract is paid by the day and not by the animal, so the contractor is less inclined to push the burros too hard. The ratio of “gallons of aviation fuel burned” to “burros gathered” cannot be very high.
- This gather would probably not have happened this year if it were not for the studies they want to conduct. Said that it was not a push from livestock grazers or other groups that made it happen. They are very interested to learn how to better count burros since they are more difficult to spot than horses from the air: they don’t necessarily spook when a helicopter flies over, and they are very good at hiding under trees. A second burro herd (name?) in Arizona has been identified as a potential second study herd – the EA is being done.
- Once the gather is finished the BLM employees and contractors will try to figure out how many burros they think are left in the field, then release enough (with collars for the study) to bring that number up to about 100.
- The “trap” used for a helicopter burro gather looks a lot like a trap used for wild horses. The heart of the trap is a small pen made out of livestock panels that has a gate that can be swung shut by a wrangler who jumps out of his hiding place after the animals are inside, and two lengths of jute fencing run out in a v-formation away from the trap that direct the animals

into the pen. One notable difference is that for burros they do not usually use a Judas animal to lead the gathered animals into the trap.

- There are three helicopter contractors who are approved by the BLM to gather wild horses and burros: Sun J Livestock, Cattoor Livestock Roundup Company and Sampson Livestock. Sun J has the helicopter contract for the Sinbad Burro gather, while Cattoor was doing the bait trapping. Cattoor did not continue with the helicopter portion of the gather since they had already met their contracted \$500k helicopter minimum (based on all work performed for the BLM), which means the other two companies have priority until they exceed their \$500k minimum.
- Sun J brought two helicopters to the gather. The primary helicopter (in all photos, below) had the most experienced pilot and he almost exclusively pushed the burros into the trap. Whereas, the less experienced pilot spent more time in the outlying areas pushing small groups of burros to a point where the primary helicopter would pick them up. While there were times when the primary pilot made some fairly dramatic moves at low altitude to keep the burros headed in the desired direction, neither helicopter seemed to push the animals very hard. Early in the day many of the burros escaped before being pushed into the trap and then worked on eluding the contractors with ropes: we were keeping a tally of “cowboys and helicopters” vs. “burros” and the burros were clearly winning. Three of the burros escaped the v-shape of the fencing by jumping the jute and running into the hills. A few of us cheered, but then we realized that it just meant that they would be hazed again. After some failed attempts by the helicopter, they started stationing some mounted contractors behind trees in the V of the trap. After the burros had been pushed deep enough into the trap the mounted horses would jump out and push the burros toward the pen. This seemed to help, but not always as the burros often saw the “hidden” horses and changed directions.
- Beyond the Sinbad Burro HMA, Utah also has a 2nd burro HMA named Canyonlands. It was last gathered in 1988 when 15-16 burros were removed. It has been self-regulating due to drought, coyotes and mountain lions.
- About “75%” of the Sinbad HMA is north of I-70, but only a small percentage of the total herd lives on the north. The burros do use interstate underpasses to go back and forth. BLM wants to know why they don’t go up there more often. Different forage? Don’t to use underpasses? Other? One thought is that they tend to winter on the far south end of the range so don’t end up going as far north the rest of the year.
- Water is usually the biggest limiting factor when figuring burro capacity for the HMA. May and June are usually the driest, while July and August

usually have monsoonal rains to offset the hotter weather. Seldom do they haul water to the burros as they are very smart and will move to water. In general, burros can keep big horn sheep off water holes (though no sheep are on this HMA), and jacks have been know to be aggressive and chase pronghorn, cattle and backpackers away from water holes.

- BLM should soon be releasing its official count for total population of wild horses and burros. Expected to be about 67,000. Current management plan calls for 26-27,000. Most herd management areas in US are over AML. Of 19 HMAs in Utah only Kingtop is under – in early 2000s there was a drought and a malfunctioning float on a water trough caused 50+ horses to die of dehydration within 10 days. Now there are only about 10-12 horses there.

PICTURES FROM TODAY’S GATHER:

Burros headed away from the trap.



Public viewing area.



Burros headed toward the trap.







Lassoed burro being guided to the trap site.









Headed to Axtell.



Cows aside, this is a BEAUTIFUL HMA!



I plan to be out on the gather again tomorrow. I'll try to submit another report in the evening.

Jim

www.wildhorses.org

