

The Dartmoor Ponies

Dartmoor Factsheet



The pony has a long history on Dartmoor. Ponies have roamed on the moor since prehistoric times, and perhaps before that. The pony is still an important part of moorland life – and is the logo for the Dartmoor National Park Authority.

When ponies first came to Dartmoor no one knows, but they have been here long enough to have their own indigenous breed – the Dartmoor Pony. This particular breed is now considered rare because there are less than 900 breeding mares left. However, there is a good chance that you will see one of these ponies on your visit to Dartmoor, as the National Park Authority has worked hard with other partners to try to stabilise the numbers, and ensure a sustainable future for them.

Many other types of ponies also live on the moor. Some such as the Shetland pony, as the name implies, are not a local breed. The origin of others such as the coloureds [the piebald (black and white) and skewbald (brown and white)] are less clear. Cross breeding, either intentional or not, also means that there are a lot of ponies of no particular breed out on the moor.

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

- **the 'native' Dartmoor 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. This is because they are too valuable to be left out, and also to prevent uncontrolled breeding with non-registered animals.



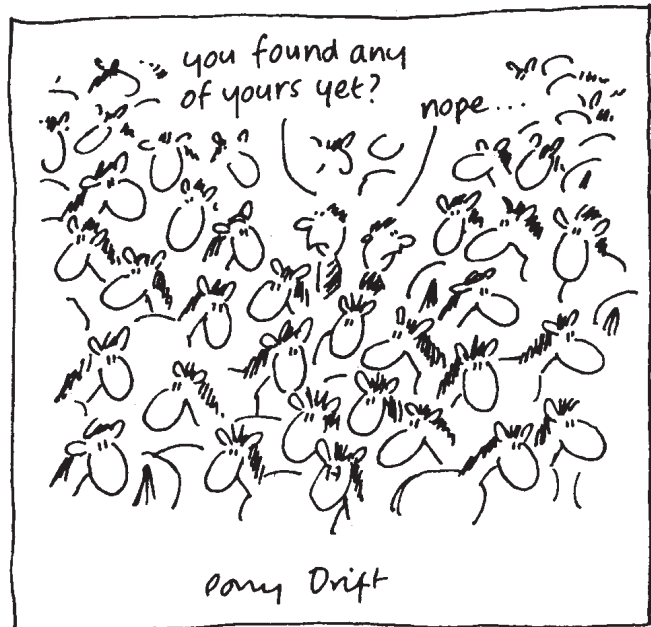
- **the Shetland pony:** this is not a local breed. It was introduced to Dartmoor early in the 20th century to produce small, strong, cross bred animals capable of working down the coal mines of northern England and Wales. Coming from the Shetland Isles, these ponies were well suited to survive the harsh conditions on Dartmoor.
- **the coloured pony:** although not a breed, these ponies are popular with pony breeders because there is a demand for them as children's ponies.

Ponies are not wild

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



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.

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.

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.

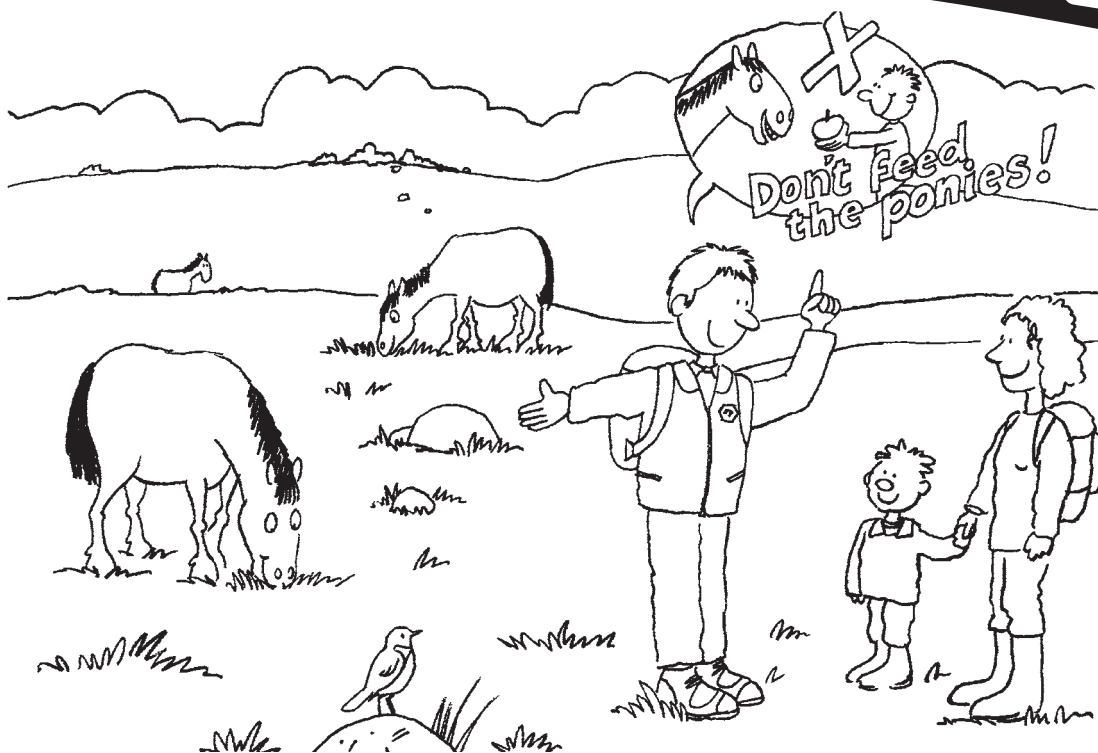
Ponies on Dartmoor

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. 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.



- a 3,500 year history

Industrial Use

In the mid 1800s Dartmoor was one of the main sources 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.

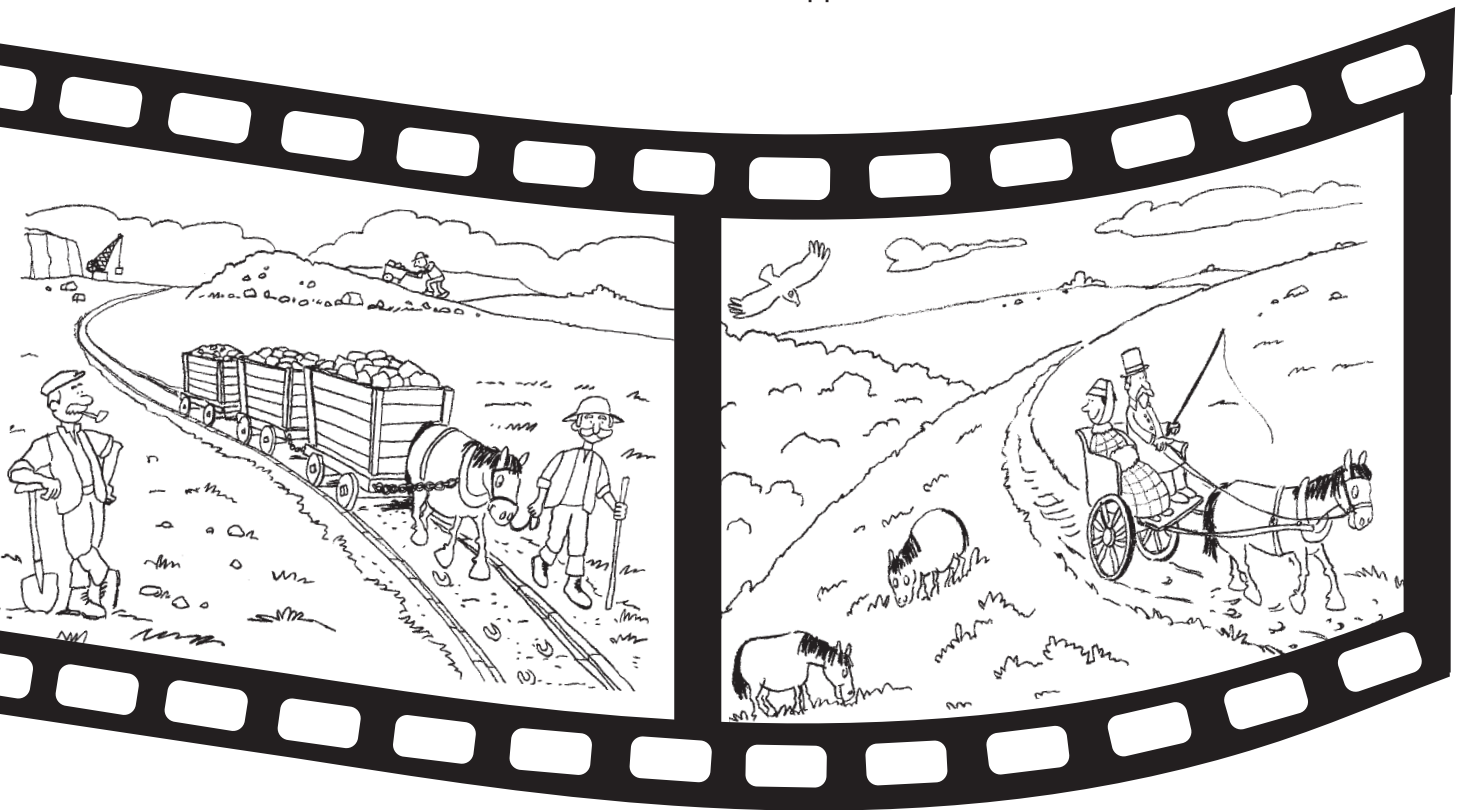
Until coal mines in England and Wales were fully mechanised, ponies were used to pull wagons from the coal face. Some of the ponies were stabled underground and never saw the light of day after their arrival at the pit.

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.



Illustrations by Marcus Byron © DNPA

The Present

In 1950 there may have been as many as 30,000 ponies on the moor. Today there are fewer than 1,500. This decline is due to a combination of factors:

- a reduction in the demand for pit ponies and ponies for meat;
- until now ponies have not been considered as agricultural animals and have therefore not attracted subsidy. This has led to farmers getting rid of ponies in preference to cows and sheep that do attract subsidy.

This, and a lack of any market for semi-feral ponies, has led to pony numbers diminishing down to critical numbers. Payment by the number of stock kept has now ceased and farmers are paid by the hectare, and for conservation benefit, not per animal. The pony is a very efficient mowing machine in conservation terms, eating vegetation that other animals won't, and is now recognised as an essential element to any moorland grazing scheme. It is hoped that this turn of events will help to ensure that pony numbers will stabilise and even increase.

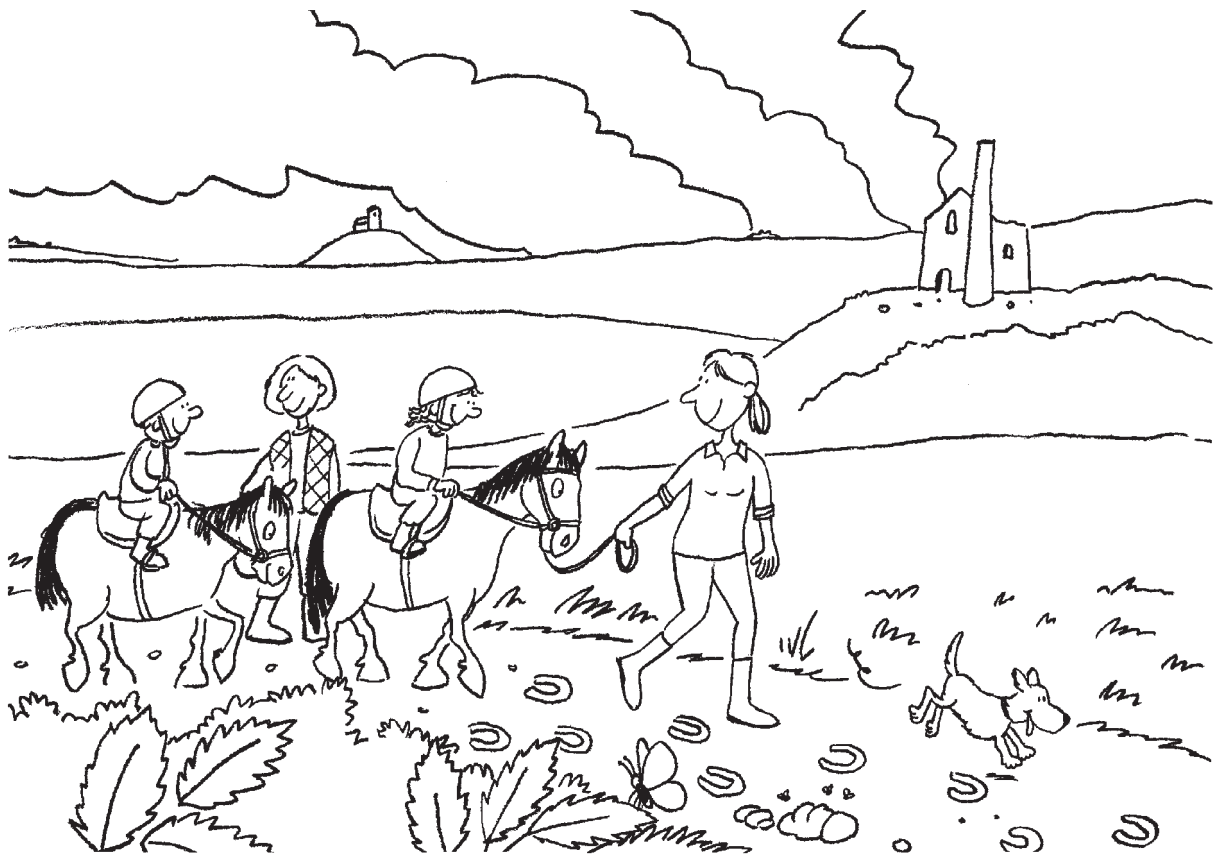


Illustration by Marcus Byron © DNPA

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, for 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.

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 relaxed the rules for Dartmoor, called a special derogation. This means that the ponies will only need a passport if they are sold or moved from the moor.

Current Schemes to support ponies on Dartmoor

Dartmoor National Park Pony Conservation Grazing Fund

This lengthy title is the name of a scheme that aims to ensure that every pony that is out on the commons, that are part of an agri-environment scheme, gets some financial support in recognition of the ponies' value as a conservation grazer. This came about because of concerns that the lack of market for ponies, and the introduction of a passport system for ponies, which would cost the farmer more to obtain than the pony was worth, would lead to all the ponies on the moor being sold.

This scheme is a partnership scheme with the Rural Development Service, which is responsible for the implementation of the Environmentally Sensitive Area scheme (an agri-environmental scheme). This means that all ponies, whatever breed, attract financial support. The total cost of providing this support is £50,000 per annum. As the ESA scheme is phased out and replaced by the Environmental Stewardship scheme (ES), it is expected that these payments will no longer be necessary as a 'top up' as there will be a conservation grazing supplement available through ES.

Dartmoor Pony Preservation Scheme

Similarly, the Dartmoor Pony Society was concerned that the native Dartmoor, the brown pony, might be the first to disappear because it was less picturesque than the coloured ponies.

The Dartmoor Pony Society whose primary interest is in the improvement of the pedigree Dartmoor Pony, was alarmed that the number of native ponies had dropped to such a level as to be considered as a 'rare' breed.

The native pony is in effect the gene pool for the breed. Once the native pony is lost from Dartmoor - its original habitat - it is in effect extinct.

The pedigree pony relies on new blood coming in from the native pony to ensure that the pedigree does not become more and more inbred.

The Dartmoor Pony Preservation Scheme (DPPS) aims to support as many of the existing native Dartmoor Pony herds on the commons, to ensure that the number of native Dartmoor ponies does not fall any further. At present 25 herds are supported. The Scheme initially funded by the Dartmoor Sustainable Development Fund, relies on public support for its on-going funding. The charitable arm of this scheme - the Dartmoor Pony Heritage Trust - has a centre at Brimpts Farm where you can see the Dartmoor pony and learn more about the ponies' history and more importantly its future, free of charge.

Dartmoor National Park Authority's own grazing herds

The National Park Authority supports three native Dartmoor Pony herds on land that it owns on Holne Moor. Some of the male offspring have been castrated and are now used as a mobile grazing herd. They are moved from site to site to graze areas of high conservation value that are off the moor, that need grazing in order to maintain their conservation quality. 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 plants and species. The scheme which started in 2003 with one herd has now been expanded to three herds.

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.

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.

Organisations working to benefit the ponies on Dartmoor

● **Dartmoor National Park Authority**

www.dartmoor-npa.gov.uk

● **The Duchy of Cornwall**

www.princeofwales.gov.uk

● **The Dartmoor Commoners' Council**

tel (01822) 618892

● **The Dartmoor Pony Society**

www.dartmoorponysociety.com

● **The Dartmoor Hill Pony Association**

tel (01364) 631036

● **The Dartmoor Pony Heritage Trust**

www.dartmoorponytrust.com

● **The Friends of the Dartmoor Hill Pony**

www.dartmoorhillpony.com

Further information available from our web site

www.dartmoor-npa.gov.uk

Visit the A-Z to access resources listed.

Other publications:

- Dartmoor Pony Information
- Purchasing ponies from the commons of Dartmoor
- Ponies on Dartmoor - advice for the public

Other information:

- The Spirit of the Pony on-line exhibition

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

**Education Service,
Dartmoor National Park Authority,
Parke, Bovey Tracey, Newton Abbot,
Devon TQ13 9JQ**

Tel: (01626) 832093

E-mail: education@dartmoor-npa.gov.uk

Web site: www.dartmoor-npa.gov.uk

Visit Learning About for more educational resources.

This publication may be photocopied for educational purposes under the Copyright Act 1988.