

# TRNP mustangs to be auctioned

## Park to test birth control on mares to maintain herd sizes

BY PATRICK SPRINGER THE FORUM



Courtesy Photo

A wild horse band runs freely through Theodore Roosevelt National Park in this Oct. 2008 photo.

Wanted: Homes for surplus wild horses that will be rounded up at North Dakota's Theodore Roosevelt National Park and offered for sale.

Park rangers plan to remove about 90 young horses from the herd of about 165 after a roundup planned for Oct. 19 and 20, with an auction on Oct. 23.

Horse advocates are spreading the word in the hope that all of the removed horses will be bought by ranchers or horse fanciers — and not by “kill buyers” who will send them to canning factories.

“It’s a sad possibility,” Marylu Weber, a Bismarck woman who has monitored the horses as a volunteer for a decade, said Thursday. “That’s why there’s a group of us trying to get the word out that these are good working horses.”

This year’s roundup also comes with a new twist: 24 mares will be vaccinated with a contraceptive to test the effectiveness of birth control, an experiment that will run three years.

If proven useful, birth control might be implemented in the future to help control the size of the horse herd, which the park wants to maintain at 65 to 90.

“Even with a lower number, they’re still visible in the park,” said Bill Whitworth, chief of resource management at the national park near Medora.

He added that non-vaccinated mares will deliver foals, so the herd size will rebound. “They will populate again. So it’s a cycle. They’re healthy horses,” he said.

Whitworth emphasized that the birth control experiment is a study, and not a change in policy.

In removing horses, the park will be careful to maintain bands, and will remove young horses, allowing breeding stallions and mares to remain.

But the park will not selectively keep horses with mustang traits, as some horse advocates and historians have asked them to do.

Some believe some park horses are descended from ponies Sitting Bull and his followers surrendered in 1882, although that influence now is greatly diminished, according to the Nokota Horse Conservancy.

“It’s more demographics than anything,” Whitworth said of the culling criteria.

The park, which considers the horses feral, maintains the herd as a demonstration of the open range era, when Theodore Roosevelt and others ran ranches in what is now a park. Any link to Sitting Bull’s ponies is unproven, park officials have said.

Weber owns a horse named Dakota Whisper acquired from an earlier auction. So does her husband, whose horse is named Embers’ Fire.

“My husband and I have found the horses are quite easy to quiet,” she said. “They’re pretty mellow.”

Anyone with experience in handling horses should have no difficulty in training them, Weber said.

So far, a network of horse lovers has pledged to adopt about 30 of the 90 horses slated for removal.

“There’s 60 more horses that need homes, and they’re gorgeous,” said Eileen Norton, of San Diego, another park volunteer who has monitored the horses.

Although wild, “They’re all gregarious and they’re all habituated to people — which is a good thing,” said Norton, a Minnesota native who plans to buy two park horses to take to her ranch in California.

Weber and other volunteers have named each of the horses and have tracked the approximately 20 bands. Weber has charted a pedigree for all of the park horses, going back five generations, so buyers will know their horse.

The park has received inquiries from prospective buyers, Whitworth said.

“I think there’s a very good chance that most or all of them will be adopted,” he said.

Buyers likely will find good values at the auction barn, Weber said: “I’m expecting these horses not to average \$100 each, which is sad. So there’ll be some good bargains for a good horse.”

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