

WILD

AN ESSAY ABOUT HORSES, HUMAN NATURE AND THE STRUGGLE FOR BALANCE. BY KELLY VAUGHN



Wild horses roam along 16 miles of the lower Salt River within the Tonto National Forest. *Saija Lehtonen*



ABOVE: The first month of life is the most critical in a wild horse's life, and the bond between mares and foals is a strong one.
Top to bottom: Bruce D. Taubert, Lori Walker, Sue Cullumber
OPPOSITE PAGE: Sunlight highlights a wild horse and its sheltering mesquite tree in the Tonto National Forest. Gerry Groeber

If the water is warm enough and the air cold, fog rises from the Salt River. It laps at the surface and lingers for a while until it folds back into itself. Into water. Becoming part of the current.

Where the fog is feline, its mother — the river — is not. For 200 miles, the Salt courses south from the White Mountains through the canyon it carved until it spills into the Gila. In some parts, it gains steam, creates rapids, charts an angry journey over rock and schist and the fragments of mountains at its bottom.

In other parts, it is liquid peace, fractured only by wind or the passing of a kayak. To these places, the horses go to drink. I call them wild.

Some of you will write letters and call them feral livestock. When you do, I'll ask you how long it would take, how many generations, to live outside a fence before your babies are considered born free.

THE LINEAGE OF THE HORSES is just one of the sticking points in the angry dialogue between the people who want the horses to stay and those who want them gone — the people who say that the Salt River herd destroys habitat for other wildlife and poses a public safety issue.

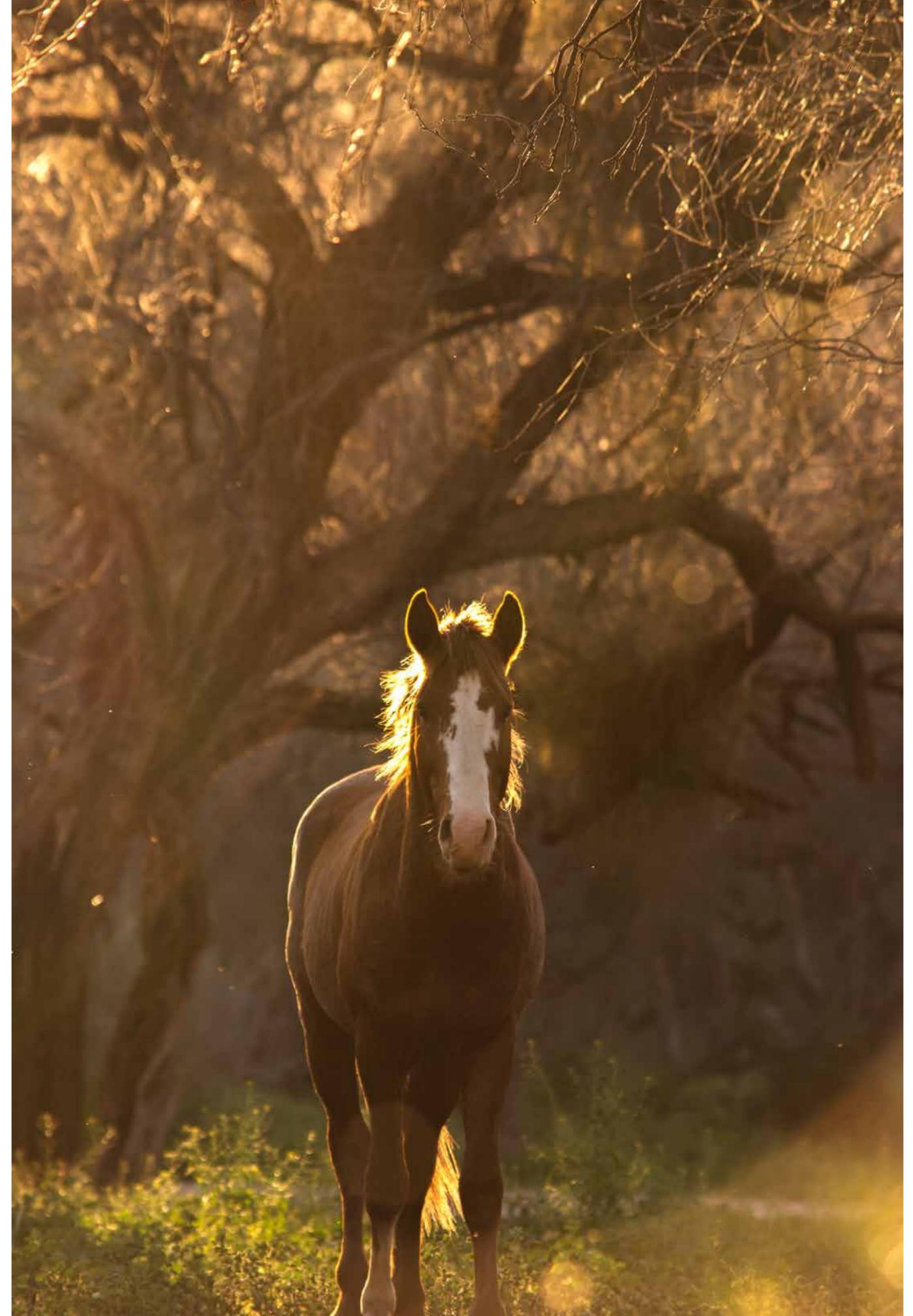
Advocates assert that the horses are descended from a line of noble giants brought to the Americas by Father Eusebio Francisco Kino in the 17th century. An article in the January 25, 1890, edition of the *Arizona Champion* newspaper describes them as “native stock.” The U.S. Forest Service acknowledges the presence of the horses along the Salt River as far back as the 1930s. But the horses weren't protected under the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971. In 1979, former Forest Service employee Perl Charles advocated for the protection of the horses in the *Phoenix Gazette*, claiming that they were wild and had been present on the Salt River for generations. “It's a delightful thing to watch them running free,” he said.

Wild. Livestock. So the argument went for decades. And then, last summer, the Forest Service tried to settle it. The agency posted a notice, signed by Tonto National Forest Supervisor Neil Bosworth, in the July 31, 2015, edition of the *Arizona Capitol Times*.

“PUBLIC NOTICE OF UNAUTHORIZED LIVESTOCK AND INTENT TO IMPOUND,” it read. “Notice is hereby given that pursuant to Regulation of the Secretary of Agriculture, ... all unauthorized livestock found upon National Forest System lands or other lands under Forest Service control within the area identified below, will be impounded by the United States Forest Service on or after 8/07/15.”

The “area identified below”? The 16-mile stretch of the Salt River along which the horses roam.

And then, an entire community of people who love the horses lost its collective mind.





Some of a band of wild horses wade in the Salt River in front of Red Mountain. Bruce D. Taubert

FOUR MONTHS LATER, I stood at river's edge, my boots caked in mud — the result of a late-autumn storm that swept the leaves from the trees and forced a winter chill to curl up under the clouds.

A mare and her foal wandered to the middle of the river, white blazes nearly identical, and I thought, *My God, I'm so glad you can drink here without worry that helicopters and cowboys will chase you into a trailer.*

Back in Phoenix, the media was just picking up word that Bosworth was canceling the notice of intent. The move came after rallies and town hall meetings, as well as conversations between stakeholders, including advocates, the Forest Service, environmental groups and the people who travel to the river to see the horses — whether to photograph them or to experience the pure, calm majesty of them.

My own history with horses, wild and otherwise, is both significant and not so at the same time.

Once, I was young, and the horse was Harvey. And, together, we were on an all-day trail ride in the mountains surrounding Mancos, Colorado. Harvey was gray-white and typical of a dude-ranch horse — a little older, a little slower than he used to be. Gentle and worn by the hundreds of people who'd duded atop him before me, Harvey was keener to stop and graze than he was to follow the horse in front of him. But when lightning split the summer sky, that old horse turned mustang, and we took off down that trail like Rottweilers after an alley cat. I thought, just briefly, that I'd end up in the reservoir that boiled with storm below us, but mostly I was happy for the wind in my hair and the static on my skin.

A few years later, my parents sent me to summer camp in

East Texas. There, I spent hours on the back of a buckskin mare named Butterscotch. We raced around barrels and galloped around the corral until both of our backs hurt. I loved her. One day, wranglers put me atop a gelding whose name I can't recall. He ran, but we didn't click, so I sat on a fence with my friends and watched another girl glide Butterscotch around the course. It's possible that was the first time I experienced envy.

More than 20 years later, I found myself in Havasu Canyon, where a medicine woman doused my body with sage smoke and washed me with a welcoming prayer in her native language. I closed my eyes, and she put a tiny totem in my hand. My spirit animal, she said — a woven horse made from the bark of a cottonwood tree.

Maybe that was the moment my heart became tied to horses for good.

So when the roundup was announced, that beating muscle ended up where my guts were supposed to be. It's a sinking thing to think that the animals that most move you could be put in pens and sent to slaughter, as so many of the horses removed from federal lands have been.

In the months that followed, I found myself often along the river — in heat that crawled under my hat and into my clothes. In rain. In the cool morning haze of autumn. I watched the Salt River horses, learned their bands and behavior, wondered what would become of them.

Then, one day, a horse — a mare, a mother — was shot. And that's when I started having the same dream night

after night after endless, angry night.

I WALKED THROUGH WATER amid a geography that didn't make sense. River. Salt cedars. Pine. The sun crashed behind distant mountains, and I knew that dark was coming. Wind. The call of a thousand beating drums.

I was barefoot, and my dress wasn't suited for this kind of trekking, all gauze and drape and smooth. Coral-colored fabric so beautiful on models. Not quite right in real life. But it fit me the way things do when they are elaborately handmade.

All around me, horses. So many that my walking became slow, stifled. The way it goes in sleep-drunk, aimless hours.

By the end of the dream, the horses were shot, and I was facedown in the water, choked by mud and silt and a flume of salmon silk.

Before the dream, I had been miles deep into desert, following hoof prints into nowhere. The seeps were dry, and I imagined where I would go if I were the horses. The wind that haunted my dream cut through creosote, and I smelled the earth the way eagles sense it — all gust and silence and awe. Then, a great horned owl took flight, and I knew I wouldn't find the horses.

Even today, no one knows who shot the horse that prompted my dream — just one more mystery, I suppose, in man's relationship with nature.

When organizations like the Maricopa Audubon Society say — without documented scientific evidence — that the Salt River horses put too much strain on the landscape, that they destroy habitat for fragile bird species, I wonder why they disregard human impact on the environment.

Aren't people a far greater threat to fragile bird species (and other things) than horses are? Walk or kayak a small stretch of the river, and you'll see more beer cans and dirty diapers and spent shotgun shells than you will wildlife. There are smoldering campfires, remnants of drug activity, nails, old tires. It's a journey through human ignorance, but the horses make an easier scapegoat. How, though, can we justify the extinction of one group of animals to attempt the protection of another?

As I write this, it's been several weeks since Bosworth canceled the roundup. Still, the issue remains. Just recently, a state legislator sponsored an emergency bill that would transfer ownership of the horses to the Arizona Department of Agriculture, a move that would, most assuredly, result in the horses' removal from their range. Optimistically, the bill will be killed in committee for its lack of clarity or a real emergency, but I've learned that optimism, like wild things, should be guarded.

And, now, the Mohave County Board of Supervisors and the Arizona Game and Fish Department are considering ways to cull the herd of wild burros near Kingman. If you read the comments about the roundup on social media, and if you're of the opinion that living things command even a modicum of respect, you'll be sickened.

"Make tacos out of them," reads one.

"Why don't you just shoot them or something like that," reads another. "Use the meat to feed the wolf problem and when you're done with the burros I know where there are thousands of feral horses that they need to get control of as well."

Rather than considering a humane birth control or management plan, as horse advocates are ready to undertake with the Salt River herd, the online mob jumps too quickly to slaughter. It's a sad reflection, maybe, of a modern society that values being heard in a maddening, chattering, narcissistic social world over getting lost and quieted and calmed in wild spaces — a society that leaps to shooting living things instead of looking for rational solutions.

But a culture can't change unless behaviors change. Someday, maybe, more people will be choked by their concrete and pixels and be compelled to go and drink the wild air, as Emerson suggested. Then, protecting wilderness and wild things — horses and burros among them — might become a priority. Now, though, it seems like man's relationship with nature is a fragile thing — lost somewhere beneath a layer of fog. **AH**