

ENGLISH TRANSLATION: CBC-TV "Green Week" Saturday June 25, 2022

INTRODUCTION: About 1,300 wild horses live in Alberta, in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. Some deplore the impact of these numerous animals on cattle farms since they feed on the same land. Others argue that it is a species endemic to this region and that they must be protected at all costs.

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HOST: Bonjour. Welcome to Green Week in Alberta.

Wild horses have been part of the landscape for hundreds of years, but as they sometimes feed on the same land as cattle, some cattle ranchers would like to see better control of these populations through capture and slaughter. A solution that is not unanimous.

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NARRATOR: The foothills region, in southwestern Alberta. This is where the boreal forest meets the Rocky Mountain escarpments and rivers. Fueled by melting glaciers, that flow towards the prairies, it's a rugged terrain, difficult to access, where the fauna is as varied as the play of light on the snowy peaks of the mountains.

There is also an animal species that evokes the imagination, but also arouses controversy. Hundreds of wild horses have lived here for generations.

[01:33]

GLOVER: They're very comfortable with these surroundings and in this landscape... There are creeks filled with fresh water and the grass on the hillside... So yeah, they're pretty happy here.

[01:51]

NARRATOR: Darrell Glover spends his days traveling through the most remote areas of the foothills...

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GLOVER: So we're going to be up in this area...

[01:59]

NARRATOR: This is where we find the largest concentration of horses in Alberta. There are probably between 700 and a thousand wild horses here.

NARRATOR: Darrell Glover formerly worked in the oil industry. Today he invests himself in what has become his passion.

Good weather, bad weather, summer, and winter alike, he covers a region of 50 hectares on makeshift paths, almost impassable in conditions like this, in hopes of capturing some precious footage of wild horses.

[02:29]

GLOVER: I think the camera is going to be full. Look at all of this...

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GLOVER: I put it on social media and it goes viral every time. People in England, in New Zealand, in Uganda. In short, people from everywhere want to see images of these horses in their natural environment.

[02:58]

NARRATOR: He follows their movements and those of their predators. These cameras become a privileged window on the ecosystems of the piedmonts.

[03:10]

GLOVER: Where ya going? Ya, ya...

[03:12]

NARRATOR: Sometimes, he even manages to approach the horses.

[03:15]

GLOVER: Haven't seen you for a while. I know. Yes.

[03:19]

GLOVER: Good... I've got a very strong bond with them, as if they recognize me, recognize my voice. They know my voice...

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NARRATOR: All these efforts have a very specific objective. To ensure the survival of these animals.

[03:33]

GLOVER: I'm building our awareness army. More and more, people know about the existence of these horses and this is our best tool to persuade the government to leave these horses alone.

[03:48]

NARRATOR: The history of these horses is closely linked to that of the development of the Canadian West.

These horses would be partly the descendants of horses which contributed to the development of the forestry and mining industries at the turn of the 20th century. During the Great Depression, hundreds, even thousands of horses would also have been released by farmers unable to feed them. The horses adapted to foothills and their numbers grew.

[04:20]

NARRATOR: Some say that their population reached 200,000 animals in the 1940s. At that time, they were captured by the thousands to send them to the battlefields in Europe or the global horsemeat market. So much so that in the 1980s, there were only about 2,000 wild horses left in southwestern Alberta.

Rancher Bryn Thiessen remembers it well.

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NARRATOR: In this area years ago I often saw more than a hundred horses in these meadows...

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NARRATOR: As a livestock breeder in the foothills, he knows wild horses and their impact on the region's ecosystem well.

[05:08]

THIESSSEN: How ya doin' little man? What makes the biggest difference is that horses live in this area 12 months a year, while cattle spend much less time on Crown Land.

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NARRATOR: So this is what the controversy is about: Farmed cattle and wild horses share the same land for food. Kept in enclosures until the end of spring, the cattle are then released onto Crown Land to graze in the forest. However, horses have already been feeding in these areas since the snow melted.

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THIESEN: In a dry year, the grass, it just never comes back. Scabrous Fescue, an incredible grass with high nutritional value that used to be found everywhere here before, has completely disappeared. It does not tolerate early spring grazing...

[06:01]

NARRATOR: These horses also have an impact on domestic breeding.

[06:07]

THEISEN: Sometimes fences get broken or they jump in and mate with our mares. I've lost mares over the years when they've gone off with a Wildie bunch.

[06:23]

NARRATOR: Cattle farming is one of Alberta's economic drivers, generating \$14 billion annually. To preserve this industry, the province granted permits for the capture of wild horses in the 1990s on Crown Land.

Provincial capture campaigns were also organized. Some horses were sold at auction, others end up in rodeos. But more importantly, some are slaughtered and their meat exported.

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NARRATOR: In a few years, the wild horse population drops to around 1,000 animals. But at the beginning of the 2000s, everything changed.

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TV NEWS ANCHOR: Three wild horses, shot to death by a high-powered rifle. There have been some complaints that the horses were eating newly-planted trees and cattle feed.

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NARRATOR: Some horses are shot at point-blank range, their carcasses mutilated.

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NARRATOR: Horse lovers, like Bob Henderson, are outraged.

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HENDERSON: A group of us decided that was probably enough and wanted to act. We created a group, the Wild Horses of Alberta Society. Seeing these magnificent animals being captured and sent to the slaughterhouse was intolerable. It was wrong.

[07:47]

NARRATOR: In 2014, the Alberta government announced a moratorium on the capture of wild horses. They commissioned the Wild Horse of Alberta Society to find other ways to control the horse population. Alberta wants to avoid a scenario like the one we find in Nevada where the wild horse population is approaching 50,000.

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NARRATOR: Bob Henderson and his group first turned to contraception. They administer a contraceptive to around a hundred mares using a dart gun.

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MALE VOICE: Good shot!

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NARRATOR: But the problem is, a second dose must be administered for the product to take effect. An almost impossible task.

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HENDERSON: You can never find the same herd again, so we had to drop that program.

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NARRATOR: They then turn to another option. On this eight-hectare plot of land nestled in the boreal forest, there is a small ranch. It's an adoption center for wild horses.

[09:01]

NARRATOR: These horses were captured on private land and transported here. In the past, these animals would have been destined for the slaughterhouse.

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HENDERSON: The idea is that we are able to give these horses a second chance and find them a permanent home. This is the ideal solution.

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NARRATOR: Sometimes, horses come here of their own accord. This is the case of these four mares and their foal which roamed in the surrounding forest for four months.

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NARRATOR: Volunteer at the Adoption Center, Candice Tkachuk, finally manages to approach the mares.

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TKACHUK: We've just been slowly getting them used to our presence. So much so that today, they come and eat directly from the buckets. Slowly but surely, we're building a relationship of trust with them.

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NARRATOR: It is Jack Nichol who has the delicate task of transforming these wild animals into domestic animals.

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NICHOL: It's a way of teaching them not to be afraid when we touch them. In the wild, the horses are constantly on the alert. They must fight tirelessly against the elements and predators. We are one of these predators and probably one of the funniest to them because we run around on two legs!

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NARRATOR: Around a hundred wild horses have been domesticated and adopted.

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HENDERSON: We'd rather see them roam free, but it is still a much better fate than before.

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NARRATOR: But despite the adoption program's successes, the government of Alberta did not want to renew the moratorium on the capture of the horses in 2019. According to provincial government figures, the population of wild horses has almost doubled since the end of the organized captures, going from nearly 900 animals in 2014 to around 1,700 in 2019.

[11:11]

GLOVER: Got some pretty good stuff here...

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NARRATOR: These figures are disputed by those who spend their days in the field following the herds.

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GLOVER: The government likes to use 17 to 20 percent as a reproduction number for the wild horses but, you can see, there's 25 to 40 horses here and only five foals. That's not much, and some will not survive the winter. We feel now the herds are sustainable at the levels they're at.

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NARRATOR: A point of view that is not at all shared by many ranchers including Bryn Theissen.

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THIESEN: Let's find a balance. I don't want these horses to disappear. They have been there for a long time and we are lucky to have them there. But, unmanaged and uncontrolled, I don't agree with.

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NARRATOR: The right of these horses to live here is at the heart of the debate today. Are they, as provincial authorities maintain, descendants of domestic horses released into the wild or are these populations native?

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NARRATOR: Conservation groups are convinced that this is the key to protection of the herds in the long-term.

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HENDERSON: They have been part of the Alberta landscape for much longer than some people in the Alberta government want to admit.

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HOST: After the break, should wild horses in Alberta be protected?

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NARRATOR: In 2019, there were, according to official figures, nearly 1,700 wild horses in the foothills of Alberta. Animals that are not protected like native species are. Conservation groups want to convince the Alberta government of value of the heritage and genetics of these animals in order to ensure their survival.

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POISSANT: You have quite a few horses here.

HENDERSON: Yeah, we've had to take in 12, and then...

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NARRATOR: To better understand the origin of these horses, Bob Henderson's group joined forces with Jocelyn Poissant, a researcher in wildlife ecology at the University of Calgary.

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POISSANT: My research interests are mainly about the link between genetic diversity and the health of wild species.

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NARRATOR: For 15 years, he studied the horses of Sable Island in Nova Scotia, a unique wild population in the world.

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POISSANT: It's a model for studying animal health in a natural environment. The horses of Sable Island are protected by Parks Canada. They are the official horse of Nova Scotia, while the wild horses in Alberta are rather seen as pests, so there's no conservation, there's no research, or at least not much research about the horses.

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NARRATOR: He then decides to put his knowledge to good use.

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POISSANT: The government and conservation groups didn't really agree on fundamental questions.

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NARRATOR: Some maintain that these horses have inhabited the foothills for centuries, populations established well before cattle breeding.

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POISSANT: Conservation groups suggest they are descendants of horses introduced by the Spaniards in the 1500s in the southern United States, which would have traveled back to America with exchanges between indigenous peoples.

What is left unsaid is that if their history is linked to American or indigenous history, then to the creation of Alberta or the development of Alberta, there is no longer a justification for devaluing these animals.

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NARRATOR: For two years, Jocelyn Poissant and his team take DNA samples from wild horse throughout southwestern Alberta. He then compares his genetic codes to breed samples from all over the world. The results are astonishing.

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POISSANT: The horses have a genetic background that is a mixture of all the horse breeds that were introduced to North America in the last 500 years.

So, there are the Spanish, who introduced horses to the south of the United States, but there are also the French, who introduced horses to Louisiana then to Florida and eastern Canada. There were the English who introduced horses. There are also the Swedes, who had a colony in the northeastern United States, then the Dutch, who also introduced horses.

POISSANT: But when we go to northern Alberta, there are clearly subpopulations of horses that are of origin... Breeds of draft horses, like Percherons. So the origin is quite complex, but I would say clearly, there are certain subpopulations that have been here probably since the early 1700s.

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NARRATOR: For researchers in animal ecology, genetic diversity is an important asset.

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POISSANT: There is a lot of genetic diversity that is disappearing because there is little interest in certain breeds. If we look at the horses of Sable Island and then the horses of Alberta, they clearly contribute to the genetic diversity of horses in Canada but also on a global scale.

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HENDERSON: Yeah, I know, Yeah, I know sweetie...

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NARRATOR: According to Bob Henderson, these results confirm what he has been arguing for 20 years: Alberta's foothills horses must be protected in the same way as native wildlife.

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HENDERSON: One of the things we look at is... What we would like, is that they are designated as a species with special status, that they have a distinct identity.

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NARRATOR: Others maintain in the meantime that whatever the origin of the horses, they have acquired the right to live in these lands.

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GLOVER: They certainly have been here long enough that they've earned the right to be here.

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NARRATOR: Every day, one video at a time, Darrell Glover's social media awareness campaign is growing.

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GLOVER: Still today, many Albertans are unaware that these horses even exist. We made it our mission to change that and spread the awareness as far as we can.

[17:49]

WOMAN'S VOICE: Do you have any hay?

MAN'S VOICE: Do you want some hay?

[17:52]

NARRATOR: Sometimes, while traveling through the hinterland, he comes to the aid of a horse in distress.

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WOMAN'S VOICE: The wider strap maybe under her front and then pull her...

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NARRATOR: Like here, in May 2020, when he came across a mare who was drowning in a marsh hidden under a layer of ice.

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GLOVER: All we had were our tow straps but we had to figure out how to get that horse out.

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WOMAN'S VOICE: She just wants to eat. She's so hungry.

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GLOVER: She walked away and turned around as if to thank us, and then she was on her way.

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NARRATOR: But sometimes nature takes its inexorable course.

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GLOVER: This is highly atypical for a mare to bring her foal to a human like this.

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NARRATOR: July 2019. A mare appears to bring her distressed foal towards Darrell Glover's truck. The young animal has just escaped a wolf attack.

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WOMAN'S VOICE: Oh, my stars. Look at inside...

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NARRATOR: The injuries are too serious; there is only one option.

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GLOVER: Nah, I think we should put her down. Yah...

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NARRATOR: The foal was euthanized.

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GLOVER: This mare stayed with her foal until dark.

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NARRATOR: The same evening, the wolf returns to look for its prey.

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GLOVER: ...and you realize everything happens for a reason. That everything is part of the cycle of life. I think a natural balance is already occurring.

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NARRATOR: The place of these horses within this ecosystem will be the subject of future research from the University of Calgary team.

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POISSANT: What are the direct and indirect effects of horses on other wildlife species such as elk, moose, or even bears? What are the impacts of rangeland development like forestry on wildlife populations? What are the real interactions with the cattle and the quality of the pastures? It is important to study these questions to better manage our rangeland.

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NARRATOR: February 2021, a team from the Alberta Ministry of Environment flies over the foothills to count wild horses. According to their findings, the population fell by 20%. The government then announced the creation of a committee whose mandate would be to examine various management options for wild horses and research into the genetics of these animals. But, the authorities do not rule out the option of organized captures in the future.

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GLOVER: Where's the rest of the group?

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NARRATOR: Those campaigning for the protection of these herds promise to continue their awareness-raising work to prevent further campaigns aimed at reducing the region's wild horse populations.

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GLOVER: If we were to see those kinds of things happening again, the public outcry would just be horrendous. There's so much more awareness today about these horses, their existence.

CREDITS:

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