

Howardian Hills

Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

As those of you who have received this for several years already know; the aim of this sheet is to update you about the Exmoor Pony Project. This project is run by the Howardian Hills AONB and Yorkshire Exmoor Pony Trust in conjunction with landowners and farmers in the area.



Figure 1: Floral diversity has continued to improve at Terrington Moor.

The aim of the project is to ensure that key grassland sites within the Howardian Hills AONB are managed in such a way that their ecological value is retained and where possible enhanced.

Only 362 ha of ecologically rich grassland remain in the area (just 1.8% of the total area of the AONB). Most of the remaining sites are highly fragile, being small and isolated with little agricultural value.

These sites are important for a range of easily recognised species such as orchids, snipe and barn owl, as well as for rare species of plants and invertebrates. They also provide a diversity of landscape which is important for the AONB.

Information sheet Exmoor Pony Project in the Howardian Hills AONB.

To ensure that these sites retain or increase their ecological value it is essential that they are either mown (with the cuttings removed) or grazed. This retains a sward rich in grasses and wildflowers. If the areas are neither mowed nor grazed, dead plant litter builds up, causing the site to become nutrient enriched. This encourages a few competitive species to thrive, smothering the less vigorous plants. Left unmanaged, the sites would be invaded by scrub species leading eventually to a succession to woodland.

Native cattle and ponies can be used to graze these sites. Not only are they well suited to removing the growth, but they also break up coarse vegetation and can cope with wetter conditions and the low nutritional value of the grassland. But overgrazing or grazing at the wrong times can also cause problems as it will damage the turf and open up areas for weed species to colonise.

The timing, intensity and frequency of grazing, therefore, has to be determined by local ground and weather conditions and can vary year by year. However, grazing generally needs to take place in the drier months, to minimise poaching. It also needs to take account of ground nesting birds and allow flowers to set seed. In order to ensure there is a diversity of habitat it is important that a site is not uniformly grazed. Where sites are adjacent to each other, it is preferable to adjust their grazing patterns so that again a diversity of sward heights and habitat is retained.

The AONB has been working with landowners since 2002 to help manage the most important grassland sites in the area.

Work has included erecting fencing to allow grazing, erecting new gates to improve access and installing water troughs.

Conservation grazing has been made possible by the work of the Yorkshire Exmoor Pony Trust, which was founded in 2002. It is a charitable organisation run by keen and enthusiastic volunteers who have a particular interest not only in protecting the Exmoor Pony, but also ensuring the sound management of important wildlife and landscape sites.

To date seven sites have become part of this grazing project and the summer of 2007 saw grazing of six of these. The ponies have continued to make a huge difference to many of the sites. There is still work to be done and the continued support of the landowners has been crucial to the success of the project.

Landowners are kindly reminded could they please rinse out all water containers (troughs and storage/transportation containers) prior to their being used for pony water to remove contaminants and build-up of disease causing bacteria.

2008 should see the return to grazing of the seventh site and also the addition of an eighth site to the schedule. The new site will be Littledale SINC near Terrington. Fencing and a water trough are scheduled to be in place at Littledale by the spring and, with the assistance of the neighbouring landowners, we hope to graze this small but potentially species rich site with two ponies in the late spring and early summer.



Figure 3: Exmoor Ponies on Cawton Bank. This image was taken in 2005. The graze we managed in 2007 was much more comprehensive (but pictures without ponies on really aren't as interesting!)

We would like to take this opportunity to thank all landowners and volunteers for their continued help with the Project and to welcome the new landowners and helpers who have started working with us in 2007/08.

If you would like to find out more about the project, the Howardian Hills AONB or the Yorkshire Exmoor Pony Trust, then please contact:

Liz Bassindale at the
Howardian Hills AONB,
The Mews, Wath Court,
Hovingham, York,
YO62 4NN.

Telephone number 0845 034 9495.

Liz.Bassindale@northyorks.gov.uk

Julian Small, Yorkshire Exmoor Pony Trust,
07909 882346

alandju@rhucottage.fsnet.co.uk

Vicki Hall, Yorkshire Exmoor Pony Trust,
07769 852596 vickihall2002@yahoo.com

The Trust relies on volunteers to help ensure the welfare of the ponies. If you would like to volunteer please contact Julian.

Produced by the Howardian Hills AONB with assistance from the Yorkshire Exmoor Pony Trust (7th January 2008).

Figure 2: Littledale SINC