

# 6 TERN CONSERVATION GRAZING



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Lucy Wilshaw, NWT's Grazing Officer, explains our approach to conservation using ponies

## Graceful grazing

Norfolk Wildlife Trust currently employs 128 ponies to help manage our nature reserves. We use the Dartmoor breed to graze heath-land sites such as Buxton Heath, Cranwich Heath, Grimston Warren, Hockwold Heath, Holt Lowes and Roydon Common, and the Konik breed to graze wetland habitats such as Hickling, Holme Dunes and Thompson Common.

Equines are selective grazers. They create vegetation mosaics of shortly grazed lawns interspersed with areas of taller, undisturbed vegetation. They are also adventurous – pushing into and opening out areas of dense vegetation. This structural diversity benefits a wide range of species including invertebrates, small mammals and birds.

Dartmoor and Konik ponies maintain good condition throughout the year by varying their diets according to the seasons and seeking out the best natural shelters on the nature reserves. Both breeds are extremely hardy; the Dartmoors due to their coats and the Koniks because of their good constitution. The Konik breed is originally from Poland and can winter in temperatures as low as minus 40 degrees.

Dartmoor ponies thrive on low-quality forage all year round; they are mostly grass-based foragers

favoured both coarse and fine grass. They readily eat smaller sedges, soft rush and brambles, and will help suppress some willow, birch and blackthorn regrowth. When short of grasses they will switch to feed almost entirely on gorse and will browse heather tops if pushed.

Koniks will browse a range of species, including elm, willow, oak, hawthorn, brambles and wild privet. They rely on browsing as an

important part of their year-round grazing and may actively seek wood if no other browsing is available. In spring and summer Koniks prefer grasses but by September they have a more varied diet again of sedges, rushes, seed heads of thistles and reeds. In winter they dig up and eat roots and rhizomes including those of stinging nettle and common reed.

The ponies thrive without the need for any supplementary



food: even in snow, ponies are known to scrape at the ground to get at the vegetation. In fact, we steer clear of any supplementary feeding because these pony breeds are not used to the foods that domesticated ponies are fed. We do not even feed them carrots or hay as it would distract them from performing their important conservation role. Plus we do not want them to associate people with food.

The staff keep a close eye on the weights of each individual pony using a method known as condition scoring. The ponies should be at their heaviest going into the winter and lightest in the spring. We depend on the ponies using up their fat reserves when grazing on lower nutritional forage. If the ponies do not lose this weight over winter they will be too heavy going into the following season, putting them at risk of serious health problems such as laminitis.



We herd the ponies every six months to receive vet and farrier checks. Other than this, very little husbandry intervention is required in these extensive free-ranging conditions. The Koniks have tough, thick skins, which makes them highly tolerant of biting insects in the wetter habitats. The hooves of the Dartmoors and Koniks are strong and slow-growing – some ponies have never needed their feet trimming, especially those on sites with access to hard, dry ground. The ponies rarely need worming either, as they have a naturally high tolerance to internal parasites and can self-regulate their parasitic burdens by dunging in definite latrine areas, which they choose not to graze, thus avoiding infestation by worms. Nevertheless, staff monitor each pony's parasitic load by performing faecal egg counts from their dung and will treat an animal if necessary. Any individuals that do develop husbandry problems are rested and treated in a hospital area.

Above: Dartmoor pony at Booton Common  
Top and left: Koniks at Holme Dunes (photos NWT)



### Help us to look after our ponies

If you would like to know more about the conservation grazing or would like to help us with livestock checking (we currently have volunteer vacancies at Booton Common, Buxton Heath, Grimston Warren, Hickling, Roydon Common and in various locations in the Brecks), please contact the Volunteer Coordinator on 01603 625540.

All of this allows the NWT equines to be managed using a 'hands-off but eyes firmly on' approach. The conservation grazing ponies are selected because they are unhandled and are not treated like domesticated ponies. Out on the nature reserves we want the ponies to keep their distance from people, so we avoid human contact completely and perform our checks from a few metres away, using binoculars if necessary.

Another advantage of the 'hands-off' approach is that we get to witness the ponies behaving naturally, similar to their wild counter-parts. They really look at home on the nature reserves – it is fascinating.