

Photographing the Wild Spanish Barbs

Photographs and Text by Steve Simmons



Above - Wild Spanish Barb stallion. Below, the stallion and three of his mares. Photographs made with Nikon D200 and 70-200mm f2.8 lens with a 1.4 tele-extender. The stallion above has come to investigate the intruder into his territory, and to see how much of a threat we, my horse and I, are to his family. As he approaches he snorts and puffs to make himself appear more threatening. Horses are prey animals, and they are very wary of predators. They will sense us approaching from more than a mile away, even on a calm day. As soon as I sense they become aware of us, I drop of my horse and, keeping him between myself and the other horses, I will walk sideways to the group to try and minimize any sense of threat to them. Nevertheless, they will only tolerate so much closeness before they disappear into the valley miles away from me.



Photographing wild horses is becoming a more common activity as interest in these animals increases. There are roaming herds throughout the country. The trick is locating them and getting access to their territory.

If you have not read Tony Stromberg's piece on this web site please do so. His article is full of insights I can only echo and reiterate.

In this group, and most others, wild horses travel in groups of a stallion and his mares or in groups of bachelor studs - stallions that have not yet earned their mares, or stallions that have lost their harem. The life of a wild stallion is tough and, at times, very lonely. Mares are more social creatures and rarely travel alone or with just other mares.

In this situation, the stallion has come to check me out. I try and use my horse, we track these horses on horseback as the roads in the area are few, far between, and terrible, and these wild horses will be initially curious about a strange horse in the area. Even one with a strange bump on his back and an extra set of legs. The natural curiosity of these horses works in my favor much of the time, if I am careful in how I get close to them. I do not ever move directly at them, but always either move away or move sideways to them. I carry my camera in a canteen bag and take it out as soon as I dismount. I keep my horse between us and sometimes I let him graze and just wait, and wait, and wait to see what the wild group will do. If I am quiet and patient, these wild horses will sometimes approach. Approach to a point that is.

Even with a 200mm lens and a 1.4 tele-extender, on the D200 with its built in magnification of about 1.4 already, this gives me a lens of about the equivalent of 420mm, These photos are cropped considerably. This group would not come any closer than about 200 yards. They moved parallel with me for about half an hour before the stallion decided he'd had enough and began moving away. After a few more minutes he took off followed by his mares and they were a couple of miles away up the valley before I could put the camera away and mount up again. However, there is no point to a horse and rider trying to catch a group of unriden horses. They can easily outrun and outlast a domestic horse, even one as tough as my Morgan.

I usually set the camera on the Aperture preferred program and set the f-stop to f4 to get as shallow a depth of field as possible. This helps separate the horses out and away from the background. This also gives me the fastest shutter speed possible as these horses sometimes are in constant motion. I set the Exposure Index at 125 to get the cleanest image possible.

Being able to photograph these horses has been an amazing experience. This huge valley has become my private riding area and tracking these horses has become a challenging opportunity. This experience is forcing me to be patient, and to learn and watch wild horse and herd behavior.