

Donkeys

THE DONKEY

?

Equus asinus

Donkeys are related to horses and zebras. They are all members of the family ?equus?, i.e. they are equines. The donkey is a descendant of the African wild ass, which is now rare in the wild and found in only a few remote parts of north-eastern Africa.



Wild donkeys

There are still several types of donkey living wild in various parts of the world including:

the ?Kiang? in India and Nepal

the ?Somali? wild ass in Africa

the ?Onager? in Mongolia, Turkestan, Iran and Syria.

Most wild donkeys stand between 102cm (10

hands

) and 142 cm (14 hands).

Adaptations:

In the wild, donkeys do not live in such close herds as horses and ponies do as they occupy marginal desert-lands where food is generally scarce. As a result they have developed very loud 'voices?', which can carry just over three kilometres. This allows them to keep in contact with one another. Their larger ears also allow them to hear the distant calls of their neighbours. Donkeys also use their ears as a form of visual communication and they may help dissipate some of the hot desert heat.

Donkeys have a very tough digestive system that can break down almost inedible vegetation and at the same time extract and save as much moisture as possible.

Domestic donkeys

Sizes:

Donkeys range in size from the Miniature Mediterranean (under 91cm) to larger donkeys such as the rare French Poitou (up to 150cm) with its large head and ears and thick, shaggy coat. Domestic donkeys tend to be classified by their size rather than breed as over the generations breeds have been crossed and as a result, there are not many pure breeds left.

The size categories are:

Miniature

Under 91 cm (9 hands)

Small Standard

91 - 101 cm (9 -10 hands)

Standard

101 - 122 cm (10 -12 hands)

Large Standard

122 - 142 cm (12 - 14 hands)

Mammoth Jacks

Over 142 cm (over 14 hands)

Colours:

Although many donkeys are the familiar grey-dun (mouse grey) colour, there are many other coat shades ? there are spotted donkeys, black, white, every shade of grey and brown and albino-white. They can also be of a pink colour (light red mixed with grey-dun), more technically known as ?strawberry roan?.

Age:

Donkeys often live for twenty-five years or more. Some have been recorded as living to the ripe old age of sixty, although a forty-year-old donkey is considered to be elderly.

A donkey/horse comparison



-

Donkeys are slower and less powerful than horses but they are extremely intelligent animals. They have a strong sense of survival and if they deem something as dangerous they simply won't do it, hence they would not make steeplechasers or three-day eventers! They are particularly patient and persistent animals and as a result make excellent pack animals.

-

Horses and ponies are native to lush grassland regions. Donkeys however, are adapted to marginal desert lands and therefore their food needs are much less than that of a horse. In fact many domestic donkeys tend to be overfed and as a result suffer from a disease called ?

Laminitis

?.

-

Donkeys do not have natural ?waterproof? coats like horses and so must have access to shelter.

-

Donkeys require just as much care and attention as horses. For example, their feet must be trimmed around every 8 weeks, they must be wormed regularly, have yearly tetanus and flu vaccinations and

regular grooming.

-

Horses are flight animals, i.e. in times of panic or danger they will run away, donkeys, however, will simply freeze when frightened. Donkeys evolved in rugged desert terrain and fleeing in times of danger simply wasn't possible.

-

Donkeys do not have a flowing tail like a horse but a tufted tail more like that of a cow.

Why do people keep donkeys?

A donkey can have many uses; here are just a few:

Protect sheep/cattle & goats

Once a donkey has bonded with a herd it will protect them against canine predators (foxes, dogs, coyote) as it would one of its own. It beds down with the animals at night and on hearing any strange noises will voice a warning to the herd and chase, often trampling, the predator.

Foal or stable companion

The donkey seems to have a calming effect on horses. It can be introduced to a mare and foal and on separation from its mother the foal looks to the donkey for support. In a similar way a donkey can be an excellent field or stable companion to a nervous horse.

Handicapped riding programmes

The donkey is widely used in riding for the disabled due to its affectionate and kind, patient nature.

Working donkeys

There are very few working donkeys in Britain today, however, in many developing countries a donkey is a person's most prized possession being used to pull loads and carts and to work mills and wells.

Some interesting donkey facts:

-



A male donkey is called a jack.

-

A female donkey is called a jennet or jenny.

-

When a female horse and a male donkey mate, the resulting offspring is called a "mule".

-

When a male horse and a female donkey mate, the offspring is called a "hinny".

-

When a male zebra and a female donkey mate the offspring is called a "zedonk" or "zebrass".

-

All of these resulting offspring are sterile, i.e. they cannot produce offspring themselves.

-

Donkey's milk was once valued as a medicine and was given to premature babies and sick children an

d to people suffering from tuberculosis. Donkey's milk contains more sugar and protein than cow's milk and less fat.



In Southern Spain there is a 'giant' pure breed of donkey called the 'Andalucian-Cordobesan', which can reach up to 16 hands high, that's as big as a racehorse! Unfortunately this donkey species is in danger of extinction; a survey in 2000 by the University of Cordobain estimated that there are probably as few as 150 Andalucians left.



Donkeys were first domesticated around 4500 years ago and, at one time were a status symbol of their owners' wealth, rather like a Rolls Royce is today.



The donkey's characteristic 'Eee awe' sound is made by an intake of breath followed instantly by exhalation.

GLOSSARY:

Hands

? a measuring unit used for equines that is equal to four inches.

Laminitis

? also known as 'fever in the feet'. It is an inflammation of the sensitive tissue lining the inside wall of the foot. It can occur at any time of the year but more often occurs in spring with the growth of the rich, new grass.

For more information on donkey breeds visit:

www.donkeybreedsociety.co.uk.

Tel: 01732 864414

All content copyright of YPTE.

