



## Devils Garden Gather 2005- Article

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**DEVIL'S GARDEN** - First light of day is just breaking over the sagebrush and juniper-covered scrubland of the Devil's Garden as Rob Jeffers and his crew head out in search of wild horses.

By 6 a.m. their work horses are saddled and two helicopters are airborne, and the hunt is on. Scattered somewhere across thousands of acres of rangeland are an estimated 700 wild horses. Federal officials would like to reduce that number by more than half.

Jeffers, wild horse manager for the Alturas-based Modoc National Forest and the person in charge of the gather, checks the setup.

Burlap cloth is strung up for nearly a quarter mile to funnel horses into a corral in a meadow near Round Mountain. Following an unsuccessful attempt to gather horses from the Devil's Garden last year, the Forest Service called in a special team of wranglers from the Bureau of Land Management's Litchfield Wild Horse and Burro Facility near Susanville, Calif.

A team of wranglers take up positions behind trees and shrubs while waiting for the helicopter pilots to find a band of horses. Jeffers checks in with the pilots every 15 minutes by radio.

The cloud cover will keep the day cool, easier on the men and the horses, at least for a while. The spot they're working today is only a half-hour's drive northwest of Alturas, but seems a world away.

Soon the wop-wop of a helicopter is heard. Wranglers make sure they're well-hidden. Once the wild horses are in the meadow any movement would distract them, alerting them to the trap.

"In the past the Forest Service made a mistake," said K.C. Pasero, the BLM's Wild Horse and Burro Program manager. "Without funds to care for the older un-adoptable horses, they turned them back out on the Garden. These horses remember the helicopter, the traps and know they can hide under the tree cover."

Pasero believes the older horses have helped younger horses to learn to avoid the helicopters.

"These horses are almost impossible to catch. This year we're taking all we can catch."

Allan Carter, of Utah, is among the most experienced pilots licensed to herd wild horses by helicopter. He knows when to let the horses move slowly, and he knows when to apply pressure.

Two specially trained "parada" horses have been brought in from Utah. They are positioned away from the trap so when the herd gets close, the parada horses - also known as prather or Judas horses - are turned loose to lead the mustangs into the trap.

By the time the herd enters the meadow not a person nor work horse moves. The sirens

and helicopter are getting louder. From their hiding places amongst the trees the wranglers see the horses coming.

They are within the confines of the trap's wings. The parada horses are running. The sound of hoof beats form a staccato accompaniment to the beat of the helicopter's rotors.

As they pass, the hidden wranglers spring from their hiding places, chasing the herd and discouraging any from turning back. Workers on the ground close the corral gates and tie them shut as soon as the last wild horse enters the trap.

The wranglers remove the paradas from the milling herd. Then the helicopter pilot radios the ground crews saying that at the last moment two young foals quit the herd and ran off in another direction.

To leave a foal out alone on the Garden would mean certain death. The wranglers climb back on their horses and start searching. Soon the foals with lariats draped around their necks are guided, led by the parada horse back to their mothers.

When 25 to 30 horses are caught, they are loaded on to trucks to be taken to the Litchfield Corrals. Once at the corrals they will be treated for any existing medical problems, vaccinated and readied for adoption.

The wranglers go back to rest in the shade. The day warms, Black swarms of gnats buzz constantly, biting and getting in ears, eyes, nose and clothing.

The men discuss what they did and how they could do better with the next herd that Carter is bringing in.

An hour or so goes by, soon the sound of rotors is heard in the distance. It's time to get ready for more action.

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