Wild horses have come to symbolize one First Nation's battle over territory in British Columbia's Chilcotin country

STORY BY ANDREW FINDLAY WITH PHOTOGRAPHY BY PATRICE HALLEY

The horse stirs and tosses its head anxiously, its muscular body chestnut-brown save for a white stripe running down the length of its snout like a couloir of snow. Chief Roger William adjusts the saddle cinch in silence, slips a boot into the stirrup and hoists himself into the saddle. A gust of dry air blows down the valley, rattling the aspens and shimmering the pine grass in golden waves, while two ravens soar on a thermal, riding up the crumbling sedimentary flanks of Mount Nemaiah before resolving into black dots against the blue sky.

If William is nervous about the mountain race about to begin, it doesn't show or, at least, he is keeping his emotions well concealed behind mirrored sunglasses. The 39-year-old chief of the Xeni Gwet'in (*ha-nay gwet-een*) has ridden his quarter horse Morgan to victory in the legendary race five times. The only other competitors this year are Terry Lulua, a veteran mountain racer, June Cahoose, a steely-nerved young woman from Anahim Lake, and George Anderson, a brash tobacco-chewing Carrier from Quesnel, B.C., whose constant chatter betrays his nerves.

In the valley far below, country music croons while an excited crowd of cowboys, tourists and locals waits for the start of the race, the marquee attraction at the rodeo hosted every August by the Xeni Gwet'in First Nation, one of six Tsilhqot'in communities that form the Tsilhqot'in National Government in the heart of Chilcotin country, the region between the Fraser River and the Coast Mountains of west-central British Columbia. To the southeast, Mount Ts'yl-os (sigh-loss), the central figure of a Xeni Gwet'in legend, keeps a silent vigil over the proceedings, sunlight glistening off a silvery tongue of ice that tumbles down its face.

Two weeks ago, 10 wild horses grazed lazily in this pasture. Among them were three mares as black as obsidian, two with one clumsy white foal each and a third one expectant, its belly swollen. Like nervous teenagers, two frisky colts pranced at a respectful distance from the powerful light brown stallion, whose blond mane lent him a regal, authoritative air. Today, the wild ones are nowhere to be seen, perhaps chased by the midsummer heat into the shaded woodlands higher up on the Chilcotin Plateau or, more likely, by the ringing bustle of the rodeo.

In a thunder of hoofs, the racers are off, galloping down the incline at a ludicrous pace, a cloud of dust billowing behind and all but obscuring the riders. A fall here could be fatal for horse and rider. In under a minute, the competitors are splashing across Nemaiah Creek. As they break onto the grassy flats of the rodeo grounds, William has a comfortable lead. Lulua, soaking wet and splattered with mud, has dropped from second to third after being unceremoniously dumped into the water by his stumbling horse. Spurring Morgan to the finish, cowboy hat still clinging improbably to his head, William and his steed are a study in grace and speed. Together, they easily notch up another victory in a display of horsemanship that evokes pride throughout the Xeni Gwet'in First Nation. In just 90 seconds, the race is over.

Wild horses and the Chilcotin are almost synonymous. Part of the frontier mystique and character of this country for at least 200 years, the animal, called cayuse here, has more recently emerged as a symbol of Xeni Gwet'in strength. The band is embroiled in a benchmark land-claims case that could change the way First Nations pursue their claims, and the wild horse has become emblematic of their culture and political struggle. Indeed, the very survival of Xeni Gwet'in culture

Veteran horsemen astride Chilcotin horses, Roger William (ABOVE, with black hat) and Terry Lulua are neck and neck for first place in the quarter-mile race, a short version of the three-quarter-mile mountain race William, chief of the Xeni Gwet'in First Nation, has won 17 times. Nine-year-old Lane Setah (LEFT, in white hat) watches as Trevor Quilt, 18, readies his rope for a calf-riding competition in the rodeo hosted by the Xeni Gwet'in since the 1970s. The Xeni Gwet'in and the conservation group Friends of the Nemaiah Valley are proposing the creation of a preserve to protect 200 or so wild-ranging horses in British Columbia (PRECEDING PAGES) from indiscriminate hunting and capture.

Many in the ranching community maintain that the Chilcotin horses (ABOVE) are an invasive species that competes with cattle for forage. They argue that the terms "mustang" and "wild horse" are used erroneously to describe feral horses that were once domesticated and then turned loose.

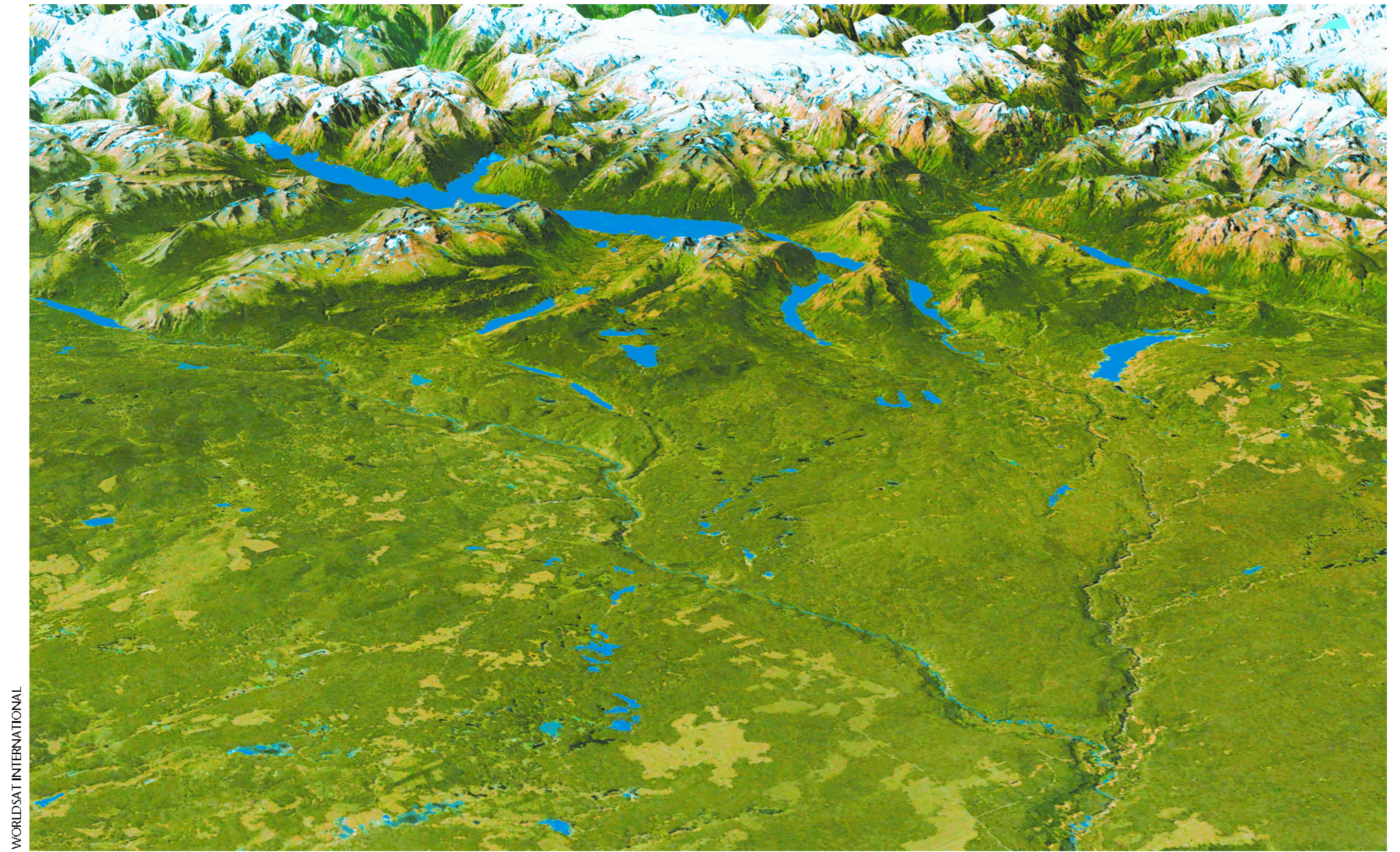
They bolt and disappear into the trees, vanishing like fleeting apparitions.

and the spirit of its people may be intrinsically tied to the survival of the horse.

The cayuse (meaning feral or domesticated mustang, especially one tamed by aboriginal peoples) is also a symbol of ecological and genealogical controversy. Conservationists who believe the wild Chilcotin horse has noble Spanish ancestry and may be among the last truly wild mustangs in Canada are pitted against the provincial government, which considers the cayuse feral (descended from once-domesticated animals) and won't protect it, and some local ranchers, who view it as an overgrazer competing with cattle for forage, a nuisance to be managed. To the Xeni Gwet'in, the cayuse is the nucleus of a centuries-old tribal horse culture, a source of saddle and draft stock and an income in times of need. It is, unmistakably, central to the Chilcotin ethos.

Scoured by the retreat of continental ice sheets, the Nemaiah Valley forms a broad U-shaped quilt of conifers and aspen-dappled meadows flanked by mountains peaking at more than 3,000 metres. From its headwaters at Konni Lake, Nemaiah Creek meanders along the valley's 25-kilometre stretch to where it pours into the icy emerald depths of Chilko Lake on the eastern slopes of the Coast Mountains. Some 375 Xeni Gwet'in live on homesteads and small ranches in and around this pastoral valley. To the north, bounded by the Chilko and Taseko rivers, is the Brittany Triangle, a lofty and mysterious-sounding part of the greater Chilcotin Plateau. Hundreds of wild horses range between the valley and the Triangle.

Judging by William's impressive track record in the iconic mountain race, nobody understands horses like he does. Bespectacled, soft-spoken and slight in stature, he seems an unlikely cowboy, let alone a community leader. In 1991, at the age of 25, he was elected chief of the Xeni Gwet'in. He is fluent in Tsilhqot'in (tsil-ko-tin), one of the Athapaskan language group. He has proven to be a spirited role model, equally at ease strategizing with lawyers in a Victoria office tower as he is riding the range with friends searching for wild horses.



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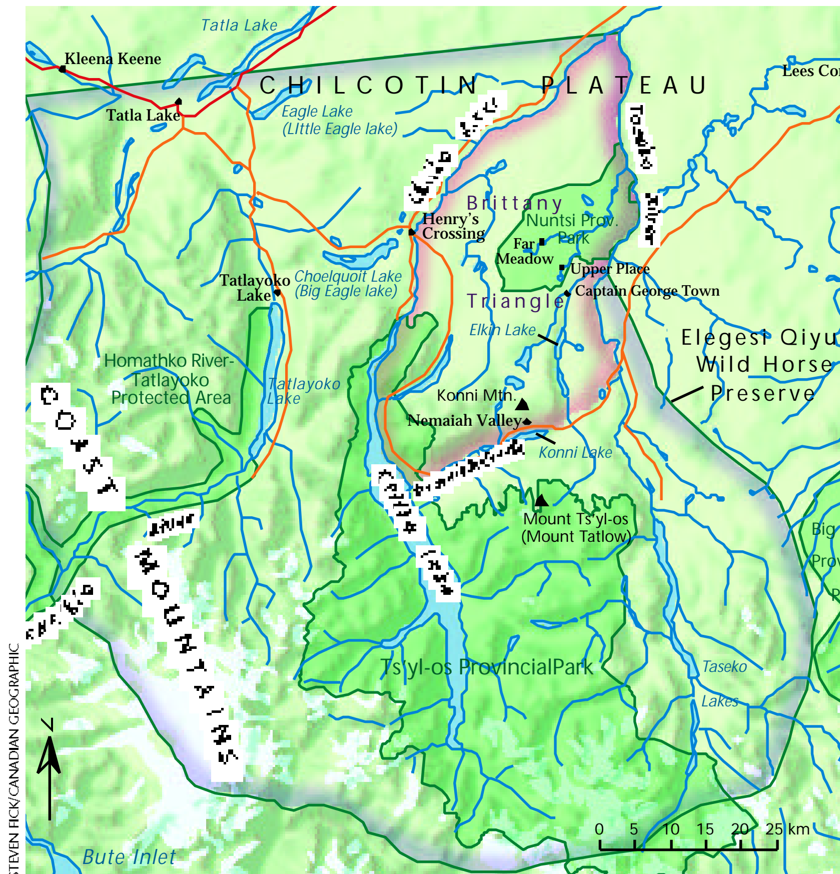

STEVEN FICK/CANADIAN GEOGRAPHIC

In a view looking southwest (TOP) across the Chilcotin Plateau toward the Coast Mountains, the Brittany Triangle lies above the intersection of the Chilko and Taseko rivers, near the bottom of the satellite image. Clear-cuts are visible in the area outside the Triangle. The Elegesi Qiyus Wild Horse Preserve (LEFT) was declared in 2002 by the Xeni Gwet'in First Nation, which is also in a court battle over a claim of title and rights to its traditional lands.

Horse whisperer Douglas Myers (TOP) uses gentle persuasion and body language to break mustangs. Dave Lulua (ABOVE) has a trapline north of Henry's Crossing on the Chilko River. With horses for partners, an equine version of musical chairs cracks up (OPPOSITE TOP, left to right) Andrea William-Youth, Leona William, Roger William, Douglas Myers and Darren Setah during the annual gymkhana, a horsemanship competition. Since the 1992 occupation of the bridge at Henry's Crossing, the yearly "Gathering" (OPPOSITE BOTTOM) has reinforced Xeni Gwet'in culture through food, songs, dances and games.

When William says he was born on the back of a horse, he means it. Before a gravel road was built in the early 1970s, the only link to the outside world was by horse team and buggy along 100 kilometres of wagon trails out to Lee's Corner on Highway 20. "I used to ride around on the back of my mom's horse chasing cattle all over the valley," he says. "We can't afford to buy expensive horses, and we can catch wild horses as we need them. If you have a tough winter with no hay, you can cut them loose and they'll feed themselves. It's something we've always understood."

Today's horse (*Equus caballus*) descends from Asian relatives that migrated to North America over the Bering land bridge about 55 million years ago. One genus of these relatives, Protorohippus, was a primitive swamp dweller about the size of a wirehaired terrier. It evolved in North America and began returning to Eurasia during the Miocene period about 20 million years ago. The modern horse went extinct here about 10,000 years ago. Spanish conquistadors reintroduced it to the New World five centuries ago, and the remnant bands of wild Chilcotin horses, it is increasingly believed, descend from those Spanish mustangs that roamed North America by the tens of thousands, arriving in central British Columbia from the southern Great Plains through trade or natural migration.

The mystery of their origin is a source of continuing controversy, but if you ask any Xeni Gwet'in where the horses come from, the response, essentially, will be: "They've been here as long as I can remember." The people of the Chilcotin and other interior First Nations have certainly been accomplished horsemen since before Europeans populated Western Canada. In his diary, explorer Simon Fraser notes a meeting in June 1808 on the banks of his namesake river with natives who "were exceedingly well dressed in leather and were on horseback."

The wild Chilcotin horses survived in obscurity for centuries, described in campfire tales and the writings of cowboy scribes such as Paul St. Pierre. That is, until a few years ago, when a renowned bear scientist with a knack for orchestrating successful environmental campaigns and an idealistic conservationist started getting the mustangs some media attention.

David Williams, one of the five founding member of the Friends of the Nemaiah Valley (FONV), invited independent biologist Wayne McCrory to conduct a wildlife inventory of the Brittany Triangle in the spring of 2001. It was a project that would send McCrory's life on an unexpected tangent. He packed his camera, notebook, field glasses and two weeks' worth of grub and joined Williams for the trip to a FONV log cabin at Far Meadow, an idyllic spot on a 65-hectare lot smack in the centre of 20,898-hectare Nunsti Provincial Park.

It was like journeying back into the province's frontier past. The only way in and out was a tortuous old wagon trail from Elkin Lake to a ghostly homestead called Captain George Town, after which the trail climbed onto the Brittany Triangle to a trapper's cabin at Upper Place. Finally, after two bumpy hours, the road brought them to the lakeside cabin that shares a low promontory with an abandoned farmstead

McCrory was enraptured, spending hours concealed in thickets of lodgepole pine watching the horses in the meadows while a fascinating picture of the ecosystem slowly emerged. The entire park was his study area, and he routinely saw 25 to 27 horses in two distinct bands: the Chestnut and the Black Stallion. There were roans, greys, chestnuts and buckskins, and several of them exhibited the shaggy mane and long tail characteristic of Spanish mustangs.

They travel a network of forest trails linking dozens of meadows, natural pastures where they forage on a variety of grasses and sedges. During the long, cold winter, they repair more often to the shelter of the forest canopy to feed on pine grass. Their social behaviour is consistent with that observed in wild horses elsewhere. Each band is led by a stallion that fiercely guards its herd of 6 to 10 mares and dependant foals, marking its territory with stacks of dung known as "stallion piles." Colts are tolerated only until they reach two to three years, at which time the stallion forces the libidinous young males out of the herd.

"It took a while for the horse aspect to kick in," McCrory says. "The iconic side of it really happened when we saw the Black Stallion band. The science side of it took a little longer."

Following the 2003 forest fire that displaced the wild horses as it ravaged the Brittany Triangle, biologist Wayne McCrory (ABOVE, left) and conservationist David Williams returned to the maze of blackened meadows and forests to look for horses. They found fireweed thriving (OPPOSITE) and coyotes surviving (BELOW). The majority of the horses roaming the Nemaiah Valley (PRECEDING PAGES) are born wild, but some escape from ranches and have feral descendants.

built in the 1920s by the late, respected Xeni Gwet'in elder Eagle Lake Henry.

McCrory found a vibrant ecosystem with a full guild of predator and prey. Using remote cameras and field observations, he recorded grizzly and black bears, moose, white-tailed deer, coyotes, wolves, lynx and cougars. And, of course, there were horses. After all, this was the Chilcotin, and horses were simply part of the landscape, like weather-beaten cowboys and homesteads. That's why neither Williams nor McCrory thought much about it at first.

One evening, though, while sitting on the front porch at Far Meadow watching the sun set over the snow-capped Coast Mountains, McCrory had an epiphany. That day, for the first time, he had seen a band of horses led by a black stallion. "This horse was snorting and doing his bluff charges," McCrory says. "Then the band disappeared. It was like a vision."

In this unassuming landscape of undulating pine forests and meadows, the biologist had stumbled across something he had never witnessed before: bands of wild horses living in balance with other wildlife in an environment that was, save for a few frontier relics, unaltered by humankind.

They are truly wild animals, highly sensitive to humans, ears like sonar discerning the snap of a twig underfoot 200 metres away. At the slightest scent carried on a shifting wind, they bolt and disappear into the trees, vanishing so quickly that they seem like fleeting apparitions.

When the fire was finally extinguished, the Triangle had been transformed.

In 2002, McCrory released a report estimating that the broader 155,000-hectare Brittany Triangle might host as many as 14 wild-horse bands, with a total of 140 to 200 individuals, in addition to the 50 to 60 that range in the Nemaiah Valley. The Chilcotin horses exist at the northern extremity of native grasslands in North America, the natural range of mustangs that dispersed across the continent after the Spanish introduced them. This, in McCrory's view, supports the case for their colonial heritage. More important, they survive alongside a rich complement of predators in a natural forest-and-pasture ecosystem in relative isolation. McCrory believes the ecosystem to be uniquely suitable to wild horses, calling it a "mosaic of meadows."

Williams and McCrory approached the Xeni Gwet'in First Nations Government with a proposal: co-operate in an effort to create a wild-horse preserve in the Brittany Triangle. It would be Canada's second official wild-horse refuge, the other being on Nova Scotia's Sable Island. On June 6, 2002, the Xeni Gwet'in exceeded all expectations by declaring the entire Brittany Triangle the Elegesi Qiyus Wild Horse Preserve. Pronounced *ah-legacy cayuse*, it means "Eagle Lake Henry Cayuse Wild Horse Preserve."

"Wild horses are sensitive to disruption of the natural environment, and their preservation and security require protection of their habitat," the declaration states. "Therefore, disruption of the environment, including flora and fauna, in the Elegesi Qiyus Wild Horse Preserve is prohibited unless authorized or consented to by the Xeni Gwet'in First Nations Government."

Early in 2003, more evidence surfaced about the ancestry of the Chilcotin horse. Blood samples from three horses, including one aptly named "Spanish Bob," were sent to Gus Cothran, a geneticist at the University of Kentucky who has analyzed DNA from 100 different wild-horse herds in the United States. One gene of interest when searching for Spanish colonial ancestry is transferrin, an iron-binding protein found in blood serum. All three Chilcotin horses had an uncommon variant of this blood marker.

"This marker is rare. We've seen it only four or five times in 100 or so herds," says Cothran. "The fact that these horses have been isolated for so long definitely warrants further investigation." He adds that he requires 20 to 25 samples to draw any conclusions about ancestry. Nevertheless, the clues locked in the horses' DNA have strengthened the case for conservation. The idea of a wild-horse preserve is gaining momentum and support from high-profile philanthropists, including

Robert and Birgit Bateman. McCrory and Williams are well aware of the horse's romantic appeal and its ability to tug at public heartstrings. However, not everybody is impressed.

Up a dusty road from Henry's Crossing on the Chilko River, Cliff Schuk grazes 150 head of cattle on crown land in the Brittany Triangle. He lives with his wife and daughters on a homestead around which old farm machinery and engine parts are scattered like museum pieces. His father bought this quarter section in 1963, and the younger Schuk has spent most of his life here. When he hears the words "wild horse," he shakes his head, then folds thick arms that hang from his torso like tree limbs.

"There's no such thing as a wild horse," he says emphatically. "It's not like a deer or a moose." Schuk doesn't necessarily advocate culling the horses but believes calls for conservation are overblown. "They could have some Spanish stock, but you can tell they've got breeding from local horses." In other words, many of the horses called "wild" share characteristics with paints, palominos, buckskins and other breeds found on any Chilcotin ranch.

The provincial Ministry of Water, Land and Air Protection shares Schuk's view: "Our Ministry does not have a policy on wild horses because our jurisdiction is under the Wildlife Act, which does not recognize these horses as wildlife," says communications director Max Cleeveley. "Because they were once domesticated, they are not considered wild the way bears, wolves, deer and cougars are."

However, a wild species is, by the Ministry's own definition, one that is wild by nature and either is native to Canada or has extended its range into Canada without human intervention and has been present here for at least 50 years. Given this, the Ministry says it welcomes any new scientific or genetic information about the origins of the Brittany Triangle horses.

The provincial Ministry of Forests, which manages crown grazing leases, is even less sympathetic to feral horses, regarding them as voracious grazers that sometimes need to be controlled. An agrologist with the forest service in Williams Lake, Chris Easthope has been dealing with the feral-horse issue since joining the Ministry in 1977. He believes the controversy surrounding the horses is guided more by "emotion than fact."

In the 1980s, Easthope oversaw the capture of dozens of wild horses south of the Nemaiah Valley, most of which were auctioned for slaughter while some were sold as saddle horses. Accurate records would be difficult to compile, according to Easthope. It wasn't the first time there had been an open season on Chilcotin wild horses. A 1940 story in the *Daily Province*, headlined "War is Declared on Wild Horses of Cariboo Area," described how ranchers could purchase a $2.50 permit to round up and kill any unclaimed horses found on their range. (In the United States, the Wild Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act, passed in 1971, made it illegal to kill horses on public land.)

The forest service continues to monitor feral horses in the Chilcotin. Over several days last winter, the forest service conducted aerial surveys and counted 794 individuals in the Chilcotin Forest District, including 115 in the Brittany Triangle alone, close to the estimate in McCrory's 2002 report.

"I don't use the term wild horses. I don't believe it's an appropriate term," Easthope says, pointing out that some horses roaming in the Chilcotin have visible brands. "All the horses that are running on crown range are feral horses."

Horses are often disparagingly referred to as "hay-burners" because of a digestive system that demands copious amounts of forage. An elongated mouth and prominent incisors make horses well adapted to grazing much lower to the ground than cattle. But charges of overgrazing by horses in the Chilcotin seem to be based more on anecdote and rumour than science and research. Easthope concedes there has never been an in-depth study of the horses' impact on Chilcotin grasslands but argues that his own field observations suggest feral horses can have a considerable negative effect. For example, he says, once horses have heavily grazed an area, unpalatable pasture sage tends to fill in.

DNA analysis is adding weight to the theory that the horses roaming the Brittany Triangle (ABOVE) are descended from mustangs introduced by Spanish conquistadores. Chilcotin people travelled widely and could have acquired horses through trade with other First Nations long before Europeans arrived in Western Canada. In a playful battle (OPPOSITE BOTTOM), two horses clash with flailing hoofs and nipping teeth.

FRANK CYRIL SWANNELL/B.C. ARCHIVES/I-33189

A Tsilhqot'in family, Kispiox Louis, Margaret and baby, on the shore of Tatla Lake, B.C., in 1913. The Tsilhqot'in people make up six communities on the Chilcotin Plateau.

Defending the Nemaiah

British Columbia was still a crown colony in 1863 when Alfred Waddington, an entrepreneur from Vancouver Island, led an effort to build a wagon road from the head of Bute Inlet to the Chilcotin Plateau in a scheme to link a deep-sea port with the goldfields of the Cariboo. Motivated by fear of smallpox and threats to their territory, a band of Chilcotin, led by the warrior chief Klatsassin, travelled down the Homathko River and ambushed Waddington's crew in the early morning on May 1, 1864. Thirteen men were killed in their tents. Fearing an insurrection, the British response was swift. A militia was sent to quash the resistance, and under a vague promise of amnesty, Chief Klatsassin and four other Chilcotins surrendered in Quesnel. They were tried, convicted of murder and all met their end on the scaffold.

For two weeks in May 1992, Xeni Gwet'in elders, youth and leaders gathered to defend their territory again. This time, instead of using guns, they blockaded a bridge at Henry's Crossing on the Chilko River, preventing Carrier Lumber from building a logging road into the Brittany Triangle. This act of civil disobedience forced the company to scrap its logging plans — an occasion that is honoured every June when Xeni Gwet'in meet at Henry's Crossing for "The Gathering."

After the blockade, the Xeni Gwet'in entered negotiations with the Ministry of Forests for joint management of the Brittany Triangle, but they came to an impasse in the late 1990s. In 1998, the band embarked on a landmark court case, arguing for aboriginal land title to a region that includes the Nemaiah Valley and a trapline around Chilko, Taseko, Big Eagle and Little Eagle lakes, roughly 420,000 hectares of crown land. The Xeni Gwet'in case, relying heavily on oral history, hinges on whether or not they had settled the land in question prior to 1846, the year the Oregon Boundary Treaty was signed and British sovereignty applied to most of present-day British Columbia.

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Given the high profile of the Chilcotin horses these days, culling them to conserve range could be a public relations nightmare, but Easthope doesn't rule it out as a last resort.

Nature dealt the Brittany Triangle a serious blow in July 2003. Lightning struck the tinder-dry forest east of Henry's Crossing, sparking a fire that, by September, had ripped across 29,200 hectares, scorching close to 20 percent of the Triangle. When the fire was finally extinguished that fall, the Triangle had been dramatically transformed. Many of the meadows that had provided key wild horse forage were reduced to barren scars of smouldering wasteland. The forest that had provided a winter refuge for horses and other wildlife was a solemn vision of blackened spikes, the remains of pine and spruce trees. However, the well-known natural rejuvenating cycle of fire was quickly evident as fresh grasses pushed stubbornly through the blackened soil last spring. It looked like the wild horses had fared well during the post-fire winter.

Concern quickly shifted to the careless actions of a few hundred people. After the snow melted, hordes of mushroom-pickers descended on the Brittany Triangle to cash in on a bumper crop of morels, leaving behind off-road-vehicle trails and campsites littered with trash. The Triangle's isolated wilderness — the very thing that makes it ideal wild-horse habitat — had been seriously compromised.

"If we don't get a lid on access, you may as well forget about it as wilderness habitat," McCrory says, adding that FONV and the Xeni Gwet'in are working hard on a plan to decommission fire roads and wagon trails leading into the Brittany Triangle.

The mushroom boom also caught the Xeni Gwet'in First Nations Government by surprise. In Chief William's opinion, the pickers, many of them Chilcotin natives, were showing a profound disrespect for the land they had fought so hard to protect. When the band council started charging harvesters a fee of $75 a month, friction resulted between the Xeni Gwet'in and other bands. William believes they were left with little choice.

The tiny Xeni Gwet'in First Nation is being closely watched by other bands around British Columbia for another reason: its aboriginal land claim, in which it has claimed title and rights to the Brittany Triangle and the Nemaiah Valley. (Neither the Tsilhqot'in nor the Xeni Gwet'in have ever signed a treaty with the federal or provincial government and maintain their title to their entire territory.) If successful, how will the Xeni Gwet'in manage the lands? The band is currently weighing the merits of various power systems, from wind to solar to a combination of hydro and alternative energy, to replace the widely dispersed community's reliance on gas and diesel generators. As testament to their independence, many band members oppose the idea of connecting to the B.C. Hydro grid for fear that it would weaken their control over development in the Nemaiah Valley.

The Xeni Gwet'in are still recovering from European contact and the effluent of social ills, broken homes, alcoholism and drug abuse that flowed from the residential school system,

when youngsters were removed from their homes, taken to St. Joseph's Mission in Williams Lake and forbidden from speaking Tsilhqot'in. Today, Xeni Gwet'in children learn Tsilhqot'in at a small daycare, old folks come together every July for the Elders Gathering and young Xeni Gwet'in are schooled in the fundamentals of horsemanship at the annual gymkhana. But if Xeni Gwet'in culture is going to survive, young people need reasons to stay in the Nemaiah Valley — and more than just romantic notions of galloping wild horses.

Harry Setah is a man with one foot planted in old-time horse culture and the other striding toward an uncertain future. As Setah bounces across a meadow astride his Honda Quad, a bracing wind buffets the Brittany Triangle. Setah, 54, has the enviable job of wild-horse ranger, charged with patrolling the Triangle, monitoring signs of horses and keeping a check on human activity. FONV contributes $18,000 a year to his salary in a 50-50 cost-sharing agreement with BC Parks.

rapidly replacing horses. Even Setah spends more time on what he jokingly refers to as his "Japanese quarter horse" than he does riding his steed. And, like others from his community, Setah has had to look elsewhere for employment, a search that has taken him to the oil patch in northeastern British Columbia every winter for the past few years. "I don't want to leave, but there's no work around here," he says, before hitting the ignition and twisting the throttle.

Back in the Nemaiah Valley, the rodeo grounds are all but deserted. The visiting cowboys with their horse trailers and the few adventurous tourists in rented campers have departed. Life rolls along in Chilcotin country in that timeless way it always has. Controversies about overgrazing, Spanish ancestry, wild or feral, don't excite many Xeni Gwet'in. They are respectful of but never overly sentimental about the wild horses — for the most

'They're not the best looking horses but they can't be beat in the mountains.'

Setah stops at the edge of the meadow, which fades into the skeletal remains of a charred lodgepole pine forest, seemingly desolate and lifeless. He dismounts, then points to a collection of sun-bleached bones, light brown hair and skin still clinging to what looks like a tibia, as well as a tail, lying detached and surprisingly well preserved.

"Looks like a young colt, probably starved to death," he says, kicking over one of the bones on which a few strands of horse hair are still visible. During his patrols last spring, Setah counted four carcasses. Winter is hard on wild horses. Deep snow and a diminished supply of grass can weaken the younger ones and render them vulnerable to predators.

Setah, like most Xeni Gwet'in of his generation, is a former rodeo cowboy, his bowlegged aging body now feeling the effects of broken bones acquired from his days on the circuit. The wild horses are legendary among the Xeni Gwet'in for agility and endurance on tough mountain trails. Setah speaks about them in reverent, almost mythological terms. But he also refers to them as you would any other resource that needs to be conserved, like deer or salmon.

"They're not the best-looking horses, but they're very sure-footed, can't be beat in the mountains. And they're smart too. They know how to deworm themselves by eating alkali," he says. Those not coveted as saddle horses are sometimes sold by the Xeni Gwet'in as rodeo stock, and to the horror of equine lovers, a rodeo horse often meets its end at the abattoir. But most of the time, Setah says, the wild horses are simply left alone.

Completed in the early 1970s, the Nemaiah Valley road brings a steady trickle of tourists to hunt moose, fish in Chilko Lake or hike through the alpine meadows surrounding Mount Ts'yl-os. The road also brings modern influences that are jeopardizing the traditional horse culture. Young people are leaving to find work, and pickups and Quads are

part, that's the job of urban equestrians. Still, debates about the mysterious and alluring horses of the Brittany Triangle and Nemaiah Valley are unlikely to die down any time soon. McCrory and FONV have made a strong case for conservation, while the B.C. government remains skeptical.

Chief William rides solo along the banks of Nemaiah Creek, bound for his home at the south end of the valley a few kilometres from where Chilko Lake's frigid waters lick the shoreline. This is the kind of leisurely commute William gets to savour too rarely these days, what with the court case, band council duties and dealing with mushroom-pickers.

Arriving home, he tethers Morgan to a tree, then holds out a handful of oats. The horse gives an appreciative snort, and William sits on a round of fir, tilting his hat to shield his eyes from the sun. In the softening evening light, the jagged skyline of the Coast Mountains is imbued with crimson and saffron, a smoky sunset from the forest fire that has been burning in Tweedsmuir South Provincial Park for much of the summer.

William is reticent when asked about the flood of attention the cayuse has drawn to this remote valley. Offering another handful of oats to Morgan, he says, "It sure doesn't hurt our political cause. If it helps, then why not?"

Questioning the Xeni Gwet'in about wild horses is like asking a woodworker about his relationship with a solid piece of old-growth Douglas fir. Still, William says, knowing that bands of mustangs still roam the land sustains the soul of Xeni Gwet'in culture. "They've always been a part of my life," he says. "Wild horses enhance us."

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