



Pony Drifts

in The New Forest



What are they?
What happens?



WHAT IS A DRIFT?

Every Autumn, the ponies that have been grazing on the open heaths and forest lawns that comprise nearly half the total area of the New Forest National Park, are gathered in by their owners and the Agisters on a number of round-ups that are known in the New Forest as Drifts. These take place from mid August to the beginning of November, and about 40 are held during this time. They are organised by the Agisters and are occasions when the commoners, who are the owners of the stock, come together to catch the ponies. Earlier in the year, the Agisters will have drawn up a list of locations for the Drifts which is sent out to all commoners so that they know when and where to turn up to help catch the ponies in their area.

Some assist on horseback, while others come on foot to help block the many gaps and escape routes around the holding pen and pound. In some cases, large areas are covered and more than 200 ponies may be caught, but other drifts can be quite small with only 30 or so gathered in. By the end of the Drift season the whole of the Forest will have been covered but, because the ponies are semiferal and some are quite wild, there will always be some that get away.

WHAT HAPPENS ON THE DAY?

The day of the Drift is very busy for the Agister in charge, and involves an early start. His riding horse has to be prepared, warning signs have to be put out along any roads in the area, and a risk assessment has to be completed. At some busy locations the Police assist with traffic control and Forestry England Rangers are on hand to liaise with the public, to close car parks if necessary and to monitor cycle routes, or anywhere where there is a possibility of conflict with other Forest users.

The Drifts normally start at 10.00am, but in some areas they start at 9.00am to minimise inconvenience to the general public. Once at the meeting place, the Agister for the area will brief the other riders and helpers on his plan for the day. This usually involves three or four 'sweeps' on horseback, each time driving the ponies towards a holding pen where the 'walkers' are on hand to guide them in. Once that is done the Agisters go to work in the pound, a smaller wooden pen, where 4 or 5 ponies can be dealt with at a time. It usually takes several hours of hard work to sort through all the ponies captured that morning.



WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE DRIFT?

There are just over 5,500 ponies on the Forest, living as nearly as possible to a natural 'wild' life. They have to be managed for the good of the Forest and their own welfare, and the Drifts play an essential part in that process. Details of all the ponies which are caught on the Drifts are recorded, including a brief description, a note of their brand, and a record of their ownership, enabling the drift records to be checked against the marking fees paid by the commoners to confirm that they have paid for all their stock. At the same time, their tails are cut in what is known as a 'tail mark' to show that they have been rounded up. Each Agister has his own distinctive pattern for this, which he cuts in the long hair in the ponies' tails, so that all commoners living in his area have their ponies marked in the same way.

The Drift is also the time when any foals which the commoners wish to keep are hot branded with their owners brand to establish their ownership. While they are in the pound, it is an opportunity for the ponies to be given a good check over to make sure they are fit and healthy heading into the winter, and some commoners take advantage of the opportunity to administer worming paste. If there are any ponies with long hooves, these can be trimmed, and if there are any that do not meet the condition standard set by the Verderers, they



will not be allowed back on the Forest until their condition improves, and so they are removed by their owners. Some ponies may have reflective collars fitted, although that is up to the owners and generally depends on whether a pony 'lives' near to an unfenced road. Approximately 1,700 reflective collars are fitted each year. It is the time of year when evenings start to draw in and, as it gets dark earlier while the roads are still busy, it is the ideal time to fit as many collars as possible. Finally, the Drift is also the time when owners can load up and take home any ponies that they wish to sell or have home for the winter: usually the foals. Most Forest ponies are sold through the sale yard at Beaulieu Road and a number of sales are especially held for this purpose during the Drift season. Once they have been dealt with, the remaining ponies are released back on to the Forest. Most will not be handled again for another 12 months.





CAN THE PUBLIC COME AND WATCH?

Members of the public are not encouraged to attend Drifts because of the obvious risks involved when 'wild' ponies are being driven, often at speed. Apart from the risks to themselves, members of the public can unwittingly interfere and cause ponies to escape, undoing hours of hard work by the riders. For these reasons the Drift List is only sent out to practicing commoners who need to attend, and to Forest users, such as local riding stables and large livery yards, whose members wish to avoid being caught up in a Drift. Because most commoners have other jobs and are not available during the week, it is inevitable that a number of Drifts take place at weekends. But even during the week, there are obviously other Forest users around and every effort is made to conduct the Drifts in a manner that is safe for the public, whilst meeting the welfare needs of the ponies. The best advice for people who may find themselves caught up in a drift is to stand still, and to one side of the track if possible, and to avoid the area altogether if they see warning signs up on the roads. Working with unhandled, and in some cases very wild, ponies is a potentially dangerous activity and for this reason, only commoners used to dealing with them, are allowed to help.

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