



**Proceedings from GAP and Flora Locale's
Ponies and Conservation Grazing Workshop**



Delegates areas of interest and reasons for attending workshop:

- New scheme putting ponies onto Wildlife Trust land.
- Farmer with ponies and SSSI.
- Commoning with ponies.
- Experience with ponies but not with conservation grazing.
- Experience with Dartmoor ponies and looking into new ways forward with ponies.
- Increasing use of ponies as the only option for grazing.
- Ponies on Welsh mountains.
- Urban heaths and semi-feral ponies.
- Looking to expand with rare breed ponies.

Agri-environment schemes and ponies. Speaker: Dr Jemma Batten (Blacksheep Consultancy)

- Works for small agri-environment consultancy.
- Countryside stewardship has a blinkered attitude to ponies. There is a clause in the CSS that land cannot be grazed solely by horses or ponies.
- There are specific limits under the CSS for the number of ponies that can be grazed per hectare.
- There is also a general rule that horses/ponies/donkeys are not allowed to graze or be kept on agreement land.
- Problems caused by ponies in conservation grazing schemes:
 - Compaction and bare ground
 - Lack of structural diversity, long or short
 - Lots of weeds, docks, nettles and creeping thistle
 - Supplementary feeding is not allowed under agri-environment schemes
- Graziers often have limited experience with ponies and paddock management. Over grazing frequently occurs resulting in poor quality land.
- Environmental Stewardship:
 - ELS: - slightly more sympathetic to ponies but still only includes them as an omission.
 - HLS: - can negotiate to graze high quality grasslands with equines
 - ponies can be sole grazers
 - a native breeds supplement is given
- Case study: Cotswolds
 - 10.6 ha SSSI
 - Habitat: Limestone grassland, scrub, woodland, organic
 - Had fought a constant battle with encroaching scrub because it is organic was cutting scrub back rather than treating but this was unsuccessful.
 - 14 Welsh ponies were introduced to the site over winter.
 - The result was positive with minimal damage to sward and the ponies bark stripped the saplings but not the mature trees.
 - As this was the whole farm (100ha) was taken on as a pony grazing pilot.

- High quality limestone grassland: 60 ha SSSI and County Wildlife Site
40 ha less diverse grassland
- The result was increasing diversity and wildflowers on the site.
- The ponies were increased to 101 cobs
- They have been doing intensive grazing which is often frowned upon under agri-environment schemes but they have been intensive grazing in short bursts.
- Grazing in short bursts and moving the ponies from one site to another prevents the build up of dung and gives the land a break.
- Ponies are excluded from 60ha SSSI and CWS in Summer and Winter and put on in Spring and Autumn (they are treated like sheep).
- Sheep can be put on to help the land in Winter if necessary.
- This has also allowed the formation of natural groups and the cobs tend to form groups of 20-30. This also has the benefit that because it is a large group they behave more like wild/feral ponies so they don't tend to dung in one place.
- They signed HLS scheme 1st of May this year and will plan and map the movements of the ponies throughout the year closely monitoring them to prevent land being damaged.
- The owners of the cob farm receive the payments from HLS.
- They have kept the less diverse 40ha free from the scheme which allows flexibility.
- They have not experienced many problems with laminitis because of moving the ponies.
- As ponies are being moved don't get such a problem with worming but may need to develop regime using an organic worming.

Handling and Managing Equines. Dru Butterfield (Dartmoor Ponies Heritage Trust)

- Overview of the Dartmoor Ponies Heritage Trust
 - On Dartmoor they were facing the problem that the indigenous Dartmoor pony was starting to disappear
 - 1950s estimated 30,000 ponies on Dartmoor, today there is 1,500 ponies.
 - There are several different types of pony of Dartmoor. There are the true Dartmoors and several crosses.
 - The approximate number of indigenous Dartmoor brood mares is 400.
 - The pedigree Dartmoor's used for shows have lost some of their hardiness.
 - When the charity was first set up they were losing lots of herds.
 - They started a scheme to identify ponies with versatility and the right temperament.
 - They put the Dartmoor ponies through a handling process and identified those ponies that had retained their wariness to people to prevent any problems with pony and public interactions.
 - They started the Dartmoor pony preservation scheme working with the pony owners/keepers and ran a value added campaign.
 - Raised awareness, ponies became heritage brand, marketed ponies as true Dartmoor rather than Dartmoor types.
 - Castrated colts to add value.
 - Handled ponies to an appropriate level either for riding or for conservation grazing.

- Over the past 12 months have had 90 sales with ponies going to the wildlife trusts, local councils, RSPB and nature reserves.
- They are making the Dartmoor heritage trust a one-stop-shop for selling ponies and pony advice.
- The preservation scheme for adding value is also providing a sustainable herd and protecting the gene pool.
- Welfare responsibilities
 - Dartmoor Pony Heritage Trust partnered the National trust in creating a protocol for managing equines in conservation grazing
 - Dispelling the myth – ponies from Dartmoor do require management
 - Moral and legal responsibility to give ponies the same level of care as cattle and sheep (selling at cost effective prices)
 - Pony keepers/owners have individual liability and can be fined £20,000, banned from keeping livestock or imprisoned under the animal welfare act.
- Preparing ponies for conservation grazing schemes
 - The trust ensures ponies are manageable but still retain wariness
 - Offer staff training and site advice
 - Source ponies
 - Arrange transport
 - Provide a one-stop-shop for advice
 - Check health of mares - teeth, feet, worms etc
- Handling techniques
 - What works for the ponies on Dartmoor is a rail pen.
 - Always work with a hat, pair of gloves (tight fitting for holding rope) and protective footwear.
 - Keep ropes and equipment smelling like a horse/pony.
 - Non-aggressive body language.
 - They use a stick to hold rope in place and then loop over ponies head (find easier than using a lasso).
 - Can't reward ponies with food. The reward is the release on the rope. Pony is allowed give/release on the rope when they are behaving correctly.
 - Once rope is round the neck put the halter on.
 - Easier to use a rigid halter.
 - Train ponies to get used to having their feet picked up.
 - Use a glove taped to the end of a stick. This is used to get the pony comfortable with having a hand near its legs. Minimises the danger of getting the handlers head kicked if they were to bend down and use their own hands.
 - The glove on a stick is used to gently touch up and down the pony's leg. This is done gradually and again the reward is the release. Once the pony is calm and not kicking take the glove away then introduce it again. Repeat the process until the pony is fine with it touching its feet.
 - Similar process with picking up the feet, a rope is placed on the ground round the pony's leg until they are comfortable with the rope. Rope is moved up and down to lift feet and this is repeated until the pony is comfortable enough to have feet trimmed using hand.

- Process takes 5-10 mins and need to keep repeating whenever pony is handled to prepare them for foot trimmer.
- Takes 1 day to be able to handle a pony for halter, legs/feet and comfortable with putting wormer inside mouth. This level of handling prepares them for a conservation grazing scheme.
- Pony will be longer to train if it has a difficult temperament.
- However it is quicker to follow this handling process than sedating them.



Dartmoor Ponies (photos courtesy of Dru Butterfield).

Equines and Conservation Grazing. Speaker: Frances Clayton (SEEDA)

- Ponies have an increasing role as land managers and livestock numbers are decreasing.
- Needs of equines are the same as other livestock (five freedoms).
- Ponies often kept in conditions that don't allow them to display natural behaviour.
- Ponies can graze sward to very short levels and are selective grazers.
- People often have negative view of ponies need to try and reinforce positive aspects.

- Agricultural management doesn't suit horses as agricultural grasses are high in water soluble carbs and low in fibre. These factors may have an impact on laminitis and they cause obesity.
- Most grass research is based on the needs of sheep and cattle.
- Rye grass can cause behavioural problems in horses
- When reseeding need to research grass type carefully, reduce the amount of rye for benefits to horses.
- Diverse grasslands and species rich swards are generally lower in sugar, higher in fibre and less productive than agricultural swards.
- Lower soil fertility leads to broader range of species which give a longer growing period and broader spectrum of minerals.
- Equines will select their favoured species resulting in opportunities for other species to flower.
- There is a reduction in rye grass as the fertility of the soil goes down.
- Young thoroughbreds and lactating mares can cope with rye grass but native breeds wouldn't cope with it.
- Rye grass is good for maximising milk production in livestock but not good for horses.
- Negative impacts of ponies:
 - Environment agency is concerned about the effects on soil erosion.
 - Lots of welfare concerns for equines on poor, muddy and compacted land.
- There is outdated and incomplete information on stocking density. The result is too many horses on too little land.
- Stocking density is key to managing land.
- Positive impacts of ponies:
 - Have a positive impact on less fibrous grassland
 - Good at keeping back encroaching scrub
 - Good way is to mix graze with sheep they break the parasite cycle, keep ragwort down and eat different lengths of sward
- It helps to put grass matting near gateways to protect land
- Use a field with standing hay instead of supplementary feed. Keep the field clear between April and November and then allow equines to graze standing hay.
- Hedges provide good shelter and forage for ponies
- Fencing types:
 - White tape has a landscape impact.
 - Post and rail is expensive and horses damage it.
 - Have found fencing with tight small squares (e.g. horse netting) to be a good way of securing a boundary and has minimal landscape impacts.
- A fencing company called Fieldguard have done research on types of fencing and their environmental impact (www.fieldguard.com/index.htm).
- Try to keep fields to a good size and not over sub-divide.

List of suitable seed suppliers for equines:

- Horse pasture seed mix suppliers (rye grass free)

Simple System Ltd (also do high fibre feed stuffs for horses)

Seed mix contains a range of species and is rye grass free.

15kg 1 acre pack is £46.50

Tel: 01371 870753

www.simplesystem.co.uk

MAS Seed Specialists

Aim for NH02 Natural Renovation Ley, NH03 Long Term Grazing Ley and NH01 Long Term Grazing Ley as these don't contain rye grass.

Tel: 01249 819013

www.meadowmania.co.uk

TGS Wildflowers

Signed up to Flora Locale Code of Good Practice. Good supplier of seed for meadow creation projects. Also offer a contract service to harvest wildflowers for specific projects.

Tel: 01386 45868

Email: info@tgswildflowers.co.uk

www.tgswildflowers.co.uk

Cotswold Seed

Only one of the Horse Ley mixes does not contain rye grass so go for the Natural Pony Paddock seed mix (MIXPP).

Tel: 0800 252211

Email: info@cotswoldseeds.com

www.cotswoldseeds.com

Sussex Pony Grazing and Conservation Trust. Speaker: Monty Larkin (Sussex Pony Grazing and Conservation Trust)

- Began as a project for Sussex Downs conservation board. South Downs volunteers had raised 13,000.
- Proposed that money was spent on a pony grazing scheme.
- Viable scheme was drawn up and ponies on site in 1998.
- Site is species rich chalk grassland on Sussex Downs AONB.
- Site is quite exposed but hardy breed of ponies. Checked by vet on an annual basis.
- Started grazing with 198 ponies, mainly Exmoors, herd was expanded to 27.
- In Summer 2004 started to also graze ponies in Ashdown forest.
- The Sussex Pony and Conservation Trust established in 2005.
- A second herd of 15 ponies was added to site; this expanded to 23 individuals in 2006 and currently has a herd of 54.

- Pony grazing has resulted in species rich grassland. Pony grazing controls invasive grass species but does not eliminate them.
- Trust has raised £45,000 from a range of organisations. The major donors are Esmee Fairbairn, Natural England, South Downs society and Sussex Downs joint committee.
- Grazing charges now cover trusts operating costs of 22,000.
- Expenses are co-ordinators wages, animals, vehicles and insurance.
- The trust pursued farmers and landowners with under grazed chalk grassland.
- Trust has a close working relationship with Natural England and undertakes annual grazing for regular clients.
- Trust has established a presence on both the South downs AONB and Ashdown Forest.
- Grazes 2500ha in Ashdown Forest, clustered sites in this area.
- In the Ashdown forest area the trust works with Sussex Wildlife Trust, grazes Defence Estates land and police training land.
- Considerations prior to grazing:
 - Assessment of site.
 - Grazing licence.
 - Volunteers – trust has a rota with lookers covering 3 month periods.
 - Experienced and knowledgeable pony expert – is available and on site.
 - Water supply and location.
 - Fencing/boundaries – does the site need sub-dividing
 - Condition of existing fencing.
 - Access to site, shape of site and lay of land for movement purposes.
 - How best to gather ponies in when moving them.
 - Handling system.
 - Health of animals – laminitis



Ponies from the Sussex Pony Grazing and Conservation Trust (photos courtesy of Monty Larkin)

Field visit to New Forest Pound. Jonathan Garelli (Head Agister for the New Forest)

- Ponies are individually owned by commoners and overseen by the agisters.
- Welfare of the ponies is the paramount concern of agisters.
- They monitor weight loss in winter and early spring and arrange for the owner to remove their stock and provide it with supplementary feed if necessary.
- The ultimate responsibility for the stock is down to the commoner the agisters just oversee.
- Has 600 practising commoners – some own large herds others have only a few ponies
 - 20% of the commoners own 80% of the stock
- There are only 4-5 agisters for the whole forest. Each agister has an allocated area.
- All agisters have to be able to ride well and keep at least two riding horses.
- Agisters carry out the instructions of the verderers on a day to day basis.
- Bylaws are strictly enforced by the verderers.
- Verderers: 5 are appointed and 5 are elected to enforce bylaws and oversee the agisters.
- Agisters note any infringement and report to it to the office.
- Agisters employment is funded by grants from government through the Forestry Commission.
- Agisters are on call 24/7 to deal with any stock welfare problems. They rely on members of the public to call in if they see an injured animal.
- Agisters will find injured animal, inform owner, call a vet if necessary and can dispatch animal humanely for example in the case of a road accident.
- 100-150 road accidents per year. Big problem with people not keeping to the speed limit. Commoners want a blanket 30mph speed limit throughout the forest.
- Semi-feral herds of ponies only a small percentage are handled regularly.
- Ponies only get handled in the autumn during the 'drifts'.
- During the drifts the ponies are rounded up into the pounds (wooden corrals).
- Main purpose of the drift is for commoners who want to sell their stock and for the agisters to keep records.
- All the commoners assist on the drift, usually on horseback although some use vehicles.
- Quad bikes are good tools if the driver is really experienced.
- They are starting to have problems as there is a lack of people that can ride well and have the skills to drift.
- The public and other horse riders cause problems as they get in the way during drifts.
- They don't advertise the drifts or get help from volunteers as they need really experienced riders to drift.
- They never catch all the ponies during the drift it is estimated that they catch 60% of the ponies.
- There are 40 pounds throughout the forest they are custom built and have proved to be the best way to contain the stock.
- Pounds are built by agisters and Commoners and they build them in areas that are naturally easy to catch animals.
- Best to handle feral stock with wooden posts and rails as they are easier on the stock than concrete and metal.

- Gates get smashed occasionally but the fences are custom built and built high enough to prevent ponies trying to jump over.
- Pounds are made from locally sourced timber so easy to replace and repair pounds.
- The gates in the pound work to direct the animals down into the race, so the ponies can be marked, wormed etc.
- There is a back gate on the pound which is useful for agisters who mainly work on their own and makes it easier for them to round an animal into the pound.
- Some commoners worm their stock, others don't worm at all. As it only lasts 6-8 weeks and is done once in autumn it does not seem to make that much difference if you worm.
- Commoner's animals are branded for ID purposes as it is not practical to microchip animals.
- It is proposed that the new purchaser puts in a microchip once the commoner has sold them the animal and passed them the relevant paperwork.
- Agisters cut marks into ponies tails, each agister has a different tail mark. The mark acts like a receipt showing that the pony has been paid for, the area it is from and that it has already been caught.
- Agisters collect a marking fee, which is the fee for the commoners turning the animals out on the land.
- Last year 800-1000 foals were produced but they are reducing the number this year due to the economic climate and the micro chipping legislation.
- The ponies are sold all over the country, the majority for riding.
- There is a loss in equine knowledge with buying and selling stock.
- Trying to produce a value product by monitoring stallions closely they can produce and sell a better quality stock.
- Produce a better product and limit the supply a bit to get a better market.
- Having lots of stallions out all the time devalues the stock.
- Main market is Beaulieu Road Sale Yard. They have done a lot to promote it and drawn in private trade rather than dealers.
- The majority of commoners want to produce registered stock to guarantee the purchaser is buying New Forest stock not crosses.
- Stallions are vetted and inspected and they select the ones to turn out in the park.
- They test the hardiness of the stallions by leaving them out over winter. Only hardy stallions that last the winter are selected.
- Any stock that is not hardy a commoner will generally get rid of.
- Usually around 40 stallions are turned out but decided to reduce to 20 this year. This decision is mainly supported by the commoners but some feel it is an infringement of their rights.
- Agisters catch and remove colts after 1st of February to prevent cross stallions being loose. They can catch all the colts because they are a specific group but they never catch all the ponies in the drifts.
- Ponies have the whole run of the forest but usually haunt an area and prefer to stay local to that area. This helps commoners know where their stock is.

Field Visit to New Forest Farm: Anne Servier Commoner and Farmer.

- SSSI and HLS farm.
- Anne is 13th generation to farm the land.
- Breeds ponies, also has cattle crosses and rare breed cattle such as Aberdeen Angus.
- Uses cattle and ponies to graze fields that are in poor condition.
- Land has never been sprayed.

Further Information:

- Sussex Pony Grazing and Conservation Trust
<http://www.southdowns.gov.uk/rte.asp?id=160>
- Dartmoor Pony Heritage Trust
<http://www.dpht.co.uk/>
- The New Forest Pony Breeding & Cattle Society
<http://www.newforestpony.com/agisters.html>
- SEEDA: South East England Development Agency
<http://www.seeda.co.uk/>

The views expressed in the Proceedings from GAP and Flora Locale's Ponies and Conservation Grazing Workshop are those of the speaker and are not necessarily representative of their affiliated organisations or of GAP.