

DARTMOOR PONY HERITAGE TRUST

Registered Charity No. 1109196

Conservation Grazing with Dartmoor Ponies



INTRODUCTION

The wild ponies living on Dartmoor are a fundamental part of the landscape. In addition to their value for tourism, they play a vital role in maintaining the habitat and biodiversity of the moor through their grazing activities.

Falling numbers of ponies and increased awareness that the ancient blood lines could be lost led to the formation of the Dartmoor Pony Heritage Trust in 2005. The principal aim of this registered charity is to save the indigenous Dartmoor pony from extinction and to maintain its presence on the moor, thus protecting our heritage for future generations.

Market forces have caused the value of the Dartmoor pony to plummet and many moorland farmers are coming to the conclusion that keeping herds on the moor is no longer financially viable. Traditionally, the wild foals are gathered in the annual autumn 'drift' and sent straight to market. However, the Dartmoor Pony Heritage Trust has identified that handling and training the foals and young ponies can add value and secure a wider market for them as pets, riding and driving ponies, or for use in conservation grazing. Consequently, the Trust has joined forces with the Dartmoor National Park Authority, Natural England and the Grazing Animals Project (GAP) to promote the use of these hardy ponies in conservation and land management, ensuring the ponies have a sustainable future.



THE DARTMOOR PONY



Dartmoors are small, hardy ponies with a quiet temperament, making them an ideal land management tools for conservation grazing. They are generally selective grazers and have the ability to switch to less palatable forage when necessary and with changes in the season. Dartmoor ponies can be used in conservation grazing across a range of habitats and systems throughout the UK where a varied sward structure, from short to longer, tussocky vegetation, is the desired objective. With certain provisos, they can graze all year round with little or no supplementary feeding.





HARDINESS

1. The Dartmoor pony maintains condition well. Mature non-breeding animals of traditional type thrive on low quality keep all year round.
2. Supplementary feed may be necessary for young stock and breeding mares in severe weather conditions and where forage is primarily browse material.
3. Ponies can withstand exposure and extreme weather since their coat is adapted to a harsh moorland environment. They cope well on exposed coastal sites, although some shelter is needed, e.g. gorse brakes or hedges.

INTERACTION WITH THE PUBLIC

1. If left alone, ponies will tend to keep their distance from people.
2. Signage is needed to prevent people feeding the ponies or otherwise encouraging interaction.
3. Reaction to dogs is variable. Unhandled animals may be particularly inclined to flightiness or aggressive behaviour if introduced directly to a site with public access. Handling stock to Conservation Grazing Level is recommended.



PHYSICAL ATTRIBUTES & HUSBANDRY

1. Good feet: hooves are small, strong and slow-growing. Minimal foot care is necessary for free-ranging ponies on poor keep with access to hard ground.
2. Laminitis is rare if ponies are kept away from lush pasture.
3. Not difficult to handle: considered one of the milder, more biddable breeds of pony.
4. Size is variable, but the heavier set, smaller pony with short ears, a small head and solid-looking is often considered to be the hardiest.
5. In summer: ponies have a high water requirement and may need some shade to escape flies.
6. Worming: in extensive systems, the ponies may be able to break parasite cycles by moving from one area to another. However, regular worming may be necessary and is generally recommended for animals kept in relatively small areas.
7. Latrine sites: on extensive sites the ponies dung in an ad hoc fashion; on smaller sites they tend to use defined latrine areas.



GRAZING CHARACTERISTICS

1. Grass: prefers a grass-based diet, favours both coarse and fine grasses including cocksfoot, fescues and purple moor grass.
2. Sedges and rushes: readily eats smaller sedges and young soft rush.
3. Browse: readily eats brambles and, if short of grass, may switch to feeding almost entirely on gorse. May browse heather tops if hungry. Some suppression of willow, birch and blackthorn re-growth.
4. Coarse herbs and flowering plants: does not normally select flowering plants, but may occasionally nibble thrift leaves or primrose.
5. Adventurous: pushes into and opens out areas of dense vegetation, including brambles and bracken.



WHEN AND WHERE TO USE DARTMOOR PONIES

1. On heath and moorland, ponies play a particularly important role in grazing purple moor grass from May onwards and western gorse in late winter.
2. On wet grassland pony grazing is critical for the maintenance of open, tussocky vegetation on which many rare species depend. Ponies instinctively avoid deep boggy areas and negotiate difficult terrain with ease. They do need some dry land to allow them to rest.
3. Ponies are the most suitable grazers to maintain the biodiversity of wetlands such as the internationally important valley mires of Dartmoor. For example, at Tor View Moor, a rhos pasture supporting southern damselfly and marsh fritillaries, grazing with continental crossbred cattle has been intermittent and sub-optimal over the past 10 years. One year of grazing by Dartmoor ponies has had an immediate impact, producing a better vegetation structure for these species.
4. Dartmoor ponies grazing at Cary Marsh, Somerset, have been observed preferentially grazing phragmites. They can therefore help to control this plant and retain open water habitat on wetland sites.
5. On chalk and limestone grasslands, ponies can help control tor grass throughout the spring and summer. They also help to maintain the varied vegetation structure that supports a range of rare species.
6. Dartmoor ponies can help to control the spread of bracken by trampling and weakening the young fronds. Trampling is beneficial in bracken stands on south-facing slopes where rare fritillary butterflies thrive. These butterflies need open bracken stands with a good density of violets. In winter, ponies will trample bracken litter along paths, helping to break it down and allowing violets to come through in the spring.
7. Ponies occasionally eat small saplings and may damage larger ones, so may prevent woodland expansion but wouldn't impact on dense scrub. This would benefit bog hoverfly in rhos pastures by maintaining sunny clearings.





SOURCING SUITABLE PONIES

The Dartmoor Pony Heritage Trust is able to offer a fully comprehensive service for Land Managers. We are able to advise on the most suitable stock for your situation and source and arrange delivery of hardy native ponies to your site. All ponies can be handled to Conservation Grazing Level, enabling easier day-to-day management of the herd. Ponies are eligible for the supplements attached to new agri-environmental schemes.

MOVEMENT OF LIVESTOCK

Dartmoor ponies are not agricultural animals therefore livestock movement licenses and restrictions do not apply.



MANAGEMENT AND WELFARE

If you look down this list you may find you are already competent in many areas of management but in others you may need to seek advice.

1. How do ponies differ from other grazing animals?
2. How do we move ponies on foot and by lorry without causing stress?
3. How do I know that the site is suitable?
4. What does a sick or injured pony look like and how does it behave?
5. What do I do when a pony is sick or injured?
6. When do I get the vet?
7. What daily, weekly, monthly, annual hands-on care is required?
8. What handling facilities are suitable for semi-wild ponies?
9. How can I adapt a site's facilities for ponies?
10. What sort of water sources and forage are suitable?
11. How can ponies and the public interact safely? Do they need to?
12. How do we train the public and recruit volunteers to help?

The Dartmoor Pony Heritage Trust is able to offer advice, support and training. We create bespoke courses to cater for all levels of experience.



TRAINING COURSES THE DARTMOOR PONY HERITAGE TRUST CAN PROVIDE

ASSESSING THE SUITABILITY OF A GRAZING SITE FOR PONIES.

This course looks at the type of site suitable for ponies:

- Monitoring seasonal variations affecting the chosen site.
- Safe fencing and collecting areas for ponies.
- Management of the public if they have access to the site.
- Water sources and forages suitable for ponies.
- Assessing the levels of stocking required at various times of the year to gain maximum advantage.

UNDERSTANDING THE DAILY CARE OF CONSERVATION GRAZING PONIES.

A course giving an overview of how ponies differ from other grazers ie cattle, sheep and goats:

- The behavioural differences between these animals.
- The basic needs of ponies in the 'wild'.
- Creating management plans to keep the land and the ponies healthy.
- Regular care needed to keep the ponies healthy.
- Seasonal care regimes and how to manage them.
- The public perception.

PREPARING PONIES FOR CONSERVATION GRAZING.

Most ponies will need to maintain a semi-wild wariness of humans but still allow essential maintenance to be carried out:

- Methods of partly taming ponies.
- Safe ways of releasing ponies onto a new site.
- Creating a safe collecting yard in which the ponies feel comfortable.
- Training ponies to accept minimal but essential handling.
- Do's and don'ts of handling semi-tame ponies so they don't become too tame!

TRAINING COURSES THE DARTMOOR PONY HERITAGE TRUST CAN PROVIDE

PREPARING THE WILD PONY FOR DOMESTICITY.

This course looks at the gentling of ponies used only for grazing to render them safe for use in a domestic environment:

- The initial taming and early handling of the pony.
- Teaching the pony to catch and lead.
- Training the pony to tie up and have his feet trimmed.
- Teaching the pony to load into a trailer.
- If required riding the pony under saddle.

MANAGING THE WILD PONY ON CONSERVATION SITES.

This longer course would train managers and staff responsible for sensitive sites to handle and manage grazing ponies.

- We study equine behaviour and how we can use this to help us manage the ponies constructively.
- We look at moving the ponies around the site and between sites.
- Methods of catching and enclosing ponies to enable vital or veterinary work to be carried out on the site or veterinary work carried out on the ponies.
- How to partially tame the ponies and subsequently handle them.
- Day to day checking and care of the ponies.
- Using volunteers to carry out regular daily checks and assess the ponies' welfare.
- Keeping the public informed and maintaining safe areas for ponies and people alike.

TESTIMONIALS

"After five years of using three small herds of Dartmoors to graze a range of wildlife habitats within the National Park, we have found them to be excellent at producing the vegetation composition and structure that is desired at these sites. They have mainly been on species-rich wet grasslands and heathlands in the summer months and drier areas, such as a heathland restoration from conifer plantation site, during the winter. Their most valuable traits in relation to vegetation management have included a particular liking for coarse grasses such as Molinia and tussock sedge, an avoidance of flowers and an ability to get around to every last square metre of even the most impenetrable sites!"

Norman Baldock - Principal Ecologist - Dartmoor National Park Authority

The Dartmoor Pony Heritage Trust co-ordinated the sale of 16 Dartmoor Heritage Ponies to the Norfolk Wildlife Trust. We were contacted by the Trust to establish if ponies would be suitable for their grazing requirements. A visit to Dartmoor was arranged for the Norfolk team to talk to relevant farmers and to look at different habitats grazed by ponies. After a two-day visit The Norfolk Wildlife Trust agreed to purchase five mares with foals at foot, a yearling colt and five three-year-old geldings.

Mel Slote, Norfolk Wildlife Trust's Grazing Officer, said *"I'm pleased to say that the ponies arrived fit and well and are swiftly settling in. The structural diversity that pony grazing will bring to the reserves will benefit a range of heath and mire species. Not only is this a wonderful opportunity for us to protect important wildlife sites; it will also help in the conservation of this vulnerable native pony."*



CONTACT DETAILS

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