

= Poitou donkey =

The Poitou donkey or Poitou ass (French : Baudet du Poitou) , also called the Poitevin donkey or simply the Poitou , is a breed of donkey originating in the Poitou region of France . It is one of the largest donkey breeds , and was selected for size so that it could be used for the production of large working mules , in conjunction with the Poitevin horse breed . It is known for its distinctive coat , called a cadanette , which hangs in long , ungroomed cords . Breeders originally prized the coats highly , but today , many Poitou donkeys are shorn for hygienic reasons .

Poitous developed in the French Poitou region , possibly from donkeys introduced to the area by the Romans . They may have been a status symbol during the Middle Ages , and by the early 18th century , their physical characteristics had been established . A studbook for the breed was established in France in 1884 , and the 19th and early 20th centuries saw them being used for the production of mules throughout Europe . During this same time , Poitou bloodlines were also used to develop other donkey breeds , including the American Mammoth Jack in the United States . Increasing mechanization in the mid @-@ 20th century saw a decline in the need for , and hence population of , the breed , and by 1977 , a survey found only 44 members worldwide . Conservation efforts were begun by a number of public and private breeders and organizations , and by 2005 there were 450 purebred Poitou donkeys .

= = Description = =

The Poitou donkey is " instantly recognizable " for a number of unusual characteristics that distinguish it from other donkeys . Its shaggy coat , called a cadanette , hangs in long cords when ungroomed because of the long , soft hair . Animals with great cadanettes of matted and tangled hair were most highly valued . A purebred Poitou has a more massive bone structure and a larger foot than a part @-@ bred animal , but the shaggy coat is such a dominant trait that even a 1 / 8 Poitou donkey may resemble a pure @-@ bred . In modern times , the coat is still considered important but less so than size and measurements . Today , many Poitou donkeys are shorn for the purpose of hygiene , but some are allowed to grow their coats out so as to have " bourailloux " , or coats of great length . The coat is always dark brown or black . While lacking the stripes and cross @-@ like markings on the coats of some other breeds of donkey , the Poitou should have a white underbelly , nose and rings around its eyes .

The Poitou donkey is a large breed ; among other European donkeys only the Andalucian donkey reaches a similar size . In order to breed large mules , the original breeders of the Poitou chose animals with large features , such as ears , heads and leg joints . The ears developed to such an extent that their weight sometimes causes them to be carried horizontally . Minimum height is 1 @.@ 40 m (55 in) for jacks and 1 @.@ 35 m (53 in) for jennies . They have large , long heads , strong necks , long backs , short croups and round haunches . The limb joints and feet are large , and the legs strong . The temperament of the Poitou has been described as " friendly , affectionate and docile " . Historically , most Poitou donkeys were used to breed large mules , but in recent years , they have found an increasing number of uses . Breed enthusiasts use them for agricultural work , driving and riding .

= = History = =

The exact origins of the Poitou breed are unknown , but donkeys and their use in the breeding of mules may have been introduced to the Poitou region of France by the Roman Empire . The Baudet de Poitou (donkey of Poitou) , and the Mulassière (mule breeder) horse breed (also known as the Poitevin) were developed together for the use of producing superior mules . In the Middle Ages , owning a Poitou donkey may have been a status symbol among the local French nobility . It is not known when the Poitou 's distinctive characteristics were gained but they seem to have been well @-@ developed by 1717 when an advisor to King Louis XV described :

There is found , in northern Poitou , donkeys which are as tall as large mules . They are almost

completely covered in hair a half @-@ foot long with legs and joints as large as a those of a carriage horse .

In the mid @-@ 1800s , Poitou mules were " regarded as the finest and strongest in France " , and between 15 @,@ 000 and 18 @,@ 000 were sold annually . In 1884 , a studbook was established for the Poitou donkey in France . During the first half of the 20th century , the mules bred by the Poitou and the Poitevin continued to be desired throughout Europe , and were called the " finest working mule in the world " . Purchasers paid higher prices for Poitou mules than for other mules , and up to 30 @,@ 000 mules were bred annually in the Poitou region , with some estimates putting the number as high as 50 @,@ 000 . As mechanization increased around World War II , mules became outmoded , and population numbers for both mules and donkeys dropped dramatically .

Poitou donkey and mule breeders were extremely protective of their breeding practices , some of which were " highly unusual and misguided . " Jacks were kept in closed @-@ in stalls throughout the year once they had begun covering mares , in often unhygienic conditions . Once the mares had been covered , a folk belief held that if they were underfed , they would produce colts , which were more valuable , rather than fillies . This often led to mares being starved during their pregnancies . Colostrum , vital for foal development , was considered unhealthy and withheld from newborns . A lack of breeding records resulted in fertility problems , and there was a significant amount of foal mortality , due to jacks being used to cover horse mares before jennies of their own kind , resulting in late @-@ born foals that were vulnerable to cold fall and winter temperatures . Despite these husbandry issues , one author , writing in 1883 , stated that " mule @-@ breeding is about the only branch of agricultural industry in which France has no rival abroad , owing its prosperity entirely to the zeal of those engaged in it . "

= = = Conservation efforts = = =

A 1977 inventory revealed only 44 Poitou donkeys worldwide , and there were still fewer than 80 animals as of 1980 . Conservation efforts were led by several public and private groups in France . In 1979 , the Haras Nationaux , (the French national stud) and the Parc Naturel Regional du Marais Poitevin , working with private breeders , launched an effort to improve the genetics of the Poitou , develop new breeding techniques and collect traditional knowledge on the breed . In 1981 , 18 large donkeys from Portugal were acquired for use in breeding Poitou donkeys . This preceded the creation of the Asinerie Nationale Experimentale , which opened in Charente @-@ Maritime in Dampierre @-@ sur @-@ Boutonne in 1982 , as an experimental breeding farm for Poitous . The Parc also works to preserve the Poitevin horse breed . In 1988 , the Association pour la Sauvegarde du Baudet du Poitou (SABAUD) was formed as a breeder network that focuses on marketing and fundraising for the breed , and in 1989 became the financial support arm of the Asinerie Nationale Experimentale . The Association des Éleveurs des Races Équine , Mulassière et Asine , Baudet du Poitou is the registering body for the Poitou donkey . The early conservation efforts were sometimes sidetracked as some breeders sold crossbred Poitous as purebreds , which are worth up to ten times as much . Forged pedigrees and registration papers were sometimes used to legitimize these sales . However , by the 1990s , DNA testing and microchip technology began to be used to identify and track purebred animals .

The conservation efforts in the latter decades of the 20th century and the early years of the 21st were successful , and a 2005 survey revealed 450 purebred registered animals . This number had dropped to just under 400 by 2011 . The French studbook for the breed is split into two sections . The first , Livre A , is for purebred animals with documented Poitou parentage on both sides of their pedigree . The second , Livre B , is for animals with one purebred Poitou parent . The American Livestock Breeds Conservancy lists the Poitou as " Critical " on its Conservation Priority List , a category for breeds with less than 2 @,@ 000 animals worldwide and less than 200 registrations annually in the US .

In 2001 , scientists in Australia successfully implanted a Poitou donkey embryo created by artificial insemination in the womb of a Standardbred mare . Worries that joint problems might prevent a healthy pregnancy in the foal 's biological mother led to the initiative . The resultant foal became one

of three Poitou donkeys in Australia . The procedure was unusual because it is often difficult for members of one Equus species to accept implanted embryos from another species in the same genus .

= = = In the United States = = =

Historical records exist of several sets of exports of Poitous from France to the US during the 19th and early 20th centuries , including a 1910 import of 10 donkeys . Most of these were integrated into the generic pool of donkey bloodstock , rather than being bred pure . During this time , Poitous were used in the creation of the American Mammoth Jack breed . Due to high purchase and transportation costs , the breed played a smaller role in the development of the Mammoth Jack than some breeders would have preferred . Imports to the US continued until at least 1937 , when a successful breeding jack name Kaki , who stood 16 @. @ 2 hands (66 inches , 168 cm) high , was brought to the country . The 1940s through the 1960s saw a dearth of Poitou imports , and only a few arrived between 1978 and the 1990s . By 1996 , there were estimated to only be around 30 Poitous in North America .

In 1996 , Debbie Hamilton , an American , founded the Hamilton Rare Breeds Foundation on a 440 @-@ acre (180 ha) farm in Hartland , Vermont , to breed Poitou donkeys . As of 2004 , she owned 26 purebred and 14 partbred Poitous , making hers the largest Poitou breeding operation in the United States , and the second largest in the world , behind the French government @-@ sponsored experimental farm . Hamilton works with French officials toward the preservation of the breed , and has received praise from French veterinarians , who appreciate her technical and financial contributions to the breed . Techniques for using cryopreservation to develop a sperm bank for Poitou donkeys have been in development in France since at least 1997 , but Hamilton has pioneered the use of artificial insemination using frozen semen in the breed , in order to use genetic material from France to improve Poitou herds in the US . The North American Baudet de Poitou Society , organized by the American Donkey and Mule Society , is the American registry for the breed , coordinating with French officials for inspections and registrations of American @-@ bred Poitou stock .