

# The Wild Horses of RBC

## Background

If you are looking for a unique experience that you'll remember for many years to come, check out the wild horses near Rangely.

**Approximately 165 wild horses live year round in the rugged rim rock and pinyon juniper woodlands just east-southeast of town.**

No one can say for certain when wild horses first established themselves in the area.

Most of the horses that Native Americans used in this part of North America came from stock that ran away from Spanish explorers to the south, and French explorers and trappers to the north.

The Ute obtained horses in the late 1600s, and by the time Dominguez and Escalante passed through the Rangely area in 1776, horses were an established part of the Ute culture.

Today's wild herds are ultimately descended from runaway Spanish horses. But the invention of the internal combustion engine reduced the need for work horses, so many farmers simply turned their unemployed horses loose on the range. And many farmers also released horses during the severe droughts of the 1930's dust bowl era.

Blood tests have demonstrated that the herds in northwest Colorado have liberally interbred with Arabians, thoroughbreds, draft horses, and many other breeds. Even today, there is some reason to believe that well meaning horse lovers are deliberately releasing good quality horses to improve the bloodlines in the wild herds.

Regardless of their origin, the wild horses of Rio Blanco County are highly adaptable, hearty, and resilient. They can make it on their own, and wild horses have probably been a part of the White River country for perhaps 300 year's or more.

Today the Bureau of Land Management is responsible for the Piceance/East Douglas wild horse herd, in cooperation with several private land owners in the Rangely area. These private land owners make it possible for you to enjoy these wild horses by allowing the horses access to water and forage on their land. Without this cooperation, the herds would roam across vast expanses of the remote and distant wild lands in this part of the state, and would rarely be seen.

The horses in this area are various shades of brown, gray, or- black. The reddish-brown horses are called sorrels, and the brown horses with a black mane, tail and lower legs are called bays.

Although all the wild stock in the huge Piceance/Douglas Creek area are considered to be a single "herd," the wild horses actually are widely dispersed in groups, called "bands." A band usually consists of one mature stallion, all the breeding mares he can gather up and defend from challengers, and the immature male and female offspring of his mares.

The strongest and most aggressive stallions gather the largest number of mares; less aggressive stallions have smaller bands. And the smallest and least aggressive studs tend to form bachelor bands until they've matured to the point where they too can accumulate some mares.

Some studs, because of poor bloodlines or physical problems, never are able to get and keep any mares, and spend their entire lives with their male pals.

This behavior- pattern assures that are born from the fittest stallions.

You may not be able to discern the social structure in a band of wild horses the first time or so. But it's there. For example, several horses tend to stick together-, like cliques of friends. They eat together, run together, and sleep together.

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If you disturb a band of horses, and they begin to move away, look for one big horse to hang back and form a protective rear guard. That will be the dominant male protecting his mares, most of the time.

Sometimes, however, it will be a dominant female. Either way, you know you're looking at one of the bosses.

### **RANGELY'S WILD HORSE LOOP**

If you don't know where to go to see wild horses in Rio Blanco County, here is a route we recommend. But allow plenty of time: expect to spend six or more hours.

- Sometimes you'll be fortunate enough to encounter a large herd early in the tour, and can spend some time just watching that herd, and then return home.
- Other times, you'll have to invest several hours just to find a herd.
- You should look for wild horses on a dry, sunny day.
- You need a reliable vehicle, water, food, and a warm jacket, and maybe some rain gear just in case, because you are headed for remote country'.
- You also need binoculars.
- And a camera would be nice, too.

Although you'll be on maintained county roads, most of them are unpaved and in rugged terrain. So a four wheel drive vehicle will make your tour a bit safer, especially on County Road 103.

The wild horse loop begins in Rangely

- Head east on Highway 64 toward: Meeker for 11 miles,
- Then turn right on Rio Blanco County Road 122, a dirt road.
- About 13 miles from Highway 64, County Road 122 intersects with County Road 103;
- Turn right and head south on County Road 103.
- About 13 miles south of the 122/103 county road intersection look for County Road 24, the Airplane Ridge Road.

- Turn left on Airplane Ridge Road and proceed 11 mile until you encounter RBC 24X.
- Go north on 24X for about 8 miles to County Road. 122.
- Turn left on 122.
- This road will take you back to Colorado 64 where you started.

### **TOUR HIGHLIGHTS**

When you first leave the pavement on County Road 122 you'll drive through a pinyon and juniper woodland on your way to Calamity Ridge.

Fletcher Draw will be to your left at first, but later Spring Creek Canyon will appear on your right.

The Spring Creek high country is almost 2000 feet higher than Rangely. There is generally more rainfall at these higher elevations, so the vegetation changes along the route.

Mountain shrub oak and service-berry replace the pinyon and juniper, and the trees on the steep north slopes across the canyon are aspen and Douglas fir.

County Road 103 traverses the ridge line between the Douglas Creek and Piceance Creek basins:

- Piceance basin will be to your left and the Douglas basin is on your right.
- This ridge line, known as the Cathedral Bluffs, is extraordinarily scenic.
- On a clear day the La Sal Mountains near Moab, Utah are visible to the southwest.
- Colorado's Flattops Wilderness are visible to the east.
- The Piceance Creek basin incidentally, has vast oil and natural gas deposits, and also is the only place in the world that has natural deposits of sodium bicarbonate.
- Look for a radio facility on the west side of County Road 103.
- Immediately after passing that facility watch for wild horses near the top of the Cathedral Bluffs, as on the ridge lines to the east.

One particularly conspicuous telltale sign that horses are in the area is the presence of fresh 'stud piles' or droppings along the roadways.

About four miles down Airplane Ridge Road, scan the country to the north with binoculars and you'll likely see horses.

County Road 24X will take you onto 84 Mesa, a broad plateau dominated by sagebrush.

This is an excellent place to see wild horses, particularly in spring and fall. If water is available in local reservoirs, you'll see horses here during the summer, too.

### **ADDITIONAL TOUR NOTES**

Instead of completing your loop by turning left County Road 122, you can turn right and return to Rangely by following the Piceance Creek.

- Take County Road 122 east to where it ends at County Road 20
- Turn left and take County Road 20 to County Road 5, also known as the Piceance Creek Road.
- Turn left on RBC 5 and follow Piceance Creek north to Highway 04,40 miles east of Rangely.
- On your way back to Rangely on Highway 64 watch for horses on your left.