



Exmoor Ponies and Conservation Grazing

Exmoor is a treasured landscape that draws visitors back time and time again. Its wide open spaces provide a feeling of wildness but are of course the product of thousands of years of grazing and browsing by red deer, ponies and, comparatively recently, by hill farmers' domestic livestock.

In the mid 1980's, Geoff Hann, then a warden with the National Trust, faced the problem of inadequate grazing of the Seacombe Valley nature reserve in Dorset. Farmers were less willing to provide cattle and sheep for such duties and, even when they were in residence, their activity failed to stem the dominance of the tor grass. The population of early spider orchids was declining as a result. It was Geoff who had the idea of introducing Exmoor Ponies to see if they might be the answer. The success of that experiment led to the idea spreading and opening up a new role for the free-living Exmoor Ponies. Small groups now undertake "conservation grazing" in many counties of Britain.

So what makes an Exmoor Pony so useful as a tool in land management? What would their CV look like if they were applying for the job?

Name: Exmoor Pony

Address: Exmoor (Somerset and Devon)

Age: a recognised rare native breed; individuals long-lived (many living independently into their mid to late twenties, some even into their thirties)

Appropriate attributes and skills:

- a) Highly efficient, clean bite due to incisors meeting like a pair of pliers
- b) A varied diet that changes with the seasons and avoids pressurizing the environment; given sufficient natural habitat, not requiring winter feeding or artificial shelter.
- c) A very hardy animal able to withstand the hostile winter elements due to an extremely efficient double-layered winter coat and features for coping with heavy rain.

- d) Unless deliberately tamed, behaviours aimed at avoiding close contact with people
- e) “Charisma” – their uniformity of appearance and obvious difference from most horses and ponies makes them an attraction to nature reserves in their own right and a very useful educational resource
- f) Can add to the workforce naturally

Relevant experience: Their family has been employed in this work for millennia.

Of course other native breeds can be and are used in land management but many wardens have turned to the Exmoor simply because they are that bit tougher, wilder and more in tune ecologically with their environment.

Over the last 25 years, many foals born to the free-living herds on Exmoor have gone to work on nature reserves. The most successful projects seem to be where some initial handling has been undertaken so that the ponies can be given farrier and veterinary treatment once caught but are not fully tamed. Such ponies make no attempt to approach the public but can be handled if intervention is needed.

Using Exmoor ponies in the managed grazing role is a highly satisfying strategy because the existence of small free-living groups away from Exmoor makes its own contribution to the conservation of this rare native breed. It has allowed the establishment of “satellite” herds as an insurance in case disease ever decimated the parent population on Exmoor. In some cases, for example on Greenham and Snelsmore Commons in Berkshire, ponies have been specifically chosen to duplicate one of the main Exmoor sub-populations, thereby increasing the representation of some family lines that are less abundant within the overall gene pool. In addition, by such wider distribution, more of the public can encounter these animals and come to understand the importance of their conservation.

Conserving the Exmoor Pony breed is a vital objective in itself as evidence suggests that these ponies are little changed from ponies that first colonised Britain 130,000 years ago and then became isolated here when the English Channel formed around 10,000 years ago. The Exmoor is probably a relic population of the “British Hill Pony” and, as such, maintaining the gene pool is very important. So, the Exmoor represents an enduring part of our historic past, part of British and Exmoor heritage.

Visit the free-living herds on Exmoor and the impression is certainly one of a wild animal, part of the natural fauna. Go back thirty or so years and the ponies were not nearly so accepting of human approach; go back fifty plus years and they were almost as distrustful as the deer. Their adaptation to the increased numbers of visitors to Exmoor has been an important part of their surviving in the free-living state. Of course they are not truly wild, as owners determine the choice of stallions and hence the genetic destiny of the population; but most of their ecology and behaviour bears no stamp of human interference.

Managing the gene pool is a heavy responsibility. Back in the early part of the 1900s, “improving” native breeds through the deliberate introduction of genes from other breeds, was quite the fashion and, indeed, influenced some of the herds running on the northern parts of Exmoor. However, on other parts (Exmoor being a collection of separate open areas, not a single expanse) herd owners had recognised that those who had cross-bred the indigenous type had created less-hardy animals and so they would have none of it. In 1921, they formed the Exmoor Pony Society and set about inspecting foundation stock for registration in the stud book (prior to that, registrations were part of the Polo Pony Stud Book in common with many other native breeds). It was their determination to conserve the true, unadulterated Exmoor that gave birth to the inspection system that continues to this day.

All foals born after 1921 were inspected by two Society inspectors and had to meet the breed standard to gain entry to the Stud Book. In 1962, the Stud Book was closed and only those foals born to a sire and dam already registered in the Stud Book were allowed to be put forward for inspection and subsequent registration provided that they met the breed standard. Today, with changes to breed registrations emanating from the EU every foal born to a registered sire and dam has a right to be registered in the main Stud Book. Foals who do not meet the breed standard are registered into Section X whilst those meeting the required standard are registered into Section 1. The faults so diligently purged were any incorrect formation of the biting teeth (overshot or undershot) and any concentrated patch of white hair or white on the feet. The correct dentition was a most important part of being able to live free successfully but the rejection of white was an insurance policy as it was believed that this was alien to pure-bred Exmoors. Thus a registered Exmoor pony has to be a worthy member of the population both in terms of its natural attributes and also being free from any non-Exmoor indications.

The Exmoor Pony Society has come a long way since those first steps was to safeguard the true Exmoor in 1921. Then, the total population probably all on Exmoor, is estimated to have been about 500 ponies. The population was decimated during the Second World War and numbers dropped to around 50. Today, the number of ponies on the moor has returned to around 500 and there are an estimated total of 4,000 ponies worldwide with the main distribution being throughout the British Isles in domestic circumstances as well as small numbers on nature reserves. However, this belies the fact that the Society still has to work hard to ensure a secure future for the ponies; the crucial statistic is the size of the breeding population and this remains at about the 500 level. So the Society’s key objective of encouraging the breeding of the true Exmoor pony remains as relevant today as in that founding period. However, there is a fine balance to be maintained between preserving the genetic pool and over-breeding given the current equine population in the UK. Monitoring of the bloodlines, responsible breeding and good herd management are the key words in conserving and preserving the Exmoor pony.

What of the future? With the changes in agriculture continuing apace, the management of land becomes ever more of a challenge. Thirty years ago the concern on parts of Exmoor was about over-grazing; today it is about under-grazing. With various

stewardship schemes requiring the conservation of farmland rather than its agricultural exploitation, this too suggests that pony grazing may be even more useful in the years ahead. And what of the energy drought that inevitably will one day begin to bite? A hardy, stocky pony, that is cheap to keep and able to undertake many tasks that today depend upon the internal combustion engine, will be such an asset. Exmoor ponies used to be a vital part of the hill farmer's way of life, an all-rounder used both for riding and in harness; ploughing, shepherding and transport to market – so versatile and economical. Conserving such a resource is not simply a desire to protect part of our heritage but a sound strategy for a very different future.

Adapting to changing circumstances has been at the heart of the Exmoor Pony story. Undertaking the role of conservation grazer was a relatively recent development but not a surprising one: as one Exmoor resident commented, "Why is everyone so surprised they are proving useful in managing nature reserves? They have been looking after Exmoor for centuries!"

Note: A 28 minute DVD "Guardians of the Land – an introduction to conservation grazing with Exmoor Ponies" is available, price £5. Prices quoted are for UK only and do not include postage and packing.

More information on Exmoor Ponies and the Exmoor Pony Society can be found at www.exmoorponysociety.org.uk or call Sue McGeever on 01884 839930 or email secretary@exmoorponysociety.org.uk. If you would be interested in running Exmoor ponies for conservation grazing purposes either short term or long term then please contact the Exmoor Pony Society.



Members of the Exmoor Committee of Herd Owners (ECHO), who work closely with the Moorland Mousie Trust place ponies in conservation sites throughout the UK, and are in a position to be able to put ponies out on loan for short term projects or sell ponies for long term grazing projects. Exmoor ponies currently attract HLS payments and it is not necessary to run a breeding herd – mares and geldings can form part of a conservation grazing herd. For more information contact Rob Taylor on 01643 831099 or email exmoorterrier@yahoo.co.uk.



The Exmoor Pony Society
Guardians of the Breed since 1921
Conserving and Preserving Exmoor's Heritage
by promoting and encouraging the Breeding of Registered Exmoor Ponies.

Registered Office: Woodmans, Brithem Bottom, Cullompton, Devon EX15 1NB
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