WHY EXMOORS ARE SPECIAL

By Dr Sue Baker

Drawings by Mrs Stephanie Poulter

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The Exmoor Pony is usually referred to as a 'breed' but really should be termed a 'race'. Breeds are produced by Man but all the characteristics of the Exmoor are adapted to a natural existence. There is no sign of human design as with many of the true breeds of horses and ponies we have created. The Exmoor is different.

The most obvious attribute of the population is also perhaps the most significant – all Exmoor Ponies are virtually identical in colour, markings, shape etc. Where humans have interfered with pony populations and introduced other blood, variation in colour, markings, size and shape are common. The Exmoor's appearance represents a natural blueprint - Nature's design for a wild pony. That blueprint has been deliberately conserved by generations of Exmoor breeders – perhaps even intensified by continual selection of the best examples of it.

So here is an animal which outwardly seems little changed from how we envisaged the first British wild ponies. The colour and markings conform to primitive appearance seen elsewhere in the equine family, the Przewalski Horse and Wild Ass for example.

Inwardly, too, there are some significant features. Studies of their bones have revealed further clues that they are a surviving relic of the original native pony. If we look at the skull of the Exmoor we see a deep jaw with large teeth. Back in the 1950s, scientist compared the dental features of prehistoric ponies found in various European sites and Britain and concluded that the Exmoor Pony showed the same arrangement of teeth and jaw structure as the ponies of many thousands of years ago. Such comparisons held true for leg bones too.

To find such a match is remarkable because horses and ponies throughout Europe have been so radically altered over the centuries through both accidental and

deliberate crossing and blending. The most satisfactory explanation of the matching of fossil bones with those of Exmoors is that they are surviving representatives of Britain's wild pony, which arrived here around 130,000 years ago.

However, such comparisons of bones can go back even further through the evolution of the pony. We know that the horse family evolved in North America. It spread across Asia and Europe during the last million years, having crossed the Bering land-bridge from Alaska. We have two cannon bones from the legs of two ponies - they are alike in all features but they are separated by thousands of miles and thousands of years. One is from an Exmoor Pony which died in 1947, the other was excavated from Alaska and is around 30,000 years old.

So Exmoor Ponies certainly are special. They are of enormous importance as part of the British heritage. Here is no inanimate relic dug up from the past; here is a living, breathing animal of great antiquity which came to Britain long ago. This type of pony has seen people evolve from the Stone Age to Agriculturalists, through the Industrial Revolution and to the Age of Technology.

It is quite incredible that they have survived virtually unaltered; indeed, some find it hard to accept that just one small population living on Exmoor escaped the melting pot of British horse breeding and remained a natural animal. The explanation lies in the history of Exmoor and its people. The natural traits of the people and the impact of one or two individuals created unique conditions on Exmoor. Both resistance to change and very early beginnings of the conservation concept conspired to save the Exmoor Pony in its true form.

Exmoors are sure footed with strong legs and hard 'blue' hooves. They are bay, brown or dun with dark legs, mane and tail and pale 'mealy' markings on the muzzle, around the eyes, inside the flanks and under the belly. There should be no white markings anywhere.

The winter coat consists of a short, woolly, insulating undercoat topped by a long, greasy, waterproof outer coat. Strategically placed whorls direct the rain away from the sensitive parts of the body. The tail is low set with a fan of shorter hairs at the top forming a 'snow-chute' or 'water-chute'. The efficiency of the inner coat is

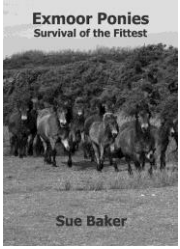
well illustrated by 'snow-thatching': the snow collects on the ponies' backs because insufficient body heat escapes to melt it and it can be periodically shaken off. This prevents the body getting chilled by melting snow.

Exmoors have protective, fleshy rims around their eyes – called 'toad eyes' - and short ears to minimise heat loss. The long forelock and mane disperse water. They have a wide forehead and long nasal cavity to warm the air before it reaches the lungs. The large, deep rooted teeth are well adapted to grazing coarse plants – they do not tear but bite cleanly.

The chest is deep and wide between and behind the forelegs with substantial depth of body allowing plenty of room for heart and lungs. The height of most Exmoors is between 11.2hh and 12.3hh at maturity.

Despite their small size, Exmoors are extremely strong and quite capable of carrying adults as well as children. This is perhaps their most special attribute – for all their wild inheritance they can be taken as youngsters, tamed and trained into wonderful riding and driving ponies.

Dr Sue Baker



The fascinating story of the Exmoor Pony is told by Sue Baker in

Survival of the Fittest *- A Natural History of the Exmoor Pony.*

The book is now in its 2nd Edition and is available from:
Friends of Exmoor Ponies, 9 The Almhouses, Gas Lane, Hinton St George, Somerset TA17 8RX
Tel: 01460 391987

For details on the Exmoor Pony Society, please contact the Secretary:
Tel: 01643 851777 or visit www.exmoorponysociety.org.uk

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