

= New Forest pony =

The New Forest pony is one of the recognised mountain and moorland or native pony breeds of the British Isles . Height varies from around 12 to 14 @. @ 2 hands (48 to 58 inches , 122 to 147 cm) ; ponies of all heights should be strong , workmanlike , and of a good riding type . They are valued for hardiness , strength , and sure @-@ footedness .

The breed is indigenous to the New Forest in Hampshire in southern England , where equines have lived since before the last Ice Age ; remains dating back to 500 @, @ 000 BC have been found within 50 miles (80 km) of the heart of the modern New Forest . DNA studies have shown ancient shared ancestry with the Celtic @-@ type Asturcón and Pottok ponies . Many breeds have contributed to the foundation bloodstock of the New Forest pony , but today only ponies whose parents are both registered as purebred in the approved section of the stud book may be registered as purebred . The New Forest pony can be ridden by children and adults , can be driven in harness , and competes successfully against larger horses in horse show competition .

All ponies grazing on the New Forest are owned by New Forest commoners ? people who have " rights of common of pasture " over the Forest lands . An annual marking fee is paid for each animal turned out to graze . The population of ponies on the Forest has fluctuated in response to varying demand for young stock . Numbers fell to fewer than six hundred in 1945 , but have since risen steadily , and thousands now run loose in semi @-@ feral conditions . The welfare of ponies grazing on the Forest is monitored by five Agisters , employees of the Verderers of the New Forest . Each Agister takes responsibility for a different area of the Forest . The ponies are gathered annually in a series of drifts , to be checked for health , wormed , and they are tail @-@ marked ; each pony 's tail is trimmed to the pattern of the Agister responsible for that pony . Purebred New Forest stallions approved by the Breed Society and by the New Forest Verderers run out on the Forest with the mares for a short period each year . Many of the foals bred on the Forest are sold through the Beaulieu Road pony sales , which are held several times each year .

= = Characteristics = =

Standards for the breed are stipulated by the New Forest Pony Breeding and Cattle Society . The maximum height allowed is 14 @. @ 2 1 ? 4 hands (58 @. @ 25 inches , 148 cm) . Although there is no minimum height standard , in practice New Forest ponies are seldom less than 12 hands (48 inches , 122 cm) . In shows , they normally are classed in two sections : competition height A , 138 centimetres (54 in) and under ; and competition height B , over 138 centimetres (54 in) . New Forest ponies should be of riding type , workmanlike , and strong in conformation , with a sloping shoulder and powerful hindquarters ; the body should be deep , and the legs straight with strong , flat bone , and hard , rounded hooves . Larger ponies , although narrow enough in the barrel for small children to ride comfortably , are also capable of carrying adults . Smaller ponies may not be suitable for heavier riders , but they often have more show quality . The New Forest pony has free , even gaits , active and straight , but not exaggerated , and is noted for sure @-@ footedness , agility , and speed .

The ponies are most commonly bay , chestnut , or grey . Few coat colours are excluded : piebald , skewbald , and blue @-@ eyed cream are not allowed ; palomino and very light chestnut are only accepted by the stud book as geldings and mares . Blue eyes are never accepted . White markings on the head and lower legs are allowed , unless they appear behind the head , above the point of the hock in the hind leg , or above the metacarpal bone at the bend in the knee in the foreleg . Ponies failing to pass these standards may not be registered in the purebred section of the stud book , but are recorded in the appendix , known as the X @-@ register . The offspring of these animals may not be registered as purebred New Forest ponies , as the stud book is closed and only the offspring of purebred @-@ approved registered ponies may be registered as purebred .

New Forest ponies have a gentle temperament and a reputation for intelligence , strength , and versatility . On the whole , they are a sturdy and hardy breed . The one known hereditary genetic disorder found in the breed is congenital myotonia , a muscular condition also found in humans ,

dogs , cats , and goats . It was identified in the Netherlands in 2009 , after a clinically affected foal was presented to the Equine Clinic of Utrecht University . DNA sequencing revealed that the affected foal was homozygous for a missense mutation in the gene encoding CLCN1 , a protein which regulates the excitability of the skeletal muscle . The mutated allele was found in both the foal 's parents , its siblings , and two other related animals , none of whom exhibited any clinical signs . The researchers concluded that the condition has an autosomal recessive mode of inheritance , whereby both parents have to contribute the mutated allele for a physically affected foal to be produced with that phenotype . The study suggested that the mutation was of relatively recent origin : the founder of the mutated gene , as all the ponies who tested positive for the mutation are direct descendants of this stallion . The probable founder stallion has been identified as Kantje 's Ronaldo ; testing is now underway to identify which of his offspring carry the mutated gene . All carriers will be removed from the breeding section of the New Forest Pony Breeding & Cattle Society 's stud book , and all New Forest stallions licensed in the UK also will be tested , whether or not they descend from Kantje 's Ronaldo , to cover the possibility that the mutated gene may have appeared earlier in the pedigree , although it is believed that the mutated gene has now been eradicated from the British breeding stock . All breeding stock imported to the UK also will be tested .

= = History = =

Ponies have grazed in the area of the New Forest for many thousands of years , predating the last Ice Age . Spear damage on a horse shoulder bone discovered at Earham Pit , Boxgrove (about 50 miles (80 km) from the heart of the modern New Forest) , dated 500 @, @ 000 BC , demonstrates that early humans were hunting horses in the area at that time , and the remains of a large Ice Age hunting camp have been found close to Ringwood (on the western border of the modern New Forest) . Evidence from the skeletal remains of ponies from the Bronze Age suggests that they resembled the modern Exmoor pony . Horse bones excavated from Iron Age ritual burial sites at Danebury (about 25 miles (40 km) from the heart of the modern New Forest) , indicate that the animals were approximately 12 hands (48 inches , 122 cm) ? a height similar to that of some of the smaller New Forest ponies of today .

William the Conqueror , who claimed the New Forest as a royal hunting ground , shipped more than two thousand horses across the English Channel when he invaded England in 1066 . The earliest written record of horses in the New Forest dates back to that time , when rights of common of pasture were granted to the area 's inhabitants . A popular tradition linking the ancestry of the New Forest pony to Spanish horses said to have swum ashore from wrecked ships at the time of the Spanish Armada has , according to the New Forest National Park Authority , " long been accepted as a myth " , however , the offspring of Forest mares , probably bred at the Royal Stud in Lyndhurst , were exported in 1507 for use in the Renaissance wars . A genetic study in 1998 suggested that the New Forest pony has ancient shared ancestry with two endangered Spanish Celtic @-@ type pony breeds , the Asturcón and Pottok .

The most notable stallion in the early history of the breed was a Thoroughbred named Marske , the sire of Eclipse , and a great @-@ grandson of the Darley Arabian . Marske was sold to a Ringwood farmer for 20 guineas on the death of Prince William , Duke of Cumberland , and was used to breed with " country mares " in the 1760s .

In the 1850s and 1860s , the quality of the ponies was noted to be declining , a result of poor choice of breeding stallions , and the introduction of Arab to improve the breed was recommended . The census of stock of 1875 reported just under three thousand ponies grazing the Forest , and by 1884 the number had dropped to 2 @, @ 250 . Profits from the sale of young ponies affected the number of mares that commoners bred in subsequent years . The drop in numbers on the Forest may have been a consequence of introducing Arab blood to the breed in the 1870s , resulting in fewer animals suitable for use as pit ponies , or to the increase in the profits from running dairy cattle instead of ponies . The Arab blood may have reduced the ponies ' natural landrace hardiness to thrive on the open Forest over winter . Numbers of ponies on the Forest also declined as a result of demand for more refined @-@ looking ponies for riding and driving work prior to the introduction of motor

vehicles . Later , the Second World War drove up the demand for , and thus , the market value of , young animals for horse meat .

Founded in 1891 , the Society for the improvement of New Forest Ponies organised a stallion show and offered financial incentives to encourage owners of good stallions to run them on the Forest . In 1905 the Burley and District NF Pony Breeding and Cattle Society was set up to start the stud book and organise the Breed Show ; the two societies merged in 1937 to form the New Forest Pony Breeding and Cattle Society . Overall numbers of livestock grazing the Forest , including ponies , tended to decline in the early twentieth century ; in 1945 there were just 571 ponies depastured . By 1956 the number of ponies of all breeds on the Forest had more than doubled to 1 @, @ 341 . Twenty years later pony numbers were up to 3 @, @ 589 , rising to 4 @, @ 112 in 1994 , before dipping back below four thousand until 2005 . As of 2011 , there were 4 @, @ 604 ponies grazing on the New Forest .

In 2014 , the Rare Breeds Survival Trust (RBST) conservation charity watch @-@ listed the New Forest pony in its " minority breed " category , given the presence of less than 3 @, @ 000 breeding females in the forest . Over the course of five years , the number of foals born each year had dropped by two @-@ thirds (from 1 @, @ 563 to just 423 in 2013) ? a change attributed by The New Forest Pony Breeding and Cattle Society to a declining market , and by the New Forest Verderers to steps that had been taken to improve the quality rather than the quantity of foals .

For a variety of reasons , including normal trade in the area and attempts to improve the breed , Arabian , Thoroughbred , Welsh pony , and Hackney blood had been added to ponies in the New Forest . Over time , however , the better @-@ quality ponies were sold off , leaving the poorer @-@ quality and less hardy animals as the Forest breeding stock . To address this situation , as well as to increase the stock 's hardiness and restore native type , in the early twentieth century animals from other British native mountain and moorland pony breeds such as the Fell , Dales , Highland , Dartmoor , and Exmoor were introduced to the Forest . This practice ended in 1930 , and since that time , only purebred New Forest stallions may be turned out . The New Forest Pony Breeding and Cattle Society has been publishing the stud book since 1960 . New Forest ponies have been exported to many parts of the world , including Canada , the U.S. , Europe , and Australia , and many countries now have their own breed societies and stud books .

= = Uses = =

In the past , smaller ponies were used as pit ponies . Today the New Forest pony and related crossbreeds are still the " working pony of choice " for local farmers and commoners , as their sure @-@ footedness , agility , and sound sense will carry them (and their rider) safely across the varied and occasionally hazardous terrain of the open Forest , sometimes at great speed , during the autumn drifts . New Forest ponies also are used today for gymkhanas , show jumping , cross @-@ country , dressage , driving , and eventing .

The ponies can carry adults and in many cases compete on equal terms with larger equines while doing so . For example , in 2010 , the New Forest Pony Enthusiasts Club (NFPEC) , a registered riding club whose members compete only on purebred registered New Forest ponies , won the Quadrille competition at the London International Horse Show at Olympia . This was a significant win , as the British Riding Clubs Quadrille is a national competition , with only four teams from the whole of Britain selected to compete at the National Final .

= = Ponies on the New Forest = =

The ponies grazing the New Forest are considered to be iconic . They , together with the cattle , donkeys , pigs , and sheep owned by commoners ' (local people with common grazing rights) , are called " the architects of the Forest " : it is the grazing and browsing of the commoners ' animals over a thousand years which created the New Forest ecosystem as it is today .

The cattle and ponies living on the New Forest are not completely feral , but are owned by commoners , who pay an annual fee for each animal turned out . The animals are looked after by

their owners and by the Agisters employed by the Verderers of the New Forest . The Verderers are a statutory body with ancient roots , who share management of the forest with the Forestry Commission and National park authority . Approximately 80 per cent of the animals depastured on the New Forest are owned by just 10 per cent of the commoning families .

Ponies living full @-@ time on the New Forest are almost all mares , although there are also a few geldings . For much of the year the ponies live in small groups , usually consisting of an older mare , her daughters , and their foals , all keeping to a discrete area of the Forest called a " haunt . " Under New Forest regulations , mares and geldings may be of any breed . Although the ponies are predominantly New Foresters , other breeds such as Shetlands and their crossbred descendants may be found in some areas .

Stallions must be registered New Foresters , and are not allowed to run free all year round on the Forest . They normally are turned out only for a limited period in the spring and summer , when they gather several groups of mares and youngstock into larger herds and defend them against other stallions . A small number (usually fewer than 50) are turned out , generally between May and August . This ensures that foals are born neither too early (before the spring grass is coming through) , nor too late (as the colder weather is setting in and the grazing and browsing on the Forest is dying back) in the following year .

Colts are assessed in their two @-@ year @-@ old year by the New Forest Pony Breeding and Cattle Society for suitability to be kept as stallions ; any animal failing the assessment must be gelded . Once approved , every spring (usually in March) , the stallions must pass the Verderers ' assessment before they are permitted onto the Forest to breed . The stallion scheme resulted in a reduction of genetic diversity in the ponies running out on the New Forest , and to counteract this and preserve the hardiness of Forest @-@ run ponies , the Verderers introduced the Bloodline Diversity Project , which will use hardy Forest @-@ run mares , mostly over eleven years old , bred to stallions that have not been run out on the Forest , or closely related to those that have .

Drifts to gather the animals are carried out in autumn . Most colts and some fillies are removed , along with any animals considered too " poor " to remain on the Forest over the winter . The remaining fillies are branded with their owner 's mark , and many animals are wormed . Many owners choose to remove a number of animals from the Forest for the winter , turning them out again the following spring . Animals surplus to their owner 's requirements often are sold at the Beaulieu Road Pony Sales , run by the New Forest Livestock Society . Tail hair of the ponies is trimmed , and cut into a recognisable pattern to show that the pony 's grazing fees have been paid for the year . Each Agister has his own " tail @-@ mark " , indicating the area of the Forest where the owner lives . The Agisters keep a constant watch over the condition of the Forest @-@ running stock , and an animal may be " ordered off " the Forest at any time . The rest of the year , the lives of the ponies are relatively unhindered unless they need veterinary attention or additional feeding , when they are usually taken off the Forest .

The open nature of the New Forest means that ponies are able to wander onto roads . The ponies actually have right of way over vehicles and many wear reflective collars in an effort to reduce traffic fatalities , but despite this , many ponies , along with commoners ' cattle , pigs , and donkeys are killed or injured in road traffic accidents every year . Human interaction with ponies is also a problem ; well meaning but misguided visitors to the forest frequently feed them , which can create dietary problems and cause the ponies to adopt an aggressive attitude in order to obtain human food .

New Forest ponies are raced in an annual point to point meeting in the Forest , usually on Boxing Day , finishing at a different place each year . The races do not have a fixed course , but instead are run across the open Forest , so competitors choose their own routes around obstructions such as inclosures (forestry plantations) , fenced paddocks , and bogs . Riders with a detailed knowledge of the Forest are thus at an advantage . The location of the meeting place is given to competitors on the previous evening , and the starting point of the race is revealed once riders have arrived at the meeting point .