

Dartmoor Pony Herd Management

In depth report from a Dartmoor Farmer



Dartmoor born and bred, Robyn Petrie-Ritchie began riding ponies at a very early age. She lives on a Dartmoor Hill Farm with her partner Steven Alford and together they will be the sixth generation to take on the family's herd of Dartmoor ponies. Robyn has a first class honours degree in Equine Science and a Research Masters in Biological Sciences. She works as a consultant for organisations such as the Mare and Foal Sanctuary and the Donkey Sanctuary, looking at the management of feral equid populations in the UK and around the world.

The Ponies on Dartmoor

There has been a great deal of media attention over the past few years focusing on the fate of the unwanted foals from pony herds on Dartmoor. Figures of foals being destroyed on farms have varied, most recently being estimated at around 400-600 each year.

However, many farmers are taking positive, effective steps to retain their traditional herds

and are working hard to reduce their foal 'crop', while producing a small number of high quality traditional Dartmoor ponies. In this article we take a look at the ponies running on Dartmoor, how they are managed and the passion and family heritage which underpins their future.

A commonly asked question: Are there any true Dartmoor ponies left on the open commons?

Yes! The traditional small, tough, thick coated, plain coloured ponies are ideally suited to the harsh environment.

There are three types of pony running on the open commons today: the registered 'Dartmoor Pony', the true-to-type but unregistered 'Heritage Pony' and the mixed bred 'Hill Pony'.

The Registered Dartmoor Pony

The registered pony is currently recognised as category two 'Endangered' by the Rare Breeds Survival Trust. The registered pony is still found on Dartmoor and is perfectly suited to the environment which shaped it. The Dartmoor Pony Society (DPS) which represents the Registered Dartmoor Pony evolved out of the Mountain and Moorland section of the National Pony Society in 1925. It was never the intention of the Society to register all ponies on the hills of Dartmoor, but simply to preserve and retain all the hardiness of the traditional types and ensure they became recognised and saleable. Many of the other recognised mountain and moorland breeds in the UK share a similar history, for example: "In 1922 the Fell Pony Society was set up in its present form, not to 'improve' but to 'keep pure the old breed of pony' in the face of cross breeding."¹ In Wales it is accepted that there has been some infusion of Thoroughbred, Eastern and Hackney blood over the years for the Welsh Pony, but the greatest measure of improvement is said to have been brought about by the intelligent and careful selection within the breed itself. Purchasing a recognised breed ensures you have some understanding of their characteristics and can be guaranteed a record of their pedigree. Showing classes specifically for native breeds are also available to registered animals, offering breeders and purchasers the opportunity to show off the best of our local breeds.

The Dartmoor Pony went from category three 'Vulnerable' to category two 'Endangered' on The Rare Breeds Survival Trust List last year.

Unregistered Ponies on the Moor

Heritage Ponies are unregistered but true-to-type ponies who have been given Heritage Trust List (HTL) status. These ponies are tough, robust and surefooted, thriving in harsh moorland conditions. When inspected and approved by a Dartmoor Pony Society judge as having good conformation and being true-to-type, they can be issued with a Heritage Trust passport. They remain unregistered unless they enter, if approved and meet certain criteria, the Dartmoor Pony Society/Duchy of Cornwall Upgrading Scheme.

Hill Ponies are a mixture of different breeds and have been shaped by market demand. Primarily, breeders have relied upon the live export meat market as an outlet for their Hill Pony stock. This has now come to an end, meaning the unhandled mixed bred pony has a vastly reduced market. Many suggestions have been made to resurrect demand, most recently the proposal that we must eat the ponies to save them. Sadly, this has done little for the profile of the true 'Dartmoor Pony' and has led to a great deal of negative publicity.

The Bigger Picture

Equine charities up and down the country are full. According to the National Equine Welfare Council (NEWC) the UK remains within the grip of a national equine crisis, meaning there are too many horses in the UK and not enough good homes. Princess Anne suggested that giving a value to unwanted horses through a meat market may reduce the chances of them becoming welfare cases. When questioned further on this topic she did however conclude that this was not a reason to breed any more unwanted ponies! It was simply a suggestion to reduce the likelihood of issues such as abandonment, for those we already have.

Working as a consultant for equine welfare organisations has allowed me the opportunity to understand common themes where feral and semi-feral herds are found. Where uncontrolled breeding takes place, welfare levels decline rapidly. The current Bodmin Moor pony crisis² is again highlighting the problems caused by leaving high numbers of stallions out on the commons with no management in place. Nutritional issues, high worm burdens and fighting are rife. There is much talk of allowing a 'natural' balance to be found and allowing these animals to be left to 'roam free'. Sadly this is an uninformed and misleading viewpoint. None of the ponies on Dartmoor are 'wild'. They are all owned and have been selectively bred for many hundreds of years. Quite simply, the recent and lasting change to market requires a change to management.

My recent research focused upon three possible breeding management options available for pony keepers on Dartmoor. Those options were: stallion removal, stallion vasectomy, and female immuno-contraception.

The research was conducted for the completion of a Research Masters at Plymouth University. It was not connected or funded by any third party. It was entirely at my own expense, carried out through a desire to answer questions which were holding back changes to management which could improve welfare.

Stallion Removal

One of the main findings was that the mares did not leave their lairs* when stallions were removed. They remained in the areas they had always grazed, suggesting that matriarch mares dictate where the herd resides and the stallion simply keeps them more closely grouped.

"Despite the popular macho image of the stallion, equine family bands are generally led by mares; stallions have been found to be neither the most dominant nor most aggressive animals in their herd and are generally subordinate to some of the mares in their groups³."

Mare Immuno-contraception

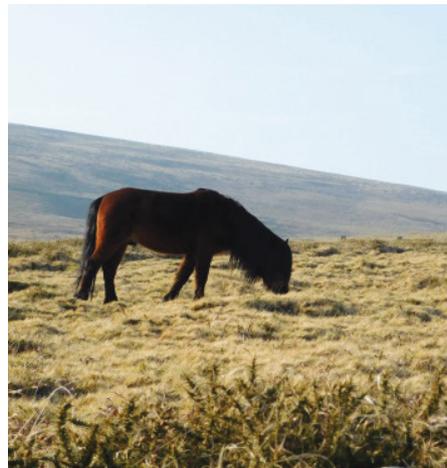
The idea of using immuno-contraceptive on the mares was primarily so that the stallion could remain on the commons and maintain the lair. However, it was noted that due to the mares no longer 'cycling' after vaccination, the stallions may actually lose interest in them and end up looking for other mares, causing lairage disruption. There is also no guarantee that mares will return to fertility after repeated treatments with the vaccine. *"Reproductive cyclicity in adult mares can be successfully suppressed by immunization against GnRH but the timing of resumption of cyclicity is highly variable⁴."* For breeders of pedigree Rare Breed ponies, maintaining the option of breeding is essential and immuno-contraception is therefore not an option. In areas where ponies are 'un-owned' and breeding in vast numbers, immuno-contraception may be the only and best option. This is not the case on Dartmoor.

Vasectomising the Stallions

This operation works differently to castration. The stallion maintains all his 'normal' behaviours and continues to herd and cover the mares as well as fending off other stallions. There was some concern that the vasectomised stallion may become very 'run up' (lose condition) due to having to cover the mares repeatedly throughout the breeding season. However, this was found not to be the case. Again, this discovery backs up much other peer reviewed literature on equine behaviour. There are now a number of farmers using vasectomised stallions to run with their herds on the open commons. This technique is proving to be very effective in maintaining normal social behaviours, while reducing the need to cull foals each year.

The Results Speak For Themselves

Our vasectomised stallion, Caspar, is going into his third year now and we can safely say he has helped us to significantly reduce the number of unwanted foals produced. Our 'entire' Pedigree stallion is kept on the farm and we bring in a small number of mares to him each year, breeding just enough for the small market we know we have. Our mares live out all year round with Caspar fending off the stallions in adjoining herds. Of course we have the occasional unwanted foal but we can manage these far more easily than having an unwanted foal from every mare each year.



Caspar March 2016

The Hutchings of Yardworthy Farm also run a traditional Registered and Heritage herd of Dartmoor ponies and they vasectomised a stallion six years ago.

"In late May 2010 our vet, Ulli Arnold, performed his first vasectomy and, I believe, the first on Dartmoor. This was on my fully Registered Dartmoor stallion, Metherall Maelstrom (Maley). I had used him for three seasons and he had proved to be 100% fertile. Immediately before the operation I ran Maley with 2 mares so that I had (hopefully) 2 foals to keep the bloodline. This I managed, with a filly and a colt the following year. Ulli performed the vasectomy on the front lawn of the farm. Recovery was much the same as gelding any other colt. Maley is not the most robust in his confirmation, but I needed to be able to catch and handle him if he had any problems. This was something that had not been done before on Dartmoor, and I was very conscious of being under the watchful eye. I waited 6 weeks before Maley returned to the moor to run with his own mares. At the time I had 10 mares, 8 of which were not in foal. Maley ran and behaved in the usual way any stallion would. This has remained the same over the past 6 years - running with 8-10 mares, ranging in age from 8-21 years. In the 6 years, I have had 5 foals from other stallions (there are up to 4 running on the same common). All the mares are home bred and have spent most of their lives on the same common. I am a firm believer that the mares 'own' their stallion, VASECTOMISED or not!"



The Fursdons of Lowertown Farm have also chosen this technique, to limit the number of foals produced from their Registered and Heritage herd.

"Making the decision to vasectomise our stallion Merribridge Groomsman, affectionately known as Donkey (from the film Shrek), wasn't an easy one as he is such a nice, pedigree pony with a wonderful character. However, back in March 2012 we couldn't ignore the recession which was hitting the equestrian market hard, with equines selling poorly both privately and at auction, made even worse with continual irresponsible breeding all over the UK.

After a lot of research we decided that vasectomising our stallion was the only workable option available to us at the time, partly because the other choice which didn't affect the behaviour of the stallion or his herd was a contraceptive injection for the mares which was yet to be trialled and fully licenced in the UK.

The vasectomy was originally seen as a short term fix to reduce the number of foals immediately; if we'd had any welfare concerns vasectomy would not have been considered, as our stallion's welfare is paramount.

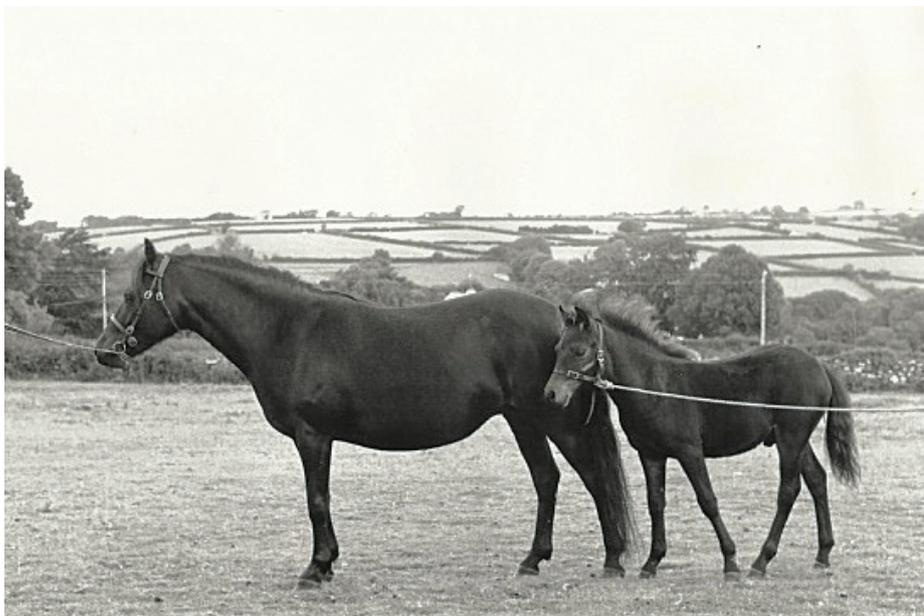
We have been very pleased with the results having a positive impact on our pony herd. With far fewer foals every year, which has been far more manageable for us (the occasional mare gets covered by other fertile stallions on the same patch of common). Our stallion is looking better than ever, as you can see by the photos taken in early March 2016 after a long, very wet and miserable winter. He has maintained his weight throughout the year, if anything often looking a bit too round! The mares appear very content too, also maintaining their weight year-round, which shows that they are very happy to run with a vasectomised stallion."





Famous Dartmoor Pony breeder Elizabeth Newbolt-Young, of Shilstone Rocks Stud at Widecombe, has also used a vasectomised stallion for some years now. Shilstone Rocks Stud produce highly successful ponies for the show ring, which are sought after world-wide and are bred and raised on Dartmoor.

Shilstone Rocks' vasectomised stallion in great condition (February 2016) running with his herd of pedigree mares.



Born and Bred

The ponies below are a small selection of our family's Registered Dartmoor ponies, born and bred on the moor, versatile, hardy, and a breed to be proud of.

Left: Champion Dartmoor Mare Shelly Pool.
Right: Shelly Pool's prizes



Shelley Pool

Shelley Pool wiped the board in the show ring and returned to the moors to spend many happy years of retirement; she was occasionally taken out of retirement in her twenties to attend fun shows with the youngest members of the family.

Steven Alford was found, aged three, in the farmyard on Timmy Tiptoes, having miraculously managed to clamber onto his back unaided! Timmy taught several generations to ride, was famous on the hunting field and spent many happy years running on the open commons.



Far left: Steven Alford on Timmy Tiptoes
Above: Shelly Ripple (aged 5) with the author and (below) now in her thirties.

Lovebrook Foxglove is currently winning many prizes in the show ring with her loan home family and will return home to Dartmoor to breed in years to come.