What makes the TRNP horse a North Dakota Badlands Horse or a Nokota?

Over the years, there has been and remains much confusion about the park's horses and what some of them became when they were removed from the park. I will try to clarify some things concerning these wonderful horses, but the first thing to realize is that horses were not valued decades ago as they are today. If a horse was not useful, it was considered worthless. I'm glad people look at horses differently now!

As we know, before the park was established, horses were running in the North Dakota Badlands. They had many origins, including those from Indians, explorers, remount breeders, ranchers, farmers, etc. They were of many breeds but mostly mixed because purebreds were scarce in those days. In 1947, a prime area of the Badlands near Medora, ND, was designated as Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Park. (It would later gain national park status.) Though ranchers still ran horses within that park for several more years, most of those branded horses were removed in the big roundup of 1954, leaving just a few of the wild horses.

After a couple decades of trying to eradicate the park's unwanted, "invasive livestock", the NPS decided to keep a small number of horses in the park as a "demonstration herd" to represent those Theodore Roosevelt wrote of seeing when he ranched in that area. The horses were still mostly managed and handled by local ranchers who knew them and could capture them regularly to keep the herd from growing too large. Most of the culls went to slaughter or the local zoo. Hoping to find a better market with ranchers and rodeo contractors and seeing the results of inbreeding from such small numbers left in the park, the local ranchers found a few young domestic stallions to introduce into the herd. They recommended to the park staff that the oldline horses be removed.

During that time, the Kuntz family ran a buggy concession in Medora. Admiring the toughness of the wild ones, Leo Kuntz, a friend, and his brother began buying what they could to save and to cross on their homebred horses. Leo coined the name Nokota to represent these North Dakota horses he wanted to preserve and, with others, created the Nokota Horse Conservancy (NHC) in 1999. I will let followers check out that organization for details on the Nokota horse type, but basically, it is a horse bred from those old lines of park horses removed before the introductions in the 1980s.

In 2009, the park had not sold any horses for six years and planned to remove around 70-80. The Nokota people did not want any introduced blood in their or other preservation herds, so they would not accept the park horses from that sale into their registry. Wanting to have a way to recognize, track, and register those horses, my husband and I started the North Dakota Badlands Horse Registry (NDBH). We felt that any horse born wild in the park was worthy of saving and being recognized as coming from the national park. The NDBH requirement for registration is that the horse was conceived or born in the park. Domestic horses that have been dumped in the park over the past decades have been promptly removed and are not eligible for registration. Equally important is our focus on educating people about the horses, advocating for them, and supporting owners of horses removed from the park. You can read more under the ABOUT NDBH tab on our webpage.

To clarify, the horses are not that different; DNA testing shows their ancestry to be very, very similar. However, they are different in that the Nokota is considered a breed based on old lines of horses existing in the park before the introduction of outside breeds. Though raising them with little human handling can allow them to still be quite wild, they are now raised on ranches and farms throughout the world. They are wonderful, tough, intelligent horses deserving of preservation. The horses living in the park are not Nokotas; they have never been considered Nokota unless purchased by the NHC and introduced into that and other Nokota herds. The horses that have been removed from the park in the last 16 years can be called and registered North Dakota Badlands Horses because that is where they are from. We can provide a registration certificate with a fairly close ancestral pedigree and even a brand to permanently connect that horse with its homeland. They, too, are wonderful, tough, and intelligent horses and are worth protecting. They live off the land, surviving and, if not removed, dying in the wild with no human care.

Though our focus and goals differ, the NHC and NDBH love the horses; we are working toward more understanding and support among our followers. We can be friends and can admire one another's horses for what they are and what they represent while working together to educate people about them. NDBH hopes to be able to include Nokota owners in our events and continue to build positive relationships.