

Badlands horses gathered for culling

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By Richard Volesky Special to The Forum Theodore Roosevelt National Park, N.D. -Sitting on a hill with a camera in hand, Wes Rimel peered through a burlap blind early Monday morning as the sound of helicopters and hooves drew closer. Rimel of Beach was waiting for the park's feral, or wild, horses, which were being driven into corrals by two low-flying helicopters and a contingent of cowboys. The park's goal was to cull the herd, to reduce their numbers to more manageable levels. Spectators such as Rimel and his cousin, Bill Filson of Plymouth, Ind., had to sit behind the fence-like blinds so as to not spook the already agitated horses. "I'm a history buff. I sometimes write about this stuff," said Rimel, who has written for outdoors magazines, as he explained his interest in the roundup. His cousin was there just to see the Badlands and the wildlife. "Back in Indiana, it's all farm ground," he said. Except for a few whinnies here and there and the banging of corral panels, the morning roundups in the park's South Unit were mostly quiet. Horses sent to the corrals had to be prompted to move down the chutes, but not unusually more than a domestic steer fresh off the range. "I was impressed with how quietly they handled the animals," Rimel said. Wild horses have roamed the Badlands since the 1880s when Theodore Roosevelt ranched in the area, said Noel Poe, the park's superintendent. The horses have also been traced to the 1930s and the Great Depression, when they were abandoned by farmers and ranchers, he said. There are about 143 horses living in 12 bands, or groups, in the South Unit, but park managers have determined the optimal numbers the land can sustain should be from 70 to 140, said Bruce Kaye, the park's chief of interpretation. About 70 horses will be removed this week. They will be sold by public auction at 1 p.m. Thursday at Western Livestock in Dickinson. Poe said the Park Service has no restrictions on what happens to the horses once they are sold. Estimated cost of the horse roundup is \$25,000, Poe said. At least part of the cost will be recouped by the horse sale. A blood sample was drawn from each horse Monday. Also, using a syringe, a microchip was placed in each horse's neck. The blood will be used for genetic testing to determine how genetically diverse the horses are and if there has been any inbreeding, Poe said. Genetic testing on the samples will take place at the University of Kentucky. Blood samples will also be stored at the University of Wyoming in Laramie. "If we ever need to go back for future disease testing or

genetic testing, we'll have (the samples), Poe explained. The microchips, which are about the diameter of a pencil's lead, identify the horses. A scanner waved over the horses' necks detects the microchips. Once the culling is finished, there will be a greater number of younger horses. However, a few older horses are needed to provide experience in the bands and to provide social structure among the animals, Poe said. Horses were last rounded up in 1997. Thirty-eight were removed that year, leaving the population at 72. A bison roundup is scheduled to begin Wednesday morning. There are about 450 bison in the South Unit, and the plans include removing about 200 to 250 and selling them to the Three Affiliated Tribes of the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation. The last bison roundup in the South Unit was in 1995. The portion of the South Unit east of the East River Road will be closed for horseback riding until Friday. The closure is needed as a safety measure to prevent park visitors from getting in the way of the bison and horses, Poe said. The Billings County road along the park's east boundary north of the Fryburg interchange will also be intermittently closed as helicopters push the animals to the nearby corrals. Volesky is a reporter for The Dickinson Press.</W></Primitive> DICKINSON PRESS</W></Primitive></Byline>