

# The Blackfoot Buffalo Horse

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Onion Creek Ranch

Two Mustang stallions, separated by a wire fence, raced towards each other—ears pinned flat, necks arched, teeth bared. They skidded to a stop at the wire and pawed the Montana prairie, clouding their hooves in dust. The mares raced and galloped at the alarm, their foals velcroed to flanks. One little dun filly kicked her heels high in the spirit of running. Suddenly, the two stallions at the fence pricked their ears forward, nosed each other, then whirled and galloped back to their respective herds. The display was over, and spectators were left immovable and open-mouthed at the raw beauty of the Spanish Mustangs.

These herds are part of the Blackfoot Buffalo Horse Coalition (BBHC), located outside of Browning, Montana, the tribal seat of the Blackfoot Indians. The reservation, some one and a half million acres, includes the 630 acre 7 Eagles Ranch, home of the BBHC horses. Robert Blackbull, the organization's founder, welcomes visitors to learn about "the pride of the past, hope of the future."

The Spanish Mustang was the finest horse in the known world during the conquest of the Americas. The Blackfoot tribes came upon them in the 16th century, and not knowing what they were, they gave them the name "PonoKomiTaiksi"—"Elk Dog" in the Blackfoot language. These animals changed the Blackfoot immediately, making them swifter, more efficient hunters and warriors, and most importantly, giving them a new, more efficient way with which to capture their main source of sustenance, the buffalo. They became skilled horsemen who called their horses Buffalo Runners—they roamed the vast beautiful northwestern section of Montana, much of which is now Glacier National Park.

The Buffalo Runners were traded and gifted to the members of the tribe as a reward, and to represent respect. In fact, the horse became a symbol of respect and status among the tribes. But during the days when the Indians were pushed into reservations, the horses were taken from them to reduce mobility. The nomadic life of hunting with the Buffalo Runner was gone. The pure Spanish Mustang was brought to near extinction, and Blackfoot culture changed irrevocably again.

In 1994, Robert Blackbull was given a Spanish Mustang stallion by Emit Brislaw, whose family had founded the first Spanish Mustang registry. With the

sale of his native artwork and private donations, Blackbull purchased six mares to establish the first herd to return to the Blackfoot since reservation days. Now their number is 130, with two herds headed by registered Spanish Mustang stallion Blue Boy, a blue roan, and the registered Medicine Hat paint stallion Dances with Wolves. They fiercely protect their mares and colts, yet will let visitors in close enough to photograph and touch them.

Historically, Blackfoot children took care of the horses. It was held as an important rite of passage into responsible adulthood. The BBHC, a non-profit organization, utilizes the return of the Mustang horses to teach the youth of the reservation their history and cultural traditions. Professional trainers such as Teresa Martino from Washington volunteer their services and hold clinics to work with the youth and horses to promote skills, self-confidence and pride.

"We hope to empower our youth through a mentoring program that will continue the heritage of Blackfoot horse culture," says Robert Blackbull. That's an important consideration—the high school drop-out rate and unemployment are high on the Blackfoot reservation.

Near 7 Eagles Ranch lies Lodgepole Tipi Village and Gallery, the home of Darrell (Buffalo Body) and Tina Norman. Darrell, a Blackfoot tribe member, offers lodging in traditional canvas tipis so that people may stay, learn about the culture, and visit the Mustangs. Southern Blackfoot cuisine such as buffalo, antelope, deer, elk, and berry soup are served for the evening meal. Darrell and Tina are traditional artists, singers and dancers. They act as a cultural exchange, teaching the myths and legends of the Blackfoot through song and story-telling.

Back on the rolling foothills of the Rocky Mountains, the Medicine Hat stallion Dances With Wolves, prized for the war bonnet on his forehead and the shield on his chest, is keeping track of the colts. He sees one who has run away from its mother—he trots over and takes the little one's tail in his mouth and drags it back to his mother. One time, Blackbull tells the story, a new colt was born when it was very cold, below zero, all spring. He saw the herd surround the newborn to keep it warm and protect it from the weather. Every day, he saw them gather round the colt, for three weeks of below-zero weather, until it was past danger.

Although the Mustangs have the advantage of the donated services of a neighboring veterinarian, the BBHC generally lets the herd be wild. Their foalings are outside and their hooves are like black rocks from running outside year-round. But when one little dun filly, Otter, got her jaw broken with a kick, Blackbull took her in and got her fixed up. Now six months old, Otter follows around each and every visitor to the herd. She's gentle, but she's learned to kick back, too.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

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SUGGESTED READING

*The Mustangs*, by J. Frank Dobie

**About the Author**

Lin Sutherland teaches horsemanship and riding at Onion Creek Ranch in Austin, Texas. She rides and writes where the west wind takes her.

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