

The Wild Horses' Perspective

The First Days

The newly mustered wild horses have had their lives turned upside down. Being captured and then separated from their family band members and close companions is traumatic for them. And, to add to that, they have been removed from their familiar home ranges. They have lost all that is near and dear to them.



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Understanding the horses' predicament as they make their transition into captivity is helpful to the horse and makes it easier for them. It's hard for them to adjust initially so it's up to us humans to make it as easy for them as possible.



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When they arrive off the truck, which is yet another traumatic experience, they are in a state of shock. Often they just shutdown, as it's all been just too much; this can sometimes be misinterpreted as being quiet and people take advantage of them being in this state and begin their handling. But, a shutdown frightened horse (or any being) cannot learn, or retain much, if anything at all, in this state – they can also become dangerous - because they can explode unexpectedly.

Giving the wild horses what they need most is up to the human. As prey animals, horses, and especially wild horses, are instinctively scared of new things, so the horses need time to figure out that everything new is not going to hurt them; that includes people and everything else in their environment.

They need the company of another horse or horses, food and water and to be left in peace for at least the first day/night. Putting another horse into an adjoining yard will help the new arrival to settle more. It would be wise for the horse provided for company be quiet and without a cover, as a horse wearing a cover can frighten the wild horse enough to have it attempt or even succeed in escaping.

All the Kaimanawa horses are different and will react accordingly. Some will be absolutely shutdown as previously mentioned. Some will be highly reactive and if pressured, will either attempt to jump over the yard railing or crash through it, while others can appear more confident. They will respond better with thoughtfulness and consideration from humans.

The next step

Introduce yourself quietly by entering the yard and standing still, while offering a big handful of cut long grass (long grass is more appealing) or hay. If the horse is highly reactive, offer food through the fence at first. It may take some time for the horse to take food, just be patient... it's a big deal for the wild horse. Patience is key to helping the horse.

Get the horse used to you by entering the yard, offering food and then leaving, to let it be. If the horse is reacting strongly to your presence, only stay in with it a short time till it settles, then leave. That way he learns that you being in with him doesn't hurt. He has to learn you are trustworthy. Leaving while he is calm allows him to learn this.

Don't put the horse into a position so he thinks that he needs to defend himself.



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There should be no reason for him to bite or kick if you are aware of how the horse is feeling – putting too much pressure on him is unhelpful to the horse – and not safe either.

Go into the yard for short periods, several times throughout the day. Increase the time spent with the horse slowly. Some come on in leaps and bounds, taking food readily, others require more time, and some will take a lot longer. Resist the urge to reach out to touch the horse - wild horses don't want to be touched by us, they don't understand our intentions – they perceive humans as life threatening.

Wild horses senses are acute – they are aware of everything in their environment – so every movement you make should be slow, deliberate and smooth. Keep the environment quiet too if possible. Kaimanawas are extremely sensitive. Especially during this initial stage, they have no idea what lies ahead of them, so they're expecting more trouble. Keep in mind what they've been through already to reach this point... they've lost their family and their home, the only thing they have left is their life!



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Being able to read the horse and use feel as a guide goes a long way. Be watchful, be aware - look for signs - read his face and body, they will show you how he's feeling. Notice his expression, his eyes, ears, mouth – are they relaxed or tight. Same with his body, is it reasonably relaxed or coiled tight and about to spring. We have to anticipate what he is about to do next and react before he does. Keep the horse calm by withdrawing just a bit or all together.

Be self disciplined. It's hard for us humans to do nothing when we are with horses, yet it is one of the most powerful tools we have. Just stand/sit with the horse, offer food by hand and wait... Patience, patience and yet more patience... It's not a race.

Robin Sisley
Author of *Eat the Wind*