

= Castillonais =

The Castillonais or Cheval Ariègeois de Castillon , once called the cheval du Biros or Saint @-@ Gironnais , is an ancient breed of small riding horse from the Ariège département of southwestern France . The breed 's phenotype is currently in flux , but overall it resembles (and is sometimes confused with) the more common Merens horse . Members of the breed are either dark bay or black , and all have pangare color modification , which results in paler color around the eyes and muzzle and on the underside of the body . Today it is used principally for pleasure riding (including equine tourism) and driving .

The Castillonais probably descends from the horses that inspired the Magdalenian @-@ era paintings found , for example , at the Cave of Niaux , with Oriental and Iberian blood added later . Originally bred as a multipurpose breed used for cavalry , agriculture and driving , the breed declined in population during the 20th century , and almost became extinct . In 1980 , a group of supporters began to work to save the breed , and a breed association , now called the Association Nationale du Cheval Castillonnais d 'Ariège Pyrénées (ANCCAP) , was formed in 1992 . The breed was officially recognized by the French Ministry of Agriculture in 1996 . The French government , breed association and a regional conservation group all now share an interest in the preservation of the breed . Population numbers are still quite low , and inbreeding is a concern .

= = Characteristics = =

The physical characteristics seen in the breed are currently in flux , so there is not a single breed phenotype , though many members of the breed closely resemble the Mérens . Enthusiasts are breeding for a rustic mountain horse , of medium size , with good gaits and good temperament . Some members of the breed closely resemble Iberian horses such as the Andalusian horse . The official breed standard calls for a moderately long neck and long , sloped shoulder , broad back , rounded croup and muscular legs . Some members of the breed are branded on the left hindquarter . Because of its relative rarity and physical similarities , the Castillonais is commonly confused with the Mérens .

Castillonais horses range from 13 @.@ 1 to 15 @.@ 1 hands (53 to 61 inches , 135 to 155 cm) high , with the ideal height for mares being 14 @.@ 1 hands (57 inches , 145 cm) and 14 @.@ 2 hands (58 inches , 147 cm) for stallions . Two colors are allowed in the breed : dark bay and black , both with pangare modification , which results in paler color around the eyes and muzzle and on the underside of the body . Horses of any other color are prohibited from entry into the studbook and all horses are genetically tested to officially determine their color before they are allowed into the studbook . The breed is considered to be an easy keeper , with an easygoing temperament . The horses are agile , sure @-@ footed on mountain paths , and exhibit extended gaits , with strong engagement of the hindquarters .

= = History = =

Like many other French breeds from the Pyrenees , the Castillonais probably descends from the horses that inspired the Magdalenian @-@ era paintings found , for example , at the Cave of Niaux . Over time , blood from Oriental and Iberian horses was added to the breed , and influenced its physical appearance and temperament . The Castillonais was originally known as the " cheval du Biros " (Biros horse) or " Saint @-@ Gironnais " , a name from the town of Saint @-@ Girons in Ariège in the Pyrenees , where a large horse fair was held the day after All Saints ' Day . In the late nineteenth century , horses of the Pyrenees were known for their use as mounts by light cavalry . In 1908 , Gabriel Lamarque , equine historian and president of the Société d ? agriculture de l ? Ariège (Agricultural Society of Ariège) , began to study the breed as part of his work in the development of native horse populations in France .

The breed was originally a multipurpose horse , used for agriculture , cavalry and pulling diligences (a type of carriage) . Because of a lack of support from a breeding syndicate , such as the one in

existence for the Mérens horse , once the need for a multipurpose breed declined , the population of the Castillonnais dwindled . Many horses were crossbred with draft horses , and the breed almost became extinct . The intervention of a group of supporters in 1980 saved the breed from extinction , and in 1992 L 'Association Pyrénéenne Ariégeoise du Cheval Castillonnais (the Ariege Pyrenees Association of Castillonnais Horses) was formed , with support from several French government agencies and stud farms . Annually , in August , the association holds a small competition and sale for the breed in Castillon @-@ en @-@ Couserans , which also includes inspections to register horses for the breed studbook .

In 1996 , the Castillonnais was officially recognized by the French Ministry of Agriculture , due to the efforts of a small number of breed enthusiasts , though by that time only 50 purebred mares remained . The breed association 's name was changed to L ? association Nationale du Cheval Castillonnais d 'Ariège Pyrénées (ANCCAP) (National Association of Castillonnais Horses of the Ariège Pyrenees) , and is headquartered in Castillon @-@ en @-@ Couserans . Le Conservatoire du Patrimoine Biologique Régional de Midi @-@ Pyrénées (Conservatory of the Biological Heritage of the Midi @-@ Pyrénées Region) , an organization that has worked to protect the diversity of animal species in the region since 1980 , is also committed to protecting the breed .

Population numbers for the Castillonnais are quite low . The majority of breeders are located in Castillon @-@ en @-@ Couserans , in Ariège , but a few can be found in Brittany and Provence . In November 2005 , there were only around 260 existing Castillonnais , and a goal was created by the breed association to double the number of purebred mares between 2005 and 2014 . Inbreeding is a concern due to low population numbers , and the national stud farm at Tarbes and Institut National de la Recherche Agronomique (National Institute of Agronomic Research) have been brought in to help safeguard the genetic resources of the breed .

= = Uses = =

The Castillonnais is used mainly for pleasure riding , and it is well adapted to the mountainous terrain of the Pyrenees , which makes is useful for equestrian tourism in the area . It can be used for driving , and is sometimes seen in dressage competitions . Some Castillonnais are used for logging and as pack horses for taking food and equipment to mountainous areas otherwise only accessible by helicopter .