

Mike Vogt/IPT A helicopter pilot prepares to dive to turn the wild horses back to the corrals Wednesday during the wild horse roundup in the Owyhee Mountains south of Marsing. Wednesday, July 25, 2007

New tech in Old West

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Roundups help control populations of wild horses

By Bryan Dooley

bdooley@idahopress.com OWYHEE COUNTY — Giving a taste of the Old West amid rugged Owyhee Mountain scenery, modern-day wranglers captured 41 wild horses Wednesday in the first of several days of round-ups intended to keep populations at manageable levels.

The roundups took place during the morning and early afternoon at the Black Mountain and Hardtrigger herd management areas, located in the Owyhee Mountains south of the Snake River, between Murphy and U.S. Highway 95.

Contractors and BLM crews used a helicopter and a “Judas horse” — a domesticated horse trained to run directly into a trap, hopefully leading the others — to herd the horses into a gated area set around a large ridge.

Fences set on each side formed a kind of funnel to guide the horses through the gate as they approached.

OWYHEE COUNTY — Crews trapped the first 29 wild horses in the Owyhee Mountains at about 12:30 p.m. Wednesday, a helicopter following them closely through a fenced-in area after performing a delicate dance to bring them down out of the mountains and keep them from scattering or running sideways up the ridges.

The horses began to circle and attempted to avoid the fences as they approached, but the chopper eventually succeeded in guiding them into the trap. An additional 12 horses were trapped at about 2 p.m.

Tom Miles, rangeland management specialist with the Boise District Bureau of Land Management, explained that using helicopters is both safer for the people working and more humane to the animals than horseback roundups, because the horses can be run shorter distances at a more controlled pace.

The bureau plans to round up 296 horses by Aug. 3, enough to bring the population down to the lower end of the appropriate management level range after some are released.

Populations are estimated at 89 horses in the Black Mountain area and 258 in the Hardtrigger area, with the appropriate management level ranges set at 30 to 60 and 66 to 130, respectively. Previous gathers took place in 2003, 1999, 1996 and 1993, and are planned to continue every four years.

Miles said wild horse populations generally grow at a rate of 20 percent each year, but the Hardtrigger herd has grown 25 to 26 percent annually.

“There aren’t many predators, not much death loss,” he said. “These populations get pretty big pretty fast, you’ll double in four years.”

Chris Robbins, Wild Horse and Burro Program lead with the Boise District BLM, said the horses are taken by truck to the Boise District Corrals on Pleasant Valley Road in Boise, where they are sorted, examined and immunized.

After some are re-released into the wild, horses from 1 to 5 years of age will be presented at the corrals for viewing on Aug. 24, and for adoption Aug. 25 and 26. Older horses and those not adopted will eventually be taken to long-term holding pastures in Nebraska, Oklahoma and Kansas, where they will live the rest of their lives.

