

Most wild horses destined for paddocks

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A musterer keeps an eye on a pen full of Kaimanawa wild horses. Photo / Alan Gibson

Should the Kaimanawa horse herd be culled to 300?

Forty three Kaimanawa horses will head for the abattoir today after not enough homes were found for the 209 captured in yesterday's annual Department of Conservation round-up.

The cold but calm weather made for perfect conditions for four helicopters to wrangle the wild horses on the Waiouru Military Training Area, near the Army base, on the Central Plateau east of the Desert Rd.

The first herd of 172 came in after a 10km two-hour trek through the Kaimanawa Ranges, through the Moawhango River and into a yard – built before the first muster in 1993 – in a basin called the Argo Valley.

A second lot of about 35 horses arrived later.

An April count revealed 594 horses living in the area but the Kaimanawa Wild Horse Advisory Group has recommended the herd, which increases by about 18 per cent each year, be reduced to 300 over the next two years to keep the horse population healthy and prevent damage to threatened plant species. Two horse protection groups have campaigned extra hard this year to find homes for the herd as previous annual musters have allowed for up

to 500. Homes have been found for 166 of these horses. This is the highest number of horses being homed in the past 10 years.

Local musterers sorted the horses once they came into the yard so they could fill orders – foals, yearlings and 2-year-old mares were the most popular for adoption because they are easier to handle. Sixteen mares were paired up with their foals with a surge in people asking for both.

DoC conservation analyst Bill Fleury said the leftover horses could not be released back into the wild as it would upset the existing herds in the area. Vet Nigel Coddington was yesterday picking out the horses with imperfections. A mare with a ruptured eye and another with a shoulder injury would not be rehomed.

A drought over the summer had affected the quality of the horses this year. Several mares had a 1.5 out of 5 rating on the Huntington Scale, where zero is very poor and five relates to an animal being very fat.

The last of the animals will today be taken by trucks to either the abattoir, near Turangi, or paddocks around the North Island where they will be drenched and picked up by their new owners who paid about \$200 for them.

Kaimanawa Wild Horse Protection Trust spokeswoman Christine Wilson said the trust had found homes for at least 100 horses as far north as Kaitaia and as far south as Nelson.

"This year we've had a really good response, especially considering the economy."

Kaimanawa Wild Horse Preservation Society vice-president Shirley Blank, who has three Kaimanawa horses on her 4ha farm in Gordonton, said the group had found homes for 38 horses. Despite never being handled or fenced in before, they didn't take long to break in. A chestnut mare warmed to people after two months, Mrs Blank said.

"I plonked my 10-year-old granddaughter on her and they were best friends. You get out what you put in. If you go in there yelling and screaming they'll get all jittery. There's no shortcuts, all it is is tender loving care and good horsemanship."

In 1997, when a management plan was developed for the herd, 1000 horses were rounded up. Last year, about 90 were captured in the annual muster – which costs the department about \$120,000 – with about a third culled.

The Kaimanawa breed is descended from domestic horses that were released in the late 1800s and early 1900s.