



# Reining in the brumbies

*Protected feral horses threaten the North Island's best remaining area of tussock grassland. Forest and Bird's Conservation Director, Kevin Smith, makes the case for the protection of the grasslands rather than the horses.*



*Over 1300 feral domestic horses exist in the Moawhango area. The descendants of escapes, strays and deliberate releases of domestic horses, they currently enjoy absolute protection under the Wildlife Act.*

*Photo: John Barkla, DoC*

*Top: Tussock grasslands of the Awapatu Valley, Moawhango catchment, rapidly being degraded by trampling and grazing from feral horses. Mt Ruapehu, in the distance, the centrepiece of Tongariro National Park (now a World Heritage Site). Photo: John Barkla, DoC*

**T**HE SIGHT OF HORSES running free across open country has universal appeal. Film producers used the imagery to good effect in countless movies of the wild west. It is not surprising therefore that a lobby has developed in New Zealand to champion the cause of a herd of feral horses found in the central North Island. What is surprising is that the feral horses enjoy protected status under the Wildlife Act – a privilege otherwise reserved only for indigenous wildlife.

Roaming over 70,000 hectares of montane to subalpine tussock grassland in the southwestern Kaimanawa-Moawhango area, the feral horses were granted absolute protection within this area by an order in council in 1981. Their grazing, trampling, campsites and dung heaps threaten the survival of the last extensive area of tussock grassland in the North Island. A number of rare or special native plants and special habitats may be eliminated by the horses with one species of native grass, *Deschampsia caespitosa*, having already disappeared.

The 1981 protection order has resulted in burgeoning horse numbers. In 1990 they numbered 1102, increasing at 16.7% per annum from 174 in 1979. In the last two years they have increased at 20% per annum, a doubling time of 3.43 years. The estimate after this current breeding season is 1490 horses.

In August this year, a public discussion document on the future of the horses was produced by the Department of Conservation. The document put forward three

options now being considered by the Minister of Conservation, Denis Marshall. These included the "do nothing" option, a reduction in horse numbers and on-going management, or the uplifting of the protection order and removal of horses from the area.

The 1981 protection order marked the end of a successful campaign by a small group of horse lovers who persuaded the New Zealand Forest Service to establish the Kaimanawa Wild Horse Committee in 1978. Comprised of horse lovers, army officers, a Forest Service ranger and an animal physiologist from Massey University, the committee was concerned at the loss of feral horses from the central North Island. In 1981, when the horses were protected, there were only about 170 remaining in the Kaimanawas.

Feral horses were once common in many areas of the North Island in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Since then, land development, wild animal control programmes and commercial exploitation have caused their range and numbers to shrink rapidly. The only remaining feral horses, or brumbies, in the North Island are the Kaimanawa horses and a few horses in Aupori forest in Northland. Feral horses first originated from deliberately released domestic horses, escaped cavalry horses and Maori horses. These were supplemented by the liberation of horses belonging to the Mounted Rifles near Waiouru at the end of World War II and from the escapes or releases of farm horses from nearby sheep stations.