

# Breed it, OR WEEP...



TARA TAYLOR

*Highland pony*

The current oversupply in the horse world caused by indiscriminate breeding has been well publicised, but Rare Breed Survival Trust CEO Tom Beeston warns of another, lesser known, crisis which actually threatens the survival of iconic UK breeds. This issue, we look into the **other** breeding crisis



FELL PONY SOCIETY

Exmoors ponies and (above right) Fell ponies



LINDA TROTSMAN

**T**he Rare Breed Survival Trust (RBST) exists to ensure the survival of rare and native UK breeds of farm livestock and equines. We have three key tasks: to monitor breed numbers and potential threats, to save both living animals and breed genetics and to promote the breeding, registration and use of rare and native breeds.

We monitor numbers by assessing the number of registered breeding females and publishing the results in our annual Watchlist which categorises the degree of threat to each breed's survival. Around half of all native livestock breeds appear on the Watchlist, but for equines, the situation is far, far worse. Of 14 breeds of horse and pony native to the UK, 12 appear on the Watchlist, in very real danger of becoming extinct.

While in the equestrian world, the term 'native' applies to Mountain and Moorland ponies, for RBST it covers all breeds considered indigenous to the UK; as well as 'hairy ponies', native breeds include the Cleveland Bay, Hackney, Suffolk, Clydesdale and Shire. Native pure-bred foal registrations have halved in the last 10 years and it is no exaggeration to say that all Watchlist breeds are now in free fall.

Sadly, there is no prospect of this trend being reversed and even the two breeds regarded to be relatively safe, the Shetland pony and Welsh pony and cob, saw numbers of registrations fall by 12 percent in the last year.

Readers of *British Horse* will already know that we are in the middle of a huge welfare crisis because of overpopulation and this has an impact on responsible pedigree breeders. Because in so competitive a market they struggle to find buyers, even the most dedicated breed producers are forced to stop breeding.

#### DIFFERING PRIORITIES

For many buyers, outside of showing circles, acquiring a pure-bred is not a priority and they generally look for type, talent and temperament, rather than for a specific breed. Competition riders often look to cross-breeds for scope, and in sports such as dressage and showjumping, European Warmbloods have taken centre stage – ironic because native breeds such as the Hackney and Cleveland Bay created the foundation base for the modern Warmblood.

Many native breeds are perfectly capable of holding their own in showing or sports arenas, but it can be difficult to get recognition for their distinctive attributes. Exmoors, for example, have a natural way of going different to other M&M breeds and are not always regarded by judges of

#### QUICK FACTS

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#### THE LAST DECADE'S DANGEROUS DIP

Native pure-bred foal registrations have halved in the last 10 years.

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#### BREEDS ON THE WATCH LIST

Of 14 native UK equine breeds, 12 are in danger of becoming extinct

## Equine watchlist...

crisis point  
UK RARE BREEDS

- 1 CRITICAL  
(FEWER THAN 300)\***  
Cleveland Bay  
Dales Pony  
Eriskay Pony  
Hackney Horse  
and Pony  
Suffolk Horse
- 2 ENDANGERED  
(300-500)**  
Dartmoor Pony  
Exmoor Pony
- 3 VULNERABLE  
(500-900)**  
Clydesdale Horse  
Fell Pony  
Highland Pony
- 4 AT RISK  
(900-1500)**  
Shire Horse
- 5 MINORITY  
(1500-3000)**  
New Forest Pony

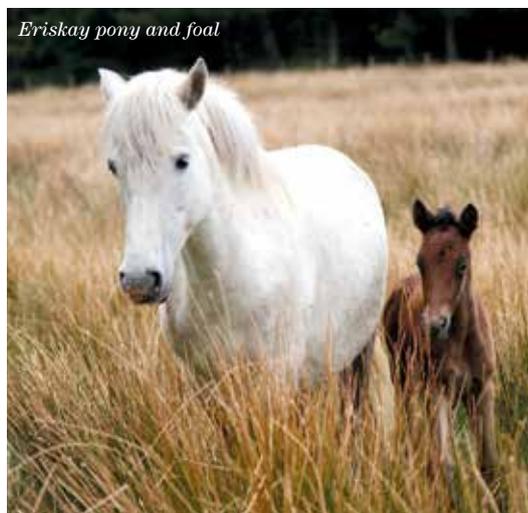


Hackneys

LINDA TROTMAN



Cleveland Bay



Eriskay pony and foal

a mixed class as correct, so they can get put down the line. Equally, Hackneys, Cleveland Bays and even native pony breeds can be very talented dressage horses, but they are not what judges expect to see.

The situation is worrying and frustrating. Normally, RBST would set up breeding programmes to help increase numbers, but in the current climate it would be unethical to promote widespread breeding. It is vital to maintain genetic diversity within these falling populations to minimise the risks of problems such as inbreeding, so the only current alternative is to collect semen for long-term storage in our National Gene Bank, which we are able to do with the help of breed societies and the generous co-operation of owners. The Gene Bank ensures we have a genetic record plus resources to carry out breeding programmes to save breeds from extinction.

If we lose native breeds, we lose their unique genetic traits. We aim to collect semen from at least 25 unrelated stallions from each breed, which would save approximately 90 percent of a

breed's original genetics, enabling a population to be re-established if it were to crash with all stallions lost. Some breeds, such as Dales and Exmoor, are only represented in the Gene Bank by two stallions; if a disease epidemic or other situation beyond our control depleted the current population of one of those breeds, there would be no way for us to save it. Cost per semen collection is extremely high at £5,000 but we need to have this resource to ensure that our native breeds are safe from extinction.

The Gene Bank is a vital conservation tool, but we really don't want to see the living animals disappear from the equestrian world. HM The Queen is a keen supporter of the UK's native breeds and she is both Patron of the BHS, and a number of breed societies.

Other members of the Royal Family offer support in terms of patronage and ownership. This in itself reflects the fact that the UK has a proud equestrian history – let's not lose the breeds on which that history is based. If you are thinking horse or pony, think native and help create the market our breeders so desperately need. 🍷

## BREED SOCIETIES

You can find breed profiles of all of the equine breeds listed on the RBST Watchlist [rbst.org.uk](http://rbst.org.uk). If you're interested in buying a rare breed horse or pony, you'll also find links to all of the breed society websites which give details of registered breeders

<b>Cleveland Bay Horse</b>	<a href="http://clevelandbay.com">clevelandbay.com</a>
<b>Dales Pony</b>	<a href="http://dalespony.org">dalespony.org</a>
<b>Eriskay Pony</b>	<a href="http://eriskaypony.com">eriskaypony.com</a>
<b>Hackney Horse &amp; Pony</b>	<a href="http://hackney-horse.org.uk">hackney-horse.org.uk</a>
<b>Suffolk Horse</b>	<a href="http://suffolkhorsesociety.org.uk">suffolkhorsesociety.org.uk</a>
<b>Dartmoor Pony</b>	<a href="http://dartmoorponysociety.com">dartmoorponysociety.com</a>
<b>Exmoor Pony</b>	<a href="http://exmoorponysociety.org.uk">exmoorponysociety.org.uk</a>
<b>Clydesdale</b>	<a href="http://clydesdalehorsesociety.com">clydesdalehorsesociety.com</a>
<b>Fell Pony</b>	<a href="http://fellponysociety.org.uk">fellponysociety.org.uk</a>
<b>Highland Pony</b>	<a href="http://highlandponysociety.com">highlandponysociety.com</a>
<b>Shire Horse</b>	<a href="http://shire-horse.org.uk">shire-horse.org.uk</a>
<b>New Forest Pony</b>	<a href="http://newforestpony.com">newforestpony.com</a>

\*The equine Watchlist – the figures in brackets denote the number of registered adult breeding females for each breed in each category