

## ROCKY HILLS HMA

The Rocky Hills Herd Management Area (HMA) is located 50 miles southwest of Carlin, Nevada in Eureka County. The HMA consists of 83,998 acres and is 15 miles wide by 13 miles long encompassing the Rocky Hills and Simpson Park Mountains. Elevations range from the highest point at 8,100 feet, down to 5,500 feet in elevation through out Denay and Horse Creek Valley that surround the Mountain ranges. The northern boundary of the HMA runs along JD Ranch Road and the western boundary along Grass Valley Road.

The AML for the Rocky Hills HMA has been established as a range of 86-143 wild horses. The current estimated population is 150 wild horses. The HMA will be gathered in conjunction with the Callaghan HMA, which is currently scheduled for 2009-10. Movement can occur and has likely occurred between the Callaghan, Bald Mountain, and Rocky Hills HMAs. Water in the HMA is somewhat limiting, and concentrated use occurs of Cadet Spring. Other sources available include a few springs and some perennial streams.

In July and August 1999, a series of lightning caused fires burned a total acreage in excess of 1.6 million acres within the state of Nevada.

The Trail Canyon fire occurred of Grass Valley, and burned the west slope of the Simpson Park Mountains and portions of the Rocky Hills, and Horse Creek Valley west of State Highway 278, and north of State Highway 50. The Trail Canyon fire impacted the Rocky Hills HMA and an area inhabited by wild horses known as the Simpson Park Mountains.

The fire burned primarily sagebrush/grass communities in the lower elevations of 5,500 to 6,500 feet. The higher elevations consisted of primarily Pinyon-Juniper plant communities throughout the elevations 6,500-7,500 feet. 39,759 acres, or 47% of the Rocky Hills HMA burned. Within the HMA, McClusky Creek, Pat Canyon, Fye Canyon, and several springs to include Dugout Spring, Cadet Trough Spring, and Ryepatch Spring burned in the Trail Canyon fire. The fire burned the vegetation up to and around all of the water sources within the Rocky Hills HMA.

An emergency gather was conducted in November 1999 to completely remove all wild horses within the HMA and place them in temporary holding facilities until rangeland conditions improved sufficiently to support the population. A total of 256 horses were removed and sent to Palomino Valley Center for processing into the adoption program and temporary holding. An estimated six horses were still remaining in the HMA post gather. The horses captured in the Rocky Hills HMA were relatively large in size, with some animals reaching 16 hands high. Several paint, several curly and many appaloosa horses were captured, in addition to those that were brown, bay, black, red roan, buckskin, chestnut and grulla (mouse colored). Many of the horses also exhibited draft horse characteristics, and several had curly haircoats.

Prior to shipping the horses, BLM WH&B Specialists marked some of the horses exhibiting historical or desirable traits. These horses were to be separated and held in a temporary holding facility near Jiggs, Nevada for 2-3 years or until it was determined that the range condition on the HMA had improved and was established enough to support the horses. Several other districts also gathered horses from their HMAs through emergency fire removals in 1999 and also held their horses at the temporary holding facility.

In October of 2002, the range conditions on the Rocky Hills HMA had improved sufficiently to allow the return of the horses. Seventy-four of the displaced horses were returned to the area. All of these horses were freezemarked in the traditional way (left side of neck) and were also freezemarked with a number on the left hip indicating which HMA the horse had originally been gathered from. The horses selected for release back into the HMA represent a wide variety of colors including paints, buckskins, grullas, appaloosas, red roans, and duns, and were large in size. Three stallions strongly exhibiting the curly traits were also released. One curly was an older sorrel. The other two were two-year-old studs, one red roan and one sorrel.

After the release, the estimated population was 94-98 wild horses within the Rocky Hills HMA. The total number of horses released back onto the HMA was 74. According to a February 2002 flight, 20 horses were observed in the HMA in the area of Geyser Creek and BLM staff estimated 20-24 animals remained within the HMA.

### **Census and Distribution**

The most recent census was conducted in March 2005. These results were used to estimate the current population using 17.5% average annual rate of increase. During the census, 95 wild horses were observed.

Band size throughout the HMA averaged 6 wild horses with observations ranging from single animals to as many as 21.

In the eastern portion, the majority of the wild horses were observed in the hills southeast of Cadet Spring. Substantial amounts of grass was noted in many of the high elevations in the southern portion of the HMA, and in the Grass Valley Allotment portion of the HMA (due to the Trail Canyon fire rehabilitation). Snow remained only in higher elevations. The horses observed within the HMA were in good body condition. Several paint horses were observed in the eastern portion of the HMA. Two wild horses were observed outside of the HMA near the Willow Seeding. One of these may be the sorrel curly horse released in 2002 that has been observed in the area previously.

The Rocky Hills HMA boundaries were established in 1971. This area was originally known as the North Simpson Park Herd Area. The earliest documented census was conducted in the HMA in 1978. Between January 31, 1978 and February 28, 1978 a total of 84 horses were observed, fifteen of which were foals and yearlings.

In 1997, the Grass Valley allotment portion of the HMA was gathered along with the Callaghan HMA. A total of 447 horses were gathered from this area, of which 112 were selected for release back to the HMA.

The Rocky Hills HMA has a unique history because several of the horses in this area exhibit traits, which can be traced back to Tom Dixon who is accredited with introducing the Curly Horse to Nevada by releasing one in the vicinity of Pete Hanson Canyon near the Tonkin Ranch. However, it wasn't until years later when the Damale family observed and pursued the curly-haired horses found in the wild herds near their ranches.

The Damale family who had purchased the 3 Bars (1899) and the Tonkin Ranches in the late 1800's took an interest in the hardiness of the Curly horses seen on the harsh Nevada range, and began capturing and taming some of them, and integrating them with their domestic stock. In the 1950's Benny Damale had a Chestnut Curly stallion with his mares, and further integrated the curly trait into a breeding program on the Dry Creek Ranch. The stallion became known as Copper D, with gentle disposition and desired characteristics this stallion became an important part of the Damales life and breeding program. It was reported during the 1960's Tom and Pete Damale released Percheron, Morgan, Thoroughbred, Appaloosa, Shire, Belgian and Clydesdale in the vicinity of the JD and Tonkin Ranches. In the mid 1970's Benny Damale turned Copper D loose allowing him to run free in the area of Bates Mountain. It is thought that horses in the area with curly hair are the progeny of Copper D. Ownership of the Dry Creek Ranch was signed over to Peter J. Damale's sons prior to Benny's death. Today, the ranch remains in the ownership of Peter and Tom Damale.

The curly traits, and especially the original curly genetics derived from Tom Dixon and the Damale family are highly sought after. Currently, researchers at Texas A&M are studying the curly gene in wild and domestic horses to learn more about the trait. Today, curly horses should still exist within the

Rocky Hills HMA, have been observed within the Fish Creek HMA, and may be found in other herds. The Simpson Park Mountains is not a designated HMA, and all horses (including curly horses) were removed from the area in 2005.