

At this time of year you can see the famous
Quantock ponies and their long-legged foals
across the Quantock Hills





The ponies play an important role in the conservation of the Quantocks

WILD PONIES

The Quantocks wouldn't be the Quantocks without its herd of characterful ponies. As this year's newborn foals take their first steps, CATHERINE WELTON finds out more about their mysterious heritage and their lives on the hills

PHOTOGRAPHY: Rebecca Davies

Springtime on the Quantock Hills is a riot of new life, as nature makes the most of the warming temperatures. Take a trip up on the hill at this glorious time of year and you'll see the famous ponies and their long-legged foals, playing or snoozing lazily in the sunshine.

Unlike Dartmoor and Exmoor ponies however, the Quantock ponies are not a native breed, but rather a mix of New Forest, cob, Welsh pony and even Arab. There are

photos of the ponies from as early as the 1920s, but no one really knows exactly where they came from. This surprising and mysterious heritage means they're a wide variety of colours, from chestnut to grey, with often eye-catching markings, such as white socks and spots.

Regardless of where they came from, the ponies play an important role in the conservation of the Quantocks, grazing alongside sheep and cattle. Today, around

50 mares in total live there, with half roaming the Stowey Road side, and the others on Aisholt Common. The ponies live in small groups, with one mare in each taking the role of leader.

Despite their semi-wild appearance, running free and largely unhandled, they are in fact owned by eight local families, who have 'common rights' to keep ponies on the land, and meet regularly as the Quantock Pony Breeders Committee. >

September sees the annual Quantock pony round up, when all the mares and foals are brought off the hill

Tim Hobbs is one of the owners. For him, the ponies have been a lifelong passion, one that has been passed down through the generations. 'We have common rights to keep ponies on the hill, with the land that our family owns,' he explains. 'But my grandfather gave up keeping ponies on the hill back in the late 1960s, due to the lack of fencing, which meant the ponies could stray onto the roads.' Once the land was fenced and made secure, Tim's father continued the tradition and bought five mares to go back on the hill. 'That was in the 1990s, and we have carried on since his death in 2016, carrying on his breeding strategy. We currently keep nine ponies on the hill.'

Tim and the other owners manage the ponies following their natural behaviours and way of life. A stallion is released after the Easter holiday and stays on the hill for about two months, to put the mares in foal. The foals are born between mid-March and mid-May the following year. September sees the annual Quantock pony round up, when all the mares and foals are brought off the hill, so the foals can be weaned. Some of the foals are sold, either privately or at auction, at the Quantock Pony Fair. The fair is held at Rydon Farm in West Quantoxhead every October and is a wonderful slice of traditional rural life, with eager bidders and spectators crammed onto a tower of hay bales to watch the action in the ring below.

The mares and any foals that have been selected for breeding, go back on the hill, but



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not before a health check. 'We take off any mare that might be getting too old to cope with life on the open hill,' says Tim. 'They can live into their twenties, but we try to take them off the hill before they get to that age and they lose too much weight.'

The ponies are naturally hardy, to cope with the British weather, but last year it was the summer not the winter that proved the biggest challenge. 'In last summer's drought, the ponies' behaviour changed as to where they were grazing, and they spent a lot of time in the valleys near water sources.



EXMOOR PONIES & QUANTOCK PONIES – WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

They might be neighbours, but there are distinct differences between the ponies that roam the Quantocks and those native to Exmoor. Where the Quantocks ponies vary in colour and markings, the Exmoors are identical, with a brown coat, 'mealy' muzzle and black or dark brown mane and tail. They're smaller than the Quantock pony too, typically 12.2hh or under, but just as hardy, built to withstand harsh winters up on the

moors. The Exmoor pony is the oldest native pony breed in Britain, its long history is well recorded and first appears in the *Domesday Book*. Originally, these strong, sure-footed ponies were used by hill farmers, but today they're more often seen excelling in the show ring or as children's ponies. The Exmoor Pony Society was established in 1921 to preserve them, and they are currently listed as an endangered rare breed.



above: Unlike Exmoor ponies, the Quantocks ponies' mysterious heritage means they're a wide variety of colours

left: Exmoor ponies are one of the oldest breeds in Britain.

Photo: Getty Images



How to safely enjoy the ponies

Tim advises that the best way to enjoy watching the ponies is from a safe distance, and to avoid doing anything that changes their natural behaviour.

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Don't feed the ponies. Unfortunately, this causes them to gather in car parks, which can be dangerous for the ponies and the public. Feeding them can also cause digestive upsets or even choking.

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Don't attempt to pet the ponies; remember they're semi-wild and may behave unpredictably.

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Keeps dogs on a lead to stop them disturbing the livestock, especially when mares are in foal or have a foal at foot. Don't forget to pick up after your dog, as it can contaminate the grazing and cause health issues in the livestock.

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Be mindful of the ponies when driving on the Quantocks.

'If we saw an individual mare, especially with a foal, losing condition, they were taken off the hill for easier grazing and water. We don't seem to get the hard winters that we used to.'

Ensuring the ponies are capable of withstanding the British weather, whatever it throws at them, is part of Tim's breeding strategy. But he's also mindful of protecting the future of the ponies by making them popular as riding horses. 'They have been bred a little bit bigger, to meet a larger market, but without losing their durability.' Depending on the stallion and the mare, the ponies can reach heights of 15.2 hands high.

A 'hand' is the traditional way of measuring a horse, and is four inches. 'We all love breeding a good, useful pony or horse and seeing how they give their new owners such pleasure. They're very versatile and go on to do various disciplines such as endurance, eventing, dressage and even carriage driving,' says Tim. While their origins may be less well documented than the neighbouring Exmoor ponies, the Quantock ponies' future looks bright, especially with Tim and the other owners championing the breed. 'We feel they are very important in the management of the Quantock Hills and it wouldn't be the same without the ponies.' ●