

ADVENTURES IN WRANGLING HORSES

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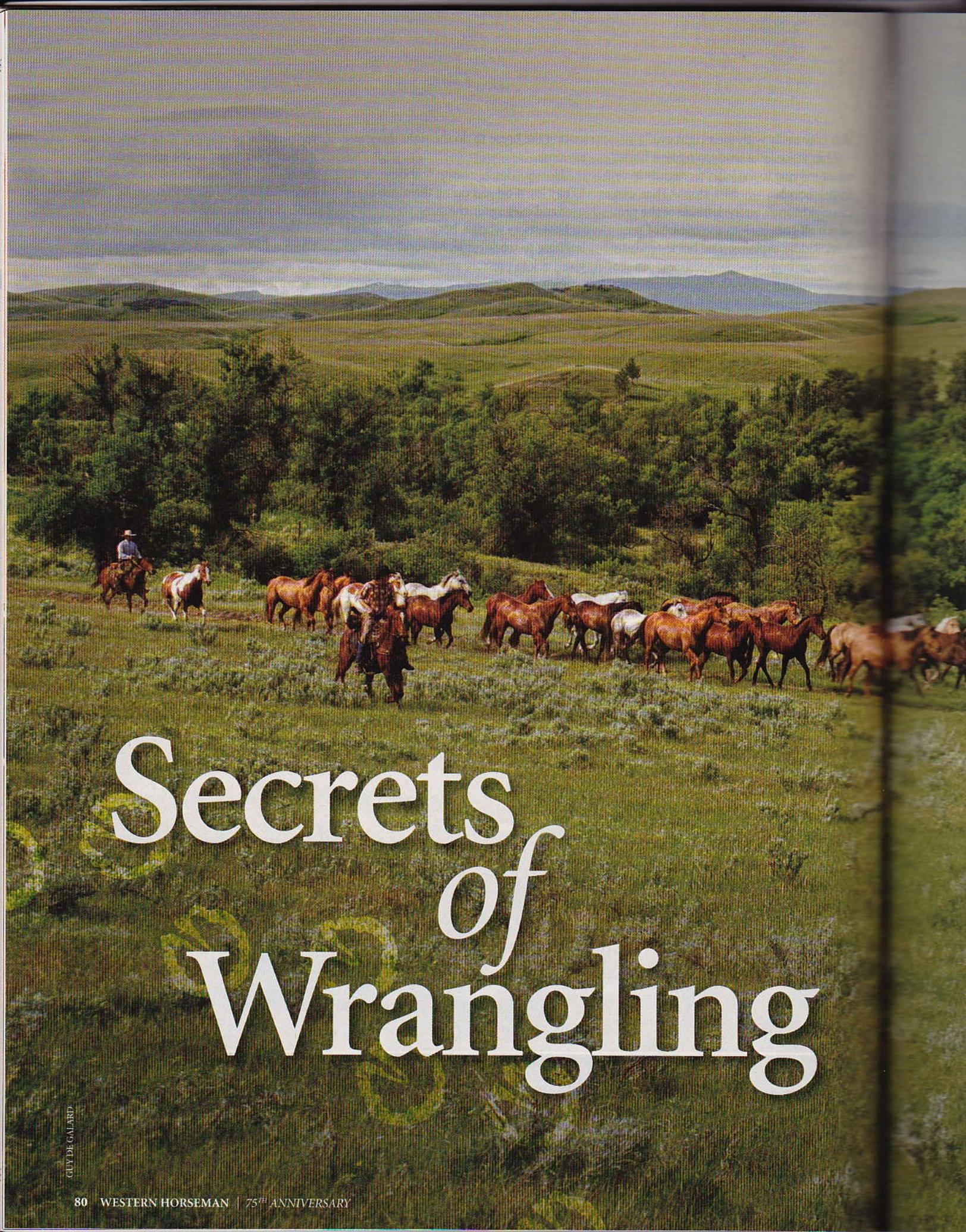


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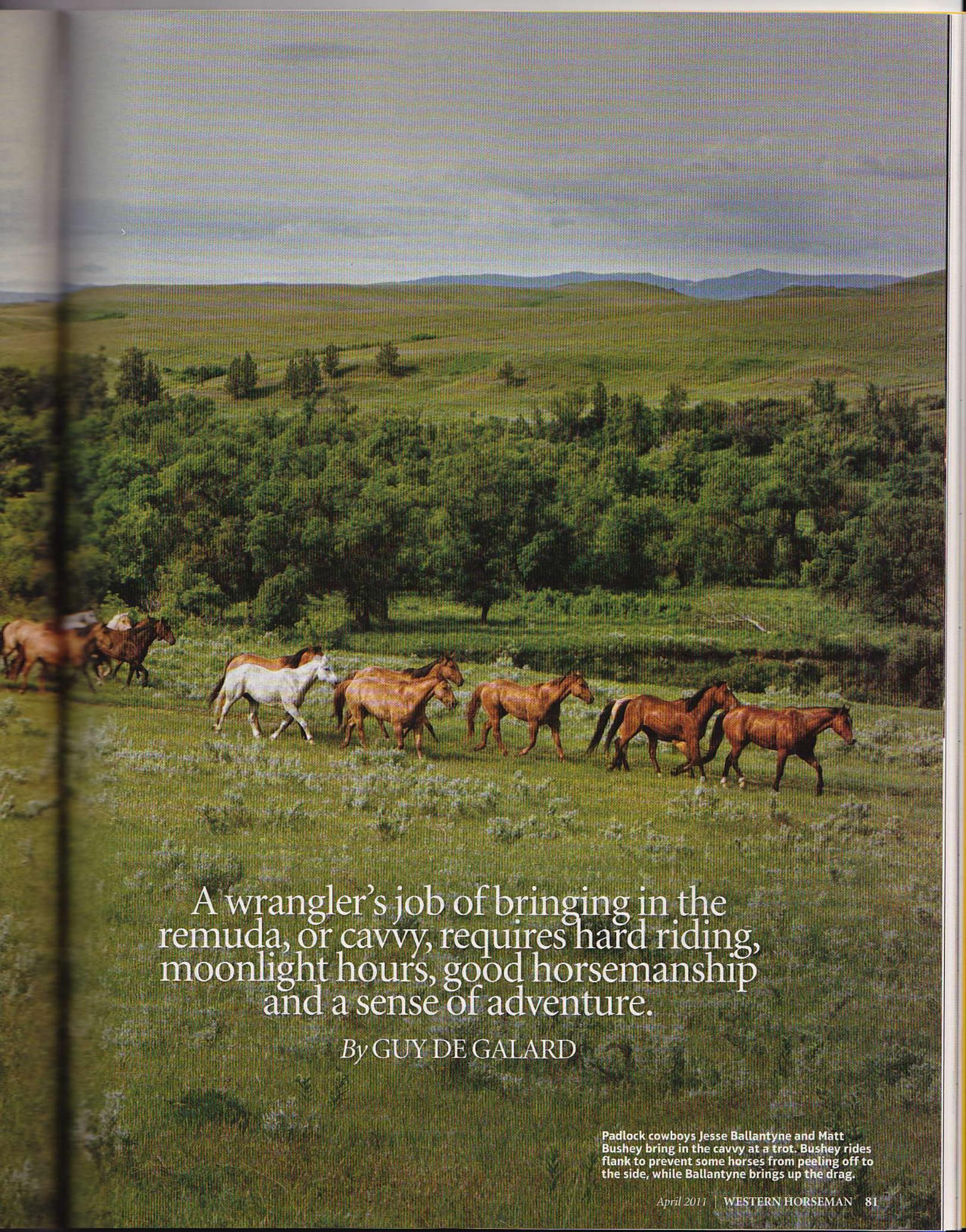


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Secrets *of* Wrangling

GUY DE GAILLARD



A wrangler's job of bringing in the remuda, or cavvy, requires hard riding, moonlight hours, good horsemanship and a sense of adventure.

By GUY DE GALARD

Padlock cowboys Jesse Ballantyne and Matt Bushey bring in the cavvy at a trot. Bushey rides flank to prevent some horses from peeling off to the side, while Ballantyne brings up the drag.

The low rumbling of running horses grows louder as the remuda pours over the ridge. Pushed by two riders, they settle into a trot as they enter an old stone corral, nickering at each other. Late afternoon sunlight filters through the dust.

This scene takes place almost every day on the historic JA Ranch, located in the Texas Panhandle. A similar scenario unfolds on many cattle outfits and guest ranches throughout the West. Wrangling horses—or jingling, as it is usually referred to in the Southwest—means bringing in fresh horses where riders await.

Many might look at wrangling as just one of the romantic aspects of ranch life, but this daily chore has practical reasons that date back to the early days of ranching on the open range.

TRADITION

According to Ramon F. Adams's book *Western Words: A Dictionary of the American West*, the word "wrangler" comes from the Spanish word *caverrango*, meaning "herder of the saddle horses." The term "remuda" is defined as a ranch's string of saddle horses and is derived from the Spanish word *remudar*, which means "to exchange."

The remuda is to the Southwest what the cavy is to the Northwest and the Great Basin. Like many cowboy terms, cavy also comes from a Spanish word, *caviada*, which means a ranch's saddle horses.

The primary reason for turning out the saddle horses to pasture and then gathering them each morning was, and still is, to make use of grass and save feed. During the large roundups in the late 19th century, each cowboy had a string of several horses. The wrangler was put in charge of grazing, watering and herding the entire remuda. The job was considered the most menial and lonesome position in cow work, and it was generally

given to either a young fellow learning to be a cowboy, or to an old cowhand too broken up to hold any other job.

Traditionally, the wrangler did not rank very high among the cowboy crew. However, his job wasn't as easy as it looked. A good wrangler checked for lame or sick horses, studied the disposition of each one and knew their grazing habits. He also tried to teach his horses remuda manners, such as quietly standing on the ropes in the rope corral. Besides knowing all the horses' names, he had to know to which cowboy's string each mount belonged, as well as the order in which it was ridden.

When he wasn't busy with his remuda, the wrangler helped the cook gather wood and cow chips, or washed the dishes. If camp was to be moved, he helped pack and load the wagons, and drove the remuda to the next camp.

Some of the bigger outfits used two men—the day wrangler, sometimes called the "wrangatang," and a night herder, called the "nighthawk." However, most ranches used only one wrangler. In the morning, he and the cook would be the first ones up, and he would ride off into the darkness to round up the horses and bring them inside the rope corral. He might bring in the remuda three times a day to supply the cowboys with fresh horses. If he came back without the complete remuda, he was given grief by the cowboss and the rest of the crew.

Bryan Neubert spent a good portion of his life buckarooing in the Great Basin. The California horseman and clinician wrangled his share of modern-day cavy's, and the methods on ranches where



In the early morning light, Eatons Ranch horses break into a lope on the last stretch to the corral. Every morning during the summer season, two to four wranglers gather more than 100 head of horses on this Wyoming guest ranch.

he worked hadn't changed drastically from those used in the early years. He explains why bringing in the entire cavy is so important.

"A cowboy might want to ride a specific horse that day, maybe because he's the most rested or is best suited for that particular day's job," Neubert says. "If that horse is missing, another horse in his string will get less rest because of it."

Poor wrangling also teaches the horses bad habits, according to Jesse Ballantyne, who has been cowboying on Wyoming's Padlock Ranch on and off for the past 19 years.

"A cavy that stays together is less trouble," he says. "Bringing them all in helps them stay together. Otherwise, some might think that they can just hide out and not come in."

Today, most ranches no longer have a full-time wrangler, and cowboys tend to ride the same horse all day. However,



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wrangling horses is often still part of everyday life on a ranch, and the task is still usually assigned to the newcomer. It teaches the novice cowboy the lay of the land and builds his confidence by giving him responsibility.

METHODS

Although horses tend to roam less in rough country than on the flats, they are also harder to find. The 25 horses in the JA remuda are kept in a horse trap the size of two sections. It is covered with juniper, mesquite brush and small canyons where horses can easily hide. Ranch foreman Steve Eytcheson and his crew often must top a knob or a hill to locate them.

"The bays and sorrels blend into the shadows, but the grays are really easy to spot," he says.

According to Ballantyne, horses that have been together in the cavvy for a long time are more likely to stay together. Also,

horses learn by repetition and consistency. If wrangling is a daily routine performed around the same time, they fall into a pattern and can be gathered almost automatically. It becomes more challenging when some of the horses split from the group.

"If some peel off from the main bunch, I really put the heat on them by bringing them back hard," says Ballantyne. "I ease off as a reward as soon as they get back into the bunch. They soon understand that leaving the bunch is not a good idea."

Eytcheson says he gives strays an additional incentive to get back to the remuda.

"If they start breaking and splitting real bad, I'll crack my bullwhip," he says. "It scares them a little bit and they eventually get back where they need to be."

Ballantyne prefers to bring in the cavvy at a trot.

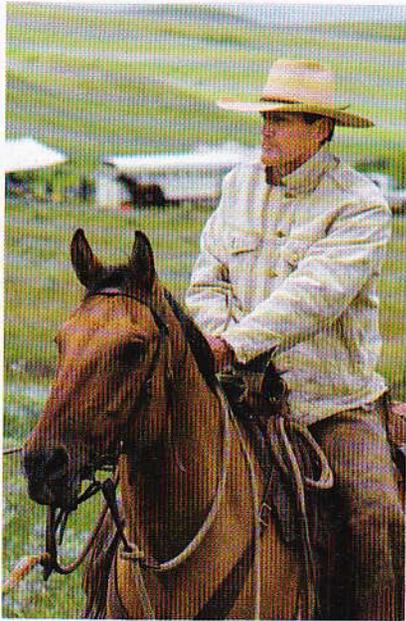
"The trot is a good, ground-covering gait," he says. "They are a little more destination-minded and less likely to wander off. If they break into a lope, I just keep up with them and they'll generally idle back into a trot."

It is important for the wrangler to avoid crowding the remuda into a run, especially when coming upon a gate. A horse could injure its hip or shoulder by hitting the gatepost.

Randy Bock is foreman of the McGinnis Meadows Ranch, a guest ranch located in northwest Montana. He prefers to move the ranch's 70-head cavvy at a slow trot.

"If the horses are fresh and take off, our wrangler doesn't have to take off after them," he says. "The wrangler just stays at a slow trot and catches up to them."

Ballantyne recommends that the wrangler stay at the back of the cavvy if he's by himself. But if the cavvy heads the

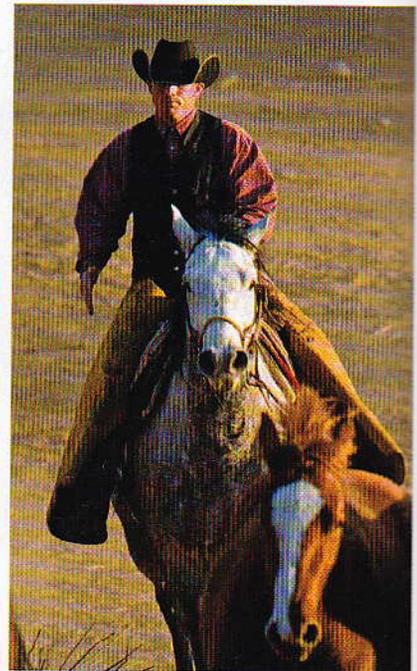
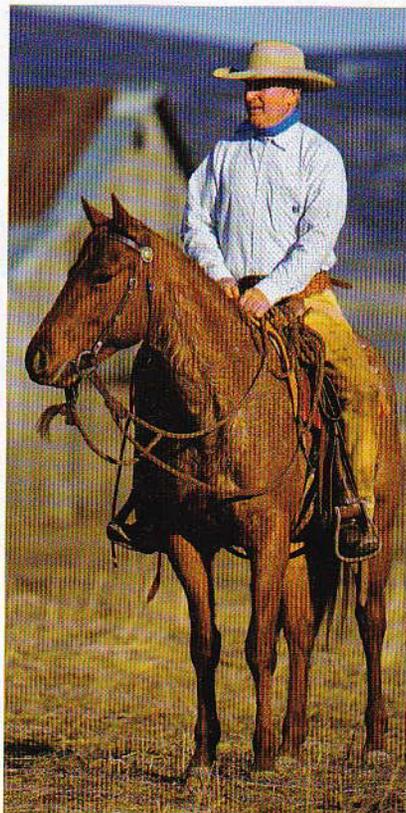


From left to right:

Padlock Ranch cowboy Jesse Ballantyne has a lifetime of experience wrangling horses.

Bryan Neubert worked as a wrangler for many years on Great Basin ranches.

JA Ranch cowboys typically bring in their remuda late in the afternoon, while there is still enough light to locate the horses.



wrong way, he must ride ahead and turn the lead horse, all the while making sure the drags keep up.

With two wranglers, it's common for one to take the lead and the other to bring up the drags.

"But if the horses are not used to following a lead rider, it's probably best that both riders stay in the back," Ballantyne adds.

The number of wranglers used often depends on the terrain, the size and shape of the holding pasture and the time of day. If the holding pasture is long and narrow, one wrangler is enough. If it is large, if there are canyons and heavy brush, or if the camp is set up in the middle of the pasture, Neubert recommends two wranglers.

"Instead of making one big circle around, one wrangler rides in one direction and another one rides in a different direction," he says. "This way, you can find the horses in half the time."

The same principles apply at Wyoming's Eatons Ranch, considered the oldest guest ranch in the country. Every morning during the summer season, three to four wranglers gather about 150 head of horses.

"It depends on the size of the holding pasture and the terrain," explains Bill Fer-

guson, the ranch's vice president who is also in charge of horses and cattle. "Each wrangler has an area to cover. At the beginning, the more-seasoned wranglers take the newcomers out to show them the lay of the land."

Eytcheson generally sends one wrangler out to gather the JA remuda.

"We always wrangle in the evening because it's too dark in the morning to see the horses," he says. "They're too hard to find in the brush. The only time we wrangle in the morning is when we're on the wagon. About an hour before breakfast, two guys go out and jingle the horses in the dark. It's always better to have two wranglers when it's dark."

The term "jingling" originates from the sound made by a tin cowbell hanging from the neck of one or two dominant horses in the remuda. The bell helps wranglers find the remuda, especially when visibility is poor.

"Just aim for that bell," Neubert says. "The bell should be placed on a horse that likes to be with the others. The sound of the bell is different when a horse is grazing than when he's moving along. When the horses hear that bell jingling, they'll want to follow it. A good wrangler horse will also aim for the bell because he knows that's where the other horses are."

Some bell horses learn to stand still so the wrangler can't find them. Neubert suggests giving a holler.

"When he hears you, the bell horse will naturally turn his head in your direction and that will make the bell ring."

The bell can also be helpful in bright daylight.

"One time the wrangler couldn't find the horses," recalls Bock, "so I went back out with him, and we still couldn't find them. As I looked way up on the divide, I just saw the glint of the sunlight off a bell."

THE WRANGLING HORSE

According to Ballantyne, it's best to ride a horse that's older, more independent and not concerned about other horses leaving him. Eytcheson agrees.

"Riding a colt to wrangle usually fries his mind because he can't take the pressure and doesn't understand why he can't run with the rest of them," Eytcheson says. "We usually start jingling when the horse is 4 or 5 years old."

By the same token, a less-experienced rider can do more damage than good when wrangling on a young horse. By constantly holding up the horse with the bit to keep it from running off with the bunch, a rider can develop a hard-mouthed horse.

"It would be like driving with the emergency brake on," Neubert says. "Soon, you won't have an emergency brake anymore."

Bock believes that every horse should eventually be able to wrangle.

"A horse isn't complete until he can push other horses or ride away from them," he says. "We get all our horses used to trailing other horses, to the point that they behave around other horses the same as around cattle. Wrangling horses is a good learning experience for horses, as well as a good training tool."

The Eatons Ranch takes a different approach.

"Most of our wrangler horses are newer horses that we bought over the winter, and we want to make sure that they'll be okay for guests to ride," Ferguson explains. "Some are good for wrangling but too much horse for guests. Some are perfect for guests but go crazy when wrangling. But you don't know until you try. If a horse gets too hot, we don't use him for wrangling."

There are several approaches to training a wrangling horse to remain calm.

"One of them is to make the right thing easy—staying with me at my pace—and the wrong thing difficult—speeding up," Ballantyne says. "This way, my horse will

understand that he doesn't have to take off after the cavvy. But for that, I need to be mentally ahead of my horse and prepared for what's coming.

"If my horse gets up into a trot before I ask him to, I take the slack out of my right rein, for instance. I make it uncomfortable for him to go at that pace until he gives to that rein and comes around. But I'm not just pulling him around in a circle. Coming around has to be his idea."

At the same time, Ballantyne cautions that bending a horse into a circle at a high rate of speed or on treacherous terrain is "a good way to end up in a pile."

If the landscape is hilly, Neubert suggests loping the horse hard up a hill while approaching the cavvy.

"This way, he'll be out of air and won't be as interested in taking off with the other horses," he explains.

ADVENTURES

Every wrangler has had some exciting adventures at one point or another. Although some of them might have turned

out badly, most seem to have ended with only a few scrapes and a good adrenaline rush. Ballantyne's most memorable experience took place while working at a hunting camp outside of Cody, Wyoming.

"We kept about 30 head of horses there," he says. "One day, they left camp and went back down the highway toward Cody. I took off after them and managed to turn them back. But three of them were dead-determined not to go back and kept blowing by me, taking the rest of the bunch with them.

"So I roped the fastest of the three with my 60-foot rope. I got him up close to my horse, took the tail end of my lariat and tied a bowline knot around his neck, and dallied him off with a clove hitch to my saddle horn, using about 10 feet of rope. Then, I took the loop off his neck, recoiled my rope, took off after the next one, roped him with about 50 feet of rope, and did the same thing with him. Then, with two horses tied behind me, I went after the third one, roped him with about

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