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Wild Wyoming

STORY AND PHOTOS BY SHAWN HAMILTON

As you step out of your teepee on an early moonlit morning to tack up your horse before sunrise, you wonder if you're really on vacation. Yet by the second day, as you slowly sneak up on a herd of wild horses using your own mount as camouflage, you realize the reward.

Bobbi and Mike Wade of Blue Sky Horseback Adventures have a permit to access almost a million acres of Bureau of Land Management land a few hours southeast of Jackson Hole, Wyoming.

They provide a unique combination of energetic riding partnered with getting up close and personal with herds of wild mustangs in the Great Divide Basin.

Unique Orientation

The first sign that this trip would be unique began with the Cadillac of orientations. It began at camp — an array of teepees scattered beside the Little Sandy Creek where it crosses the Continental Divide — while we sipped our late-morning coffee beside the corral.

Mike, 51, a wrangler since high school, was influenced by such masters as Ray Hunt and Tom Dorrance. He first taught us how to safely brush and tack up a horse while staying in the “safe zone.” He then demonstrated the

independent seat that keeps you firmly in the saddle.

Along the way, he explained the phrase “Hoka Hey,” which means to be alert and ready for whatever may come your way, in Blue Sky Sage speak.

No matter how extensive your horse knowledge, how many horses you've trained, ridden, or shown, you *will* learn something from this thorough orientation.

While brushing and tacking up our horses, my travel buddy, Kim, and I do our best to stay in the safe area between the withers and the front of the horse's hip —

not something we think about at home with our own horses.

Fields of Sage

Stirrups adjusted and saddlebags secured, we mounted up. Only a few minutes from camp, we heard Mike say, “Hoka Hey.” Two fellow guests, Bernie and Cathy, replied in unison, “Hoka Hey,” — *we're ready* — and within seconds, we were loping through endless fields of sage.

My mount, Rooster Reno, a 20-year-old Quarter Horse, dodged the sagebrush until he found a path, then loped along smoothly. The vast openness was liberating, the sagebrush dotted only by the odd rock outcropping all the way to the mountains' edge.

Sensing that Mike and Bobbi were assessing our abilities, I asked them why we loped so soon into the ride. “If anything is going to fall off, come undone, or go wrong at the lope, we may as well know here, close to camp,” Mike replied.

The four of us all seemed to pass the first test.

We stopped to rest at a small rock outcropping. A climb to the top revealed a view of the Wind River Mountains to the north. Black clouds loomed in the distance. The sky gradually darkened.

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*Blue Sky Sage
Horseback Adventures
will take you from a
teepee camp to close
encounters with wild
mustangs.*



For a photo gallery from Shawn Hamilton's experience at Blue Sky Sage Horseback Adventures, visit www.equestarch.com/thetrailrider.

"The vast openness was liberating, the sagebrush dotted only by the odd rock outcropping all the way to the mountains' edge," Shawn Hamilton says of riding at Blue Sky Sage.

By noon, we were hunkered down in a hollow eating lunch in the long prairie grass surrounded by echoing thunder and a display of lightning. Kim, whom I've ridden with since we were 14 years old, laughed under her breath, knowing my innate fear of lightning.

Jokingly, I questioned Mike and Bobbi about the existence of either the blue sky or the wild horses, completely unaware of what was in store for us the next day.

Loping back to camp, Rooster Reno caught up to Cathy's horse. When they were head-to-head, my horse kicked it into fifth gear.

"Wow, he really does pack a lot of punch for a 20-year-old," I yelled to Cathy while leaving her well behind.

We enjoyed a dinner of buffalo smothered in homemade barbeque sauce, with salad, vegetables, and Key Lime pie, all made by chef extraordinaire Jocie. Even Bernie, a vegetarian, was extremely pleased with his alternatives.

I piped up, "Well, if we never see blue sky or wild horses, at least we're being fed well."

After dinner, we sipped wine by the fire, and listened to stories and jokes. My belly sore from laughing, I retired to my sleeping bag. The howling wind outside drowned out the rush of the river, but I was warm and dry — for the time being.

Herd-Spotting

Then it came, the 5:30 a.m. wake-up call. With eyes barely open and my breath visible in the cool air, I slowly sauntered to the washroom teepee. Coffee was on in the main tent. Mike stoked the woodstove as we huddled around for biscuits and gravy.

On this day, my mount was Laramie Bill, a big, 19-year-old bay foundation Quarter Horse. By 6:38, he was in the trailer and on the road with the others. The sun slowly rose over the crest of the mountains and spread its golden glow on the facing slopes.

Mike spotted a small herd of wild horses with his binoculars. Rain was forecasted, so Bobbi and Mike decided to stay on the main road.



Blue Sky Sage co-owners Mike and Bobbi Wade "provide a unique combination of energetic riding partnered with getting up close and personal with herds of wild mustangs in the Great Divide Basin," says Shawn Hamilton.

"When the back roads get wet around here, they turn into what we call *gumbo*, the nastiest stuff in Wyoming," Bobbi explained. "You can be stuck out here for days." This would explain the shovels and chains rattling in the back of the pickup.

"We'll approach the herd from a different direction, something we haven't tried before," said Mike.

We pulled over at the Parting of the Ways Monument, a historical spot marking a split on The Oregon Trail where emigrants had to choose between staying on the main route southwest toward Fort Bridger or veer right and cross the Little Colorado Desert. The cutoff, opened in 1844, saved about 46 miles, but lacked a water source along most of it.

Horses unloaded, lunches packed in the saddlebags, and rain gear tied on, we trotted off toward the mountains where Mike had spotted the herd.

Kim, aboard a Paint Horse named Flash, broke into a long lope and had a blast dodging the sagebrush, some of which was over four feet tall. Bobbi told me there are approximately 56 species of sage in this area of differing size, shape, and texture.

Close Encounter

We stopped just shy of a ridge. Mike and Bobbi motioned us to stay back. Following instruction, we've been silent for more than an hour, not an easy feat for me.

On Mike's signal, we dismounted and positioned our horses broadside to the herd, hiding behind our horses' shoulders. We slowly approached the ridge, trying not

to step on the crackling sagebrush while keeping hidden behind our horses.

We finally rose to view a single cremello stallion. I watched in awe, amazed by his clean, healthy, strong appearance.

The lone stallion stared at us for quite some time, then took off. We feared he'd warn the others. We could clearly view four bands; an additional 9 to 11 were off in the distance.

We approached a herd of eight with baby steps, decreasing the distance by 20 to 30 feet at a time. We stopped intermittently to peer over our horses' necks.

A cremello mare with foal raised her head. Then mare and foal trotted toward us, full of curiosity, and stopped just 50 yards away. Still camouflaged by our horses, we stood our ground, pretending to be just another herd out in this vast openness.

The remaining six wild horses decided to see what the commotion was about. All of a sudden, mares and foals, chestnuts and cremellos, and a few young studs were running full speed toward us.

I tried to keep my camera steady as my heart pounded with excitement. It took all my will not to say a word.

The horses didn't seem to be stopping. Just as I was ready to scream and wave my arms, as Mike has told us they've had to do in the past, the stallion ran to the front of the herd and snaked the galloping horses away from us.

The stallion headed for the hills, taking the larger bands with him. Hundreds of hooves thundered up the mountainside.

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The Afterglow

Once out of earshot, we stopped for lunch and talked about the experience. Bernie was awe-struck. "For a guy born and raised in a dirty, crummy steel town, this is like heaven," he said. "It's awe-inspiring and makes every fiber of your being come alive. Being out here moves your soul. I never expected to get that close to the mustangs."

It was indeed a unique experience. It was a first for me to be able to use another horse as camouflage; the stallions seemed less threatened this way.

Mounted back up with a *Hoka Hey*, we loped off returning to the truck and trailer where snacks and drinks await us. Back at camp, well-deserved naps are in order until we hear the dinner bell beckoning us for shrimp and veggie skewers on the grill. Quite the five-star dining out here in the middle of nowhere.

Rain began to fall. We piled into the warm tent, and Bobbi pulled out her guitar. Cowboy classics, such as "The Strawberry Roan," "Whoopee Ti Yi Yo," and "Ghost Riders in the Sky" bellowed above the crackle of the woodstove.

Blue Sky Riding

After a leisurely breakfast of eggs, sausage, and blueberry pancakes topped with maple syrup heated in the "microwave" (an aluminum pan with an inch of water in it set on the grill over the fire), we were on the trails heading northeast out of camp.

The sun finally decided to show up for the party. The scenery, completely different from the past few days, glowed with the golden leaves and silver bark of aspen trees.

On a backdrop of snow-covered peaks, the sandy trails allowed for an abundance of loping. A forest of quaking aspens displayed primitive and somewhat provocative artwork etched into the bark by Basques shepherders, who had an interesting sense of humor. (For photos of these etchings, visit www.equestrian.com/thetrailrider.)

We rode to the border of the Bridger-Teton National Forest.

At lunch, I tried three times to put the



hobbles on Rooster Reno. Mike had shown us how to apply hobbles, but I finally succumbed and asked for assistance.

Hobbles allow a horse to graze without a halter and lead rope, eliminating the risk of becoming entangled in the lead rope. (For more on hobbles, see "5 Horse-Containment Options" on page 30.)

Knowing how to apply hobbles is a useful trail skill; knowing how to wear them is useful to any trail horse. I make a mental note to teach my horses how to hobble when I get home.

The return ride took us past the Lander Cut-Off of the Oregon Trail, the oldest of the northern commercial and emigrant trails. The original wagon ruts are still visible, stretching for miles through the sagebrush under the big blue sky.

As we sipped our pre-dinner wine in the warm tent, suddenly, huge chunks of hail begin to bounce off the canvas tent. The storm diminished as fast as it started, leaving a double rainbow over camp.

Close Proximity

After another early morning of eating breakfast burritos on the run, we tacked up and loaded the horses, and quickly got on the road. This time, Bobbi and Mike decided to risk the back roads.

As I galloped along a ridge top on Roost-

A cremello mare with foal raised her head," writes Shawn Hamilton of her wild-horse encounter. "Then mare and foal trotted toward us, full of curiosity, and stopped just 50 yards away."

er Reno, I was in my own little world until Mike signaled for us to stop. He and Bobbi took the binoculars and climbed the last part of the ridge.

On their signal, we dismounted and picked a gully for cover. This time, we took only two horses with us to use as a barrier; Bobbi stayed back with the other horses.

We climbed quietly out of the wash to see a herd of about 50 horses less than 300 feet away. They continued to graze; some were lying down in the long grass.

Our strategic approach to use the wind to our advantage paid off. As we inched a little closer, some of the mustangs interrupted their grazing to lift their heads, but still weren't threatened by our mounts.

This herd consisted of mostly chestnuts and bays. We stayed as still as we could, surprised that the stallion hadn't yet roused the mares. In amazement, I watched one horse lie down. Never have I experienced a wild herd so unthreatened by our close proximity.

As all curious humans will do, we eventually pushed the envelope when we were at around 60 yards away. The stallion then motioned for the herd to rise. Within minutes, they turned and headed for the hills.

As we made our way back to Bobbi, we spotted another huge herd coming down off a distant ridge toward her. Excited at first to see another herd, we then remembered she was in the wash with four horses to herself. We picked up our pace, worried that the herd might ambush her. But the mustangs spotted us and headed back up the ridge.

The ride back was one continuous, glorious lope. I rode in and out of the sagebrush and over ridges under a warm sun. On the return ride, we spotted a lone stallion, a chestnut with a flaxen mane and tail.

That night, as we enjoyed singing and storytelling by the fire under the starry sky, Kim and I felt fortunate to have come on

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Wild Wyoming

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this trip with such a fun group of people. There seemed to be no barriers between us. Lively, humorous stories just rolled, leaving me in a constant state of laughter.

Winding Down

On our final day of riding, we received a lesson in how to teach your horse to hobble, and hit the trails. As I galloped down a dirt road, I soon realized why my new mount, a Mustang-Quarter Horse cross, was called Dusty — he left everyone else behind in the dust.

Never before had I been on a ride that allowed you to lope and gallop as much as this one. And the horses were so fit, it seemed as though they could go at that pace forever.

Back at camp, Chef Jocie took a group photo. In only a short time, we'd made friendships that would last a lifetime. The four of us are already planning our next riding trip together. The wine, song, and




stories were unforgettable, and Mike and Bobbi's hospitality was over the top.

The next day, we visited Granite Falls in Bridger-Teton National Forest to relax in the hot springs. The naturally warm spring water flowed over my body while I reflected on the previous week.

And what a week!

"Never before had I been on a ride that allowed you to lope and gallop as much as this one," says Shawn Hamilton. "And the horses were so fit, it seemed as though they could go at that pace forever."

Communing with wild horses, absorbing the Wades' amazing horsemanship skills, listening to Mike's interesting stories, and enjoying Bobbi's angelic voice all combined to make this a unique experience that we'll all cherish. 

For more information on Blue Sky Sage Horseback Adventures, call (307) 260-7990, or visit www.blueskysage.com. For more on Bridger-Teton National Forest, call (307) 739-5500, or visit www.fs.fed.us/r4/btnfl.

As the owner of Clix Photography (www.clixphoto.com), Shawn Hamilton travels worldwide to cover equestrian events. Her images regularly appear in top magazines. She lives with her husband, four children, and five horses on a farm in Ontario, Canada.

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