DONKEY

Summary

Although far less hardy than UK native ponies, the donkey nonetheless thrives on poor forage. It also appears to graze and browse in a way which is much sought after in many nature conservation situations. Accordingly, the donkey deserves due consideration for use, particularly in sheltered locations and where appropriate accommodation is available.

Hardiness – thrives on poor forage, but not very hardy and therefore unsuitable for use on sites with wet ground or damp climates.

- *Thrives on poor forage* – has a lower food requirement than an equivalent sized pony.
- *Fares well on sunny, sheltered lowland sites* – but desert origins have not led to physical adaptations appropriate to the wet or windy conditions of northern Europe.
- *Shelter* – may not cope well with heavy rain. Its coat has no natural water repellent and soon becomes saturated. This, coupled with low temperatures can lead to pneumonia, particularly in foals or if an animal has lost condition or is stressed. Requires year-round access to housing on exposed sites or in wet or fly-ridden regions. Housing essential during autumn/winter months.
- *Intelligent* – with long memory. Quick to take advantage of any food/ shelter offered by people.

Physical Attributes & Husbandry – requires regular routine husbandry.

- *Hooves* – fast-growing; vary with terrain and feed. Unless kept on a hard, dry, abrasive substrate, feet likely to need regular trimming (every two/three months).
- *Surefooted* – on difficult or uneven terrain.
- *Water* – similar high water requirement to ponies and also fastidious about water quality.
- *Laminitis* – at risk on improved or lush pasture.
- *Handling* – fairly placid and less powerful than ponies so generally not as potentially hazardous to handle. However, not always biddable and well able to deliver a damaging kick or bite.
- *Parasites* – can suffer from worms and lice. Lungworm readily occurs and can cause serious illness in horse 'companions'. However, regular worming can eradicate this risk.
- *Teeth* – until it gains its adult teeth after 3 years a donkey will not have good 'bite' and may need extra feed to maintain condition. When older teeth may need rasping annually to enable effective feeding.
- *Long-lived* – commonly reach 30-40 years of age; some have been known to reach 60.
- *Insects* – disturbed by biting insects, but may adapt behaviour to avoid them, taking shelter by day and grazing by night.

Matthew Oates

Grazing Characteristics – good grazing and browsing ability on a large range of species.

- *Grasses* – readily eats a wide range of fine and coarse grasses, including tall, rank species. Dislikes Purple Moor-grass or the habitat in which it grows.
- *Sedges and rushes* – readily consumed. Takes Wood Small-reed, Sand Sedge, Blunt-flowered Rush, Soft Rush and Common Reed.
- *Herbs* – eats many flowering plants, including the flowers of Hemp Agrimony, Creeping Thistle and Hawkweed; also Spear Thistle, once frosted. Takes many flowering plants, but not Bluebells, Devil's-bit Scabious and heathers.
- *Browsing* – readily browses year round, taking the leaves, buds and seedlings of most species of tree and scrub, and the leaves and fruits of Roses and Brambles. Strips bark. May destroy regrowth on newly laid hedges. As much of 20% of a donkeys diet may comprise browse material.
- *Impact of social behaviour* – ranges widely to forage, probably travelling further each day than native ponies. Enjoys rolling in dust/sand; uses favoured spots on a regular basis.
- *Poaching* – minimal, as the donkey avoids mud.

Interaction with the Public – suitable for use on sites where public access is controlled.

- *Reaction to people* – generally placid. Ignores people unless fed titbits, then may become a bit pushy and aggressive. Stallions can be unpredictable and may be unsuitable on public access sites.
- *Reaction to dogs* – likely to see-off pestering dogs, 'Jennys' with foals and Jacks are likely to be quite aggressive. Dislikes and chases foxes; sometimes kept with sheep for this purpose.
- *Public appeal* – friendly and perceived as less threatening than ponies or cattle. Maintains condition well and has a thick, all covering coat for most of the year.

Sites where Donkeys are in use & contacts

SITE NAME	HABITAT	DETAILS AVAILABLE	CONTACT
Bentley Wood Wiltshire Bentley Wood Trust	Damp grassland & scrub; previously a conifer plantation.	Managed for Marsh Fritillary and its food-plant, Devil's-bit Scabious. Trial grazing with 3 donkeys in 1999 (short-term summer grazing); appears successful; suppressing Birch regrowth well and Bramble; ignoring the Devil's-bit Scabious. Site now grazed by Belted Galloway cattle, which are considered better for the site.	Oliver Howells 07968 340717 Stephen Davis 01380 726344
New Forest		New Forest donkeys eat little grass; in summer they concentrate new gorse shoots and in winter gorse, holly and bramble. Donkeys in the New Forest travel further on a daily basis to forage than the ponies; in winter they tend to forage alone or in small groups, forming groups in summer.	Raymond Bennett 01794 322204
Houtsaeger De Panne Belgium Flemish community	Mixed coastal habitat, with marram-dune, grey dune, dune grassland, rough grassland and abundant scrub. (80 ha)	15 donkeys live year round on site. During study found that unlike other sites, donkeys seldom used shelter even during very wet periods. Favoured scrub for shelter. Species taken included Wood Small-reed, Sand Sedge & Blunt-flowered Rush. Ate common species of rush and reed such as Soft Rush. The study found that 20% of a donkey's diet is browse material and that a donkey spends 55% of its time eating, whilst a Shetland ponies spends 70% and consumes 3.5 times as much biomass as a donkey.	Mark Leten 0032 (0)9 233 24 73
Other contacts:		Author of references below.	Eric Cosyns <eric.cosyns@rug.ac.be>
		Donkey Breed Society	Carol Morse 01732 864414

References

COSYNS E et al (1999) *Grazing behaviour and diet composition of Donkey and Shetland pony in a heterogeneous coastal dune landscape, a comparison.* University Gent, Department of. Biology, Lab. Botany, K L Ledeganckstraat 35, B-9000 Gent, Belgium.

COSYNS E et al (2001, in press) *Feeding ecology of Konik horses and donkeys in Belgian coastal dunes and its implication for nature management.* Belgian Journal of Ecology (submitted). Expected date of publication June/July 2001.