

The Dartmoor Ponies

Dartmoor Factsheet



When Dartmoor was designated a National Park, in 1951, the pony was chosen to be its logo. Ponies help to give Dartmoor its unique character and are one of the attractions for visitors to the area. They are an integral part of the moorland landscape and are a part of the area's cultural heritage. Ponies are also important for conservation grazing particularly on certain habitats such as wet permanent pasture.

Not all the same!

Dartmoor National Park is home to the native breed Dartmoor Pony. But not all the ponies on Dartmoor look the same. Importing other breeds has created various colours and shapes of the animal.

The most common types and breeds of pony to be found on Dartmoor are:-

- **the 'native' pony:** this is the type of Dartmoor pony that you are most likely to see on the moor. They often run with mixed breed ponies and stallions on the moor and so it is impossible to prove their parentage.
- **the pure-bred or 'registered' Dartmoor:** this is similar to the 'native' Dartmoor pony. However, the 'registered' pony has a known pedigree because the stallion is chosen for its good breeding and is introduced to the mare in a controlled environment. The pure-bred pony also tends to be more refined than the native breed and is often to be seen at pony breed shows. The pure-bred Dartmoor is seldom seen on the commons because they are too valuable to be left out and to prevent uncontrolled breeding with non-registered animals.

- **the Shetland pony:** this is not a local breed. It was introduced to Dartmoor early in the 20th century to produce small, strong, cross bred animals capable of working down the coal mines of northern England and Wales. Coming from the Shetland Isles, these ponies were well suited to survive the harsh conditions on Dartmoor.

The coloured pony, although not a breed, is popular with pony breeders because there is a demand for them as children's ponies.

The ponies on Dartmoor are not truly wild animals. They are all owned by farmers, who let them out on to the commons to graze for most of the year. This is where most visitors to Dartmoor come across them.

Pony Glossary

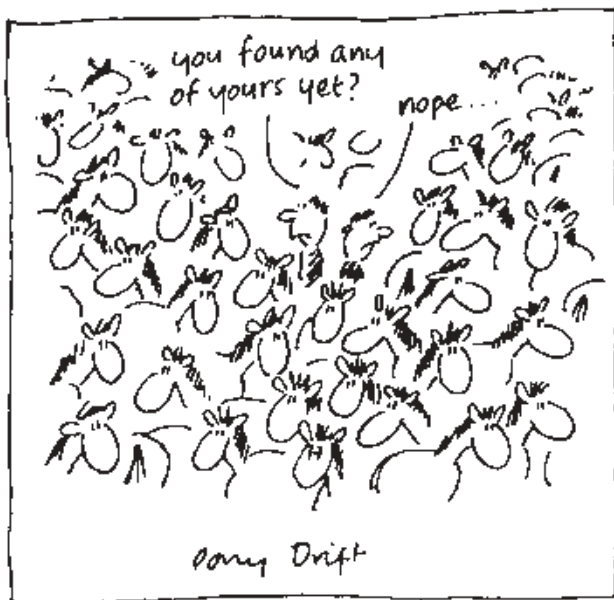
● Stallion: uncastrated male	● Drift: annual round up
● Mare: female	● Semi-feral: owned by someone, but the ponies are running wild
● Foal: young / juvenile	● Broken-in: trained to be ridden
● Colt: young male	
● Gelding: castrated	
● Filly: young female	

Ownership

The ponies on the moor are not wild animals. They all have owners. Certain farms on Dartmoor have rights to graze a specific number of cattle, sheep and ponies on particular moorland areas (the commons). Farmers mark their ponies to indicate the animal's owner. They do this by branding the coat, by making ear cuts (cutting the tops off ponies' ears or cutting slits into them), by placing ear tags (with the farmer's name and a number), by cutting tail hair in distinctive patterns, or by a combination of these methods.

The Pony Year

The ponies live out on the moor all year round. They spend most of the time in small herds of mares with one adult stallion and young ponies. Most foals are born between May and August. Local farmers who keep ponies get together to clear ponies off their particular common. These round ups are called "drifts" and are held in late September and early October.



People on horseback, four wheeled bikes, and running on foot, herd the ponies towards a convenient small field or yard. The ponies are then separated into groups according to ownership. The health of all the animals is checked, and treatment is given where appropriate. The sick, old and infirm, or those to be sold, are separated from those which will be returned to the moor.

The Pony Markets

After the drifts pony keepers decide which ponies to sell. The rest are returned to the moor until the following year. The market for ponies has declined in recent times and new markets as conservation grazers and riding ponies are being actively promoted.

Historically, the markets for ponies were very buoyant. Before modern transport and agricultural machinery the ponies were sold as work ponies, for example pulling carts, carrying loads, or for milk and post deliveries. Some ponies were cross bred with shetlands to produce strong short legged ponies for pit ponies in the coal mines. With the advent of technology that market disappeared and a new market was found in Europe – as meat for human consumption.

There was also a small demand for meat for zoos and pet food. Markets in Europe disappeared when an export ban was imposed on the export of live animals.

The export ban is presently being reviewed by the Government. There are concerns being raised that the Government might amend the present legislation to allow live export again. Some pony owners believe it is vital to open up this market again to ensure that there is a market that will keep ponies on Dartmoor. However, there are doubts as to whether this is likely to happen, as other bigger ponies/horses from Poland have filled the vacuum that was created when the export ban was imposed.

Ponies on Dartmoor - a 3,500 year history

Prehistoric Times

Hoof-prints found on Dartmoor during an archaeological excavation in the 1970s show that domesticated ponies were to be found here around 3,500 years ago.

Medieval Times

The first written record of ponies on Dartmoor occurs in AD 1012, with a reference to the 'wild horses' of Ashburton, owned by the Bishop of Crediton. Early manorial records indicate that, as today, many ponies were not broken in, but all were branded and usually ear-marked. Many of these ear-markings are still in use today.



Dartmoor pack horses were still in use at the turn of the 19th century

Wheeled carts were virtually unknown on Dartmoor in medieval times; the most common method of transporting goods was the packhorse. No doubt fully laden ponies were a common sight.

Industrial Use

In the mid 1800s Dartmoor was the main source of granite in Britain. At Haytor the remains of a granite railway, that was used to transport granite down to the quayside at Teigngrace, can still be seen. Ponies were used to haul the trucks up and down the tramway.



Haytor Tramway

Until coal mines in England and Wales were fully mechanised, ponies were used to pull wagons from the coal face. Some of the ponies were stabled underground and never saw the light of day after their arrival at the pit.

Early 1900s

The pure-bred Dartmoor can claim a Royal connection. Prince Edward (later Edward VIII) visited Dartmoor frequently in the 1920s. He kept and bred Dartmoor ponies near Princetown, where he crossed them with Arab ponies to try and produce a finer polo pony.

The first half of the 20th century

Before widespread use of machinery and modern transport, ponies and horses were used extensively to enable goods and services to be delivered, and farm work to be carried out. They also provided, as they do today, recreational opportunities for both locals and visitors alike.

The Present

In 1950 there were approximately 30,000 ponies on the moor. Today there are fewer than 3,000. This decline is due to a combination of factors:

- a reduction in the demand for pit ponies and ponies for meat.
- a large part of a Dartmoor farmer's income comes from Government and European subsidies for keeping cattle and sheep on the uplands. There are no Government or European subsidies for ponies. The price received at market is very low and ponies graze land that could be utilised by more profitable stock.

Recreation

The Dartmoor pony has a very good temperament making it an excellent child's pony. Ponies are also used in the increasingly popular sport of carriage driving. Part-bred Dartmoor ponies make excellent all-rounders. They are used in show jumping, cross country, one day events, as working hunter ponies, carriage driving and, of course, as popular family ponies.

Conservation

The ponies on Dartmoor are an integral part of the landscape and many visitors to the National Park come specifically to see these animals in their natural environment. The healthy survival of the pony on the moor is in the minds of many people.

Current Schemes to support ponies on Dartmoor

Dartmoor Pony Moorland Scheme

The Dartmoor Pony Moorland Scheme was introduced in 1998, by the Duchy of Cornwall and the Dartmoor Pony Society. The aim is to improve the bloodline of ponies living on the commons of Dartmoor and thereby ensuring their suitability to the Dartmoor environment. The Dartmoor National Park Authority supports the Scheme. The Scheme invites owners of suitable mares living on the Dartmoor commons to put them into a newtake (moorland enclosure) with a pure-bred Dartmoor stallion, between 1 May and 1 October. All the mares are inspected by the Dartmoor Pony Society and an incentive payment is made to their owners. Any foals born are inspected and, if approved, are registered with the Dartmoor Pony Society.

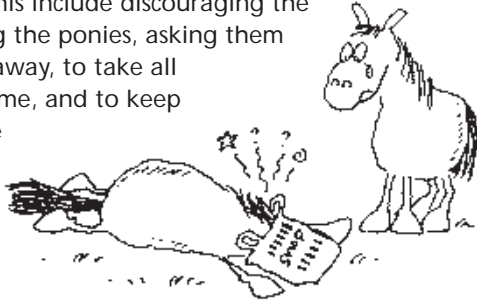


Dartmoor National Park Authority Pony Herd Agreements

These were introduced in 2000 to support existing herds on its own land. Three herds are now supported on Holne Moor and it is hoped to support another herd on Haytor Down. Pony keepers receive financial support to maintain the herds on the land. Ponies are inspected annually by an independent vet to ensure their continued well being.

Public Awareness Campaign

This campaign helps inform visitors and local residents of how they can protect the ponies on Dartmoor. The main elements of this include discouraging the public feeding the ponies, asking them to keep well away, to take all their litter home, and to keep to the 40 mile per hour speed limit on moorland roads.



Dartmoor National Park Authority Conservation Grazing Scheme

Ponies are less discerning eaters than both cattle and sheep. This is very important in areas such as Dartmoor where much of the semi-natural vegetation is rough, and of nutrient poor quality. Grazing of the semi-natural vegetation is important to the survival of many rare species. Although long vegetation is an essential part of many species habitats, so is the provision of shortcropped areas.

The National Park Authority has set up a scheme on an experimental basis which uses a mobile herd of Dartmoor ponies to be moved from site to site to graze areas other livestock find unpalatable. The scheme started in early 2003, using eight castrated colts (males) which are the offspring of animals included in the Dartmoor National Park Authority's Pony Herd Agreements. The scheme has been a success and the Authority plans to expand the use of ponies in conservation grazing.

Passports

European Union legislation requires each semi-feral pony to have a passport and Britain is required to comply with this legislation. Although the legislation is put in place on a Europe wide basis to enable meat products to be traced, the benefit of such a system in this country is that each pony will have a unique number, or brand, that will identify it from birth. It is hoped that this will encourage people to recognise the worth of the pony and thereby increase its market value. The Government recognises that it is uneconomical for pony keepers to obtain passports for individual animals in a herd and has given Dartmoor a special derogation. This means that the ponies will only need a passport if they are sold or moved from the moor.

Dartmoor Commoners' Council's Stallion Support Scheme

The Dartmoor Commoners' Council introduced this in 1999 to ensure that ponies not hardy enough to survive on the moor are not bred. Regulations have been put in place by the Council to ensure that only stallions that have been inspected and approved by an independent vet to be hardy, healthy, and of good confirmation are allowed out on the commons.

To ensure that mares do not mate with their own offspring all colt foals must come off the moor during their first year. They must remain off the commons until after they are two years old. They may then only go back on the commons if they have been approved as a stallion through the scheme, or castrated. To prevent young filly foals mating at too young an age, they too must come off the commons in their first year. They must stay off until the following year.

Organisations working to benefit the ponies on Dartmoor

- **Dartmoor National Park Authority**
www.dartmoor-npa.gov.uk
or telephone (01822) 890414
- **The Duchy of Cornwall**
<http://www.princeofwales.gov.uk>
or telephone (01822) 890205
- **The Dartmoor Commoners' Council**
(01822) 618892
- **The Dartmoor Pony Society**
<http://www.dartmoorponysociety.com>
or telephone (01487) 822635
- **Friends of the Dartmoor Hill Pony**
<http://www.dartmoorhillpony.com>
or telephone (01626) 888713

Useful web links for further information:

- Other publications:**
 - Dartmoor Pony Information
<http://www.dartmoor-npa.gov.uk/dnp/factfile/ponyfactfile.pdf>
 - Ponies on Dartmoor - advice for the public
<http://www.dartmoor-npa.gov.uk/dnp/factfile/pony2.pdf>
- Other information:**
 - The Spirit of the Pony on-line exhibition
<http://www.dartmoor-npa.gov.uk/dnp/factfile/hillpony.html>

For further information, and a list of other Fact Sheets available, contact the:
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