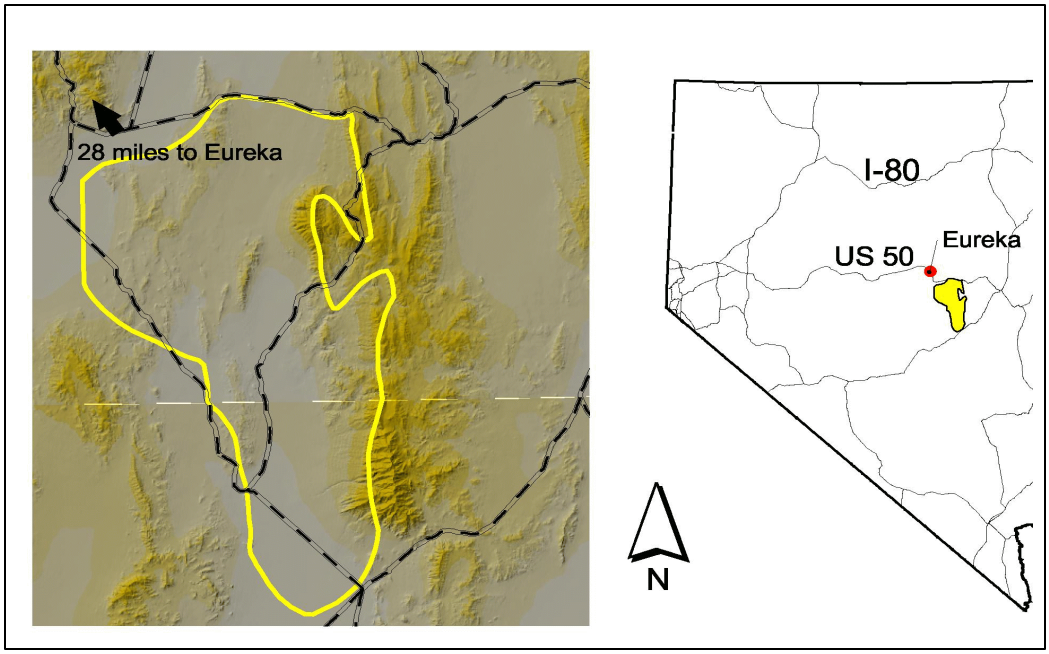
Monte Cristo Herd Management Area
White Pine and Nye Counties, Nevada

Location/Habitat

The Monte Cristo Herd Management Area (HMA) is located in White Pine and Nye counties, Nevada, approximately 30 air miles west of Ely. The HMA lies on the west slopes and foothills of the White Pine Range and extends west beyond the Pancake Range into Little Smokey Valley. The area is rural in character. Topography consists of valley floors, alluvial fans, canyons, mountains, steep ridges, and basins. The climate is arid to semiarid. Annual average precipitation varies from 20 inches at the higher elevations to 8 inches or less at the lower elevations. The bulk of the precipitation occurs through early spring rains and winter snows. Temperatures range from summer maximums in excess of 90 degrees Fahrenheit to winter lows falling well below zero. Springs and reservoirs provide a water supply of generally fair to good quality. Air quality is good, although short-term increases in fugitive dust levels occur as a result of climatic variations and vehicular traffic. Soils vary with the extremes of landscape, topography, and geology. Soil textures are generally loams, clay loams, and silt loams, most of which are capable of supporting desirable species of vegetation.

The herd area supports a variety of wildlife. This region provides yearlong range for pronghorn antelope and mule deer. Rocky Mountain elk can be found in the White Pine Range. Sagegrouse and chukar are known to exist in the area. Amphibians, reptiles, mammals, rodents, raptors, and passerine bird species common to the Great Basin can be found. Federally threatened bald eagles winter here annually between November and April. The Lahontan Cutthroat Trout (threatened) occurs to the northeast at Illipah Reservoir. Other species being considered for threatened or endangered status and found in the area are the ferruginous hawk (numerous nesting sites in the area) and the Railroad Valley Tui Chub fish (in springs on the west boundary).



The area has traditionally been grazed by domestic livestock since the existing ranches were established in the late 1800s. Historically, both cattle and sheep have grazed, but primary use was by large, nomadic bands of sheep. During the 1950s most of t
e livestock operators converted from sheep to cattle due to economic conditions which have prevailed to the present time

The area is also of high interest for minerals, both hard rock and leasable. There is presently one major active mining operation which is a disseminated gold open-pit mine, as well as three inactive mines which began in 1989. There are also extensive prospecting operations throughout most of the area. The area is currently undergoing extensive seismic exploration for oil and gas.

Other uses of the area are primarily for recreational purposes. It is believed that some recreational use of horses, either by viewing or photography, is made by visitors to the area. Deer, antelope and upland game hunting occur throughout the area. Trapping activities are moderate. Firewood gathering and pine nut harvesting also occur. The U.S. Forest Service's Currant Mountain Wilderness Area lies in the White Pine Mountains at the south end of the HMA, providing recreational opportunities for hikers and backpackers. There are numerous significant cultural resource areas. Typical prehistoric sites are open lithic tool and debitage scatters, although more unusual sites such as rock shelters with preserved perishable artifacts, rock art sites, and hunting blinds occur. The historic White Pine Mining District contains numerous sites associated with the mining of silver, copper, and even placer gold.

Contrasting and varied topography make the area visually pleasing to many people. It is sparsely settled. It is rural in character. The primary source of income is from the ranching and mining operations. There are no towns. Major population centers are far removed, the nearest community being Ely, Nevada, which is located 30 miles to the east, or Eureka, Nevada, approximately 30 miles to the northwest.

Vegetation

Major plant associations may be generally characterized as big sagebrush-grass, mid sagebrush-grass, pinyon pine-juniper, and winterfat-saltbush flats. There are stands of aspen and fir trees, as well as open grassy meadows, in the higher elevations of the White Pine Mountain Range.

Herd Description

Wild horses in the area possess a variety of colors with variations from white to black and all shades in between. The herd contains a preponderance of sorrels and bays, as well as a high percentage of palominos. Grays, buckskins and roans can be readily seen throughout the area, and even an occasional pinto can be observed.

The overall condition of the area's wild horses is generally good. The majority of the horses are sound, relatively healthy, of good conformation, and adapted to the type of environment they live in. This HMA produces average size wild horses of about 13 to 15 hands. Since wild horses have few natural predators other than man, the herd increases at a rate of about 20 percent a year (considering natality and natural mortality).

There is no specific information regarding the breed of horse that resides in this herd area. It is known that these horses are descendants of ranch stock and horses that belonged to miners in the area during the 1800's; they were released and became wild. They are probably descended from quarterhorse, thoroughbred, Morgan and other draft breeds based on the history of the area. Curly horses can also be found in the Monte Cristo HMA. Few HMAs have the Curly horse breed in the wild.

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