



Pryor Mountain Wild Horses — Larry's Version

Lu wanted to see some wild horses, and it turns out the Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Range is one of only four places in the lower 48 where the BLM actually manages land specifically for wild horses and burros. Roughly 38,000 acres in and around the Pryors, home to about 120 mustangs plus whatever else lives up there. We read through the BLM brochure online beforehand and figured we had what we needed. Knew going in that some of the roads call for 4WD, high clearance, short wheelbase — the brochure's own words were that the roads are "difficult in all conditions and nearly impassable during inclement weather." We know mountain weather can turn fast, so we packed extra clothes, food, water, filled the tank, and let both the family back in Chicago and the folks at our campground in Hardin know where we were headed, in case anyone needed to come looking.

Long drive just to reach the Range, and we got there around midday. Passed a small building called the Pryor Mountain Wild Mustang Center and a BLM office, both looking empty — holiday, maybe. The posted map at the entrance matched the one we'd already seen online, which is to say, about as clear as BLM maps ever are. One road circles the whole range with some twists, turns, and points of interest marked. We got ourselves onto it and headed out.





Terrain up there gets called cold desert — rock, short twisted pine, sagebrush, rough scrub. The road itself was one long series of deep dips, steep climbs, sections that looked like nothing but loose rock, altitude changing constantly. Fun enough for the first twenty minutes, and then it just turned into a grind. We're driving a 4WD Toyota Sequoia — decent clearance, moderate wheelbase — and there were still stretches where I genuinely wasn't sure we'd get out of whatever hole we'd just dropped into. Sometimes the road just fell away in front of the hood and I had to get out and walk ahead to see where it actually went. Sometimes it just went straight up. We wanted horses, though, and kept telling ourselves the road had to level out eventually. It didn't. Four hours of this — up, down, east, west, every bolt in that truck getting tested. Even a smaller vehicle built specifically for that terrain would've been slow going; ours certainly was.

Had to fight the wheel the whole way, inching forward in low-4, crawling over each rise and easing down into each dip. We were wrecked, but there wasn't much choice besides continuing — turning around would've meant redoing everything we'd already ground through.

At some point it became clear we were actually climbing a mountain, though true to BLM map form, we had no idea which one or how high. Spotted a few horses off in the distance and got some photos.





Eventually the road opened into a short, flatter stretch, and there — people. Vehicles, horses, actual humans. We were genuinely relieved to see other people out there and pulled up carefully, given how close everyone was standing to the horses. Turned out to be a film crew shooting a documentary called “American Horses,” full camera and sound rig. Asked them how to get out — they confirmed we were near the north edge of the range, gave us the fork to take heading down and out. One of the women warned it’d be at least three

and a half hours of “more of the same” before we hit flat ground, and longer still to pavement. Hoped she was exaggerating. Noticed as we passed that their crew was fully set up to camp — tents, coolers, trucks built on the same kind of platform as ours. Explained why the timeline didn’t bother them; they weren’t planning to leave that mountain before dark anyway.



We did get our horses, and they’re something else in person. Completely unbothered by people, didn’t flinch at the crew or our truck. Bigger than any of the horses we’d seen on farms across Montana — shaggy, multicolored, clearly running the place on their own terms.

By then it was getting dark and cold on that snowy summit. Started down, and sure enough, the woman hadn’t been exaggerating — same brutal road going down as coming up, hours

of it, headlights on the whole way, inching along, stopping now and then as gusts kicked up enough dust to blot out the road entirely. And then we genuinely lost it.

Nothing ahead but rock and scrub, no visible track. Happened a few times already that day, so I got out with a flashlight and checked both directions — nothing I could identify as a road. Nearly full dark by then. We made the call to just stop for the night rather than risk a wrong turn sending us off a cliff or out into open desert with no way back.

Temperature was in the 40s, not dangerous with what we'd packed. Put on a warm sweatshirt, kept my winter coat handy as a blanket if needed. Plenty of food along — sandwiches, chips, dried fruit, fresh cherries — and water. Backed the car onto the closest thing to level ground we could find, reclined the seats, ran the engine a while to build up some warmth before shutting it off. I was out almost immediately, exhausted, around 10:30. Woke at some point, ate a little more, ran the engine again, went back to sleep.



Mountain dawn comes early. Around 5:30 I figured there might be enough light to spot the road, so I got out to look. Turned out we'd drifted off the track a good eighth of a mile back sometime in the dark — good thing we'd stopped when we did, since the ground where we'd parked sloped down onto solid rock leading straight into trackless desert, and we'd been angling steadily away from any actual road the whole time.

Took some careful backing and maneuvering to get clear of where we'd stopped. From there, maybe another hour and a half of rough road before hitting dirt road proper, then another hour to pavement. Still running on fumes ourselves by that point. Stopped for gas in Lovell and realized food mattered more than anything else right then — cleaned up as best we could in the gas station bathroom and found a place called the Brandin' Iron, where eggs and potatoes went a long way toward making us feel human again.



Someday we'll live like horses, free rein from your old iron fences. There's more way than one to regain your senses, break out the stalls, and live like horses.

— Elton John and Bernie Taupin