



The Sussex Pony Grazing & Conservation Trust



Our Trust helps to protect valuable wildlife habitats of the Sussex High Weald and South Downs by undertaking conservation grazing with hardy Exmoor ponies.

- We provide a comprehensive and specialised conservation grazing service bringing together the necessary knowledge, expertise and resources to deliver hassle-free and cost-effective conservation grazing to land managers;
- Conservation grazing helps to control more aggressive, dominant species of vegetation on chalk grassland and heathland thus encouraging biodiversity and the restoration of the sward structure;
- The work of the Trust, as custodian of around 80 'wild' (semi-feral) ponies, is also ensuring the viability of the Exmoor breed whose characteristics make them ideal for conservation grazing in both their grazing habits and ability to survive on poor forage in hostile weather;
- We offer grazing in liaison with, and on behalf of, organisations including Natural England, local authorities, National Trust, the RSPB, Sussex Police Authority, Sussex Wildlife Trust and private landowners;
- The Trust currently employs two Grazing Co-ordinators who manage the conservation grazing contracts on sites across Sussex;
- We are supported by as many as 115 volunteer 'Lookers', ensuring the daily welfare of our ponies at all of the grazing sites.



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The Work of the Sussex Pony Grazing & Conservation Trust (SPGCT)

1 WHO WE ARE

The SPGCT is an independent Charitable Trust managed by a Board of Trustees and Committee. Established in 2004, it was the independent successor to the Sussex Downs Conservation Board's (SDCB) Exmoor Pony Project. The original project was set up in 1999 by SDCB staff member Monty Larkin to assist with the conservation of parts of the eastern South Downs. A team of volunteers was recruited to ensure daily monitoring of the ponies. In 2004, Monty and the volunteer team took over ownership of the herd (then 27 ponies) to continue and expand the work as a Charitable Trust.

Today SPGCT grazing contracts are managed by Grazing Co-ordinators Monty Larkin and Anna Bogg with clients spread across the High Weald and South Downs of Sussex. The ponies are monitored on a daily basis by the team of around 115 volunteer 'Lookers'.

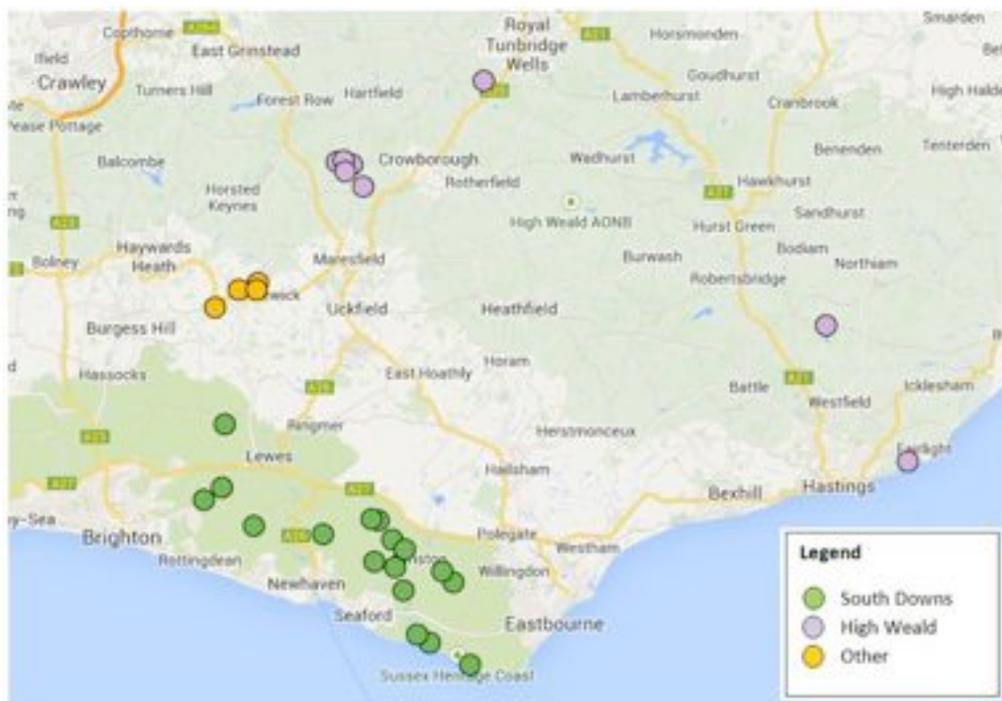


Figure 1: Map showing locations of all sites grazed by the SPGCT in the South Downs and High Weald of East Sussex between 2005 and 2015



2 SPGCT AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

- **To provide a sustainable approach** to the effective management of protected chalk grassland and lowland heathland by using targeted grazing to reverse or limit further loss and degradation of these important habitats;
- **To advise and assist landowners**, governmental bodies and NGOs, in the planning, delivery and management of grazing for ecological benefit;
- **To foster and maintain relationships** with local communities, volunteers and the wider public to further promote the benefits of conservation grazing;
- **To increase awareness** of the inherent and economic value of biodiversity and the cultural and landscape heritage of the Sussex countryside;
- **To support and promote the 'endangered'** native rare breed Exmoor pony.

The work of the Trust is funded by a combination of grazing fees, donations and grants from charitable trusts.

3 WHY CONSERVATION GRAZING?

Conservation grazing is a method of environmental management now in widespread use across the UK and increasingly around the world. Broadly speaking it is used to replicate an ecological function once provided by pastoral farming practices.

Many of the important wildlife habitats that exist in Britain today have been created through centuries of human management, often associated with grazing by livestock. The effect of these activities is to consistently halt the natural plant 'succession', that is, the progression from lower plants through to the 'climax' vegetation, usually woodland. This creates what is called a 'plagio-climatic' or 'semi-natural' habitat, meaning a human-influenced habitat, of which chalk grassland and heathland are both examples. Over time, many species have evolved interdependently with these environments and therefore the cessation of grazing and resultant habitat loss threatens their continued survival.

In Sussex, large proportions of chalk grassland and heathland have been lost and, of what remains, much is considered to be in 'unfavourable condition' as defined by Natural England, the Government's countryside advisor. Habitats considered to be 'recoverable' are offered the highest environmental protection. Livestock grazing is necessary to restore and maintain the structure and composition upon which a variety of plants and animals now depend.

Our targeted grazing of SSSI sites is an integral part of efforts to meet the objective of restoring land to 'favourable' condition. SSSI work is largely funded through joint EU and Government-financed agri-environmental grant



schemes (Higher Level Stewardship). Our conservation activity is consistent with the Government's 'Biodiversity 2020' strategy for England's wildlife habitats and endangered species (formerly the UK Habitat Biodiversity Action Plans (BAPs)). The continuation or reintroduction of grazing is a vital tool in helping maintain and enhance the natural and cultural value of these habitats for the future.

4 WHAT DOES CONSERVATION GRAZING ACHIEVE?

There are several key functions of managed grazing schemes:

- **Maintenance** – the removal of vegetation whilst maintaining a varied sward structure and composition, which mechanical methods often destroy;
- **Restoration** – controlling more aggressive, dominant species; this helps to increase competition, prevents and reduces scrub invasion and consequently encourages bio-diversity;
- **Removal of nutrients** – it is partly the low nutrient value of soils on chalk grassland and heathland that maintains the biodiversity by not allowing any one species to flourish at the expense of others. Although animal dung adds nutrients, there is still a net overall loss, so long as the animals receive no additional feed;
- **Habitat re-creation** - grazing animals can also be used to assist in transforming habitats, such as in woodland or arable reversion.

Other livestock such as cattle and sheep are widely used for conservation grazing. The more primitive, therefore hardier, breeds are utilised as they are better equipped to deal with harsh conditions and tend to forage on species that commercial breeds will not. Each graze in slightly different ways and therefore produce slightly different ecological effects. The choice depends upon the conservation objectives of each individual site. To ensure the greatest ecological benefit it is also crucial to consider the number of animals and the timing of grazing as under-grazing or over-grazing can have detrimental effects.

Because animals are selective in their grazing they achieve effects that machinery cannot. Grazing some areas very short and leaving taller 'tussocky' areas creates a mosaic of micro-habitats that support many different animal species. Being a more gradual method of removing vegetation than alternatives such as mowing or burning, grazing is also kinder to these inhabitants, giving them time to escape and relocate. Further benefits of grazing animals are that they push through and break up the sward and trample invasive plants such as bracken. They also create areas of bare ground by 'poaching' the soil with their hooves. This provides a seed-bed for regenerating species and an important habitat for reptiles. Animal dung provides a micro-habitat for some important species such as beetles.



5 EXMOOR PONIES FOR CONSERVATION GRAZING

Native to the moor of the same name in North Devon, the Exmoor is the oldest of the native breeds of British ponies and thought to be the closest pure descendant of ponies that inhabited Britain 100,000 years ago, long before the arrival of man. They have hardly changed since those prehistoric times when they lived alongside mammoths and sabre-toothed tigers and are one of the purest examples of equines in existence. This means they all look alike and have unique features that have helped them to survive for thousands of years.

"A hardy native breed of pony, the Exmoor appears to have inherent capability and intelligence to do well on conservation sites".
(Grazing Animals Project, 2009).

The Exmoor ponies' natural characteristics make them adaptable, capable of surviving hostile weather and being able to live on poor forage, thus making them ideal for conservation grazing. They are able to graze out all year round and maintain good body condition without supplementary feeding. They thrive on the low quality keep of chalk grassland and heathland, tackling the invasive coarse grasses (tor grass and purple moor grass respectively) that threaten biodiversity. With sharp (upper and lower) teeth, ponies are able to graze very close to the ground and they are highly 'selective' grazers which helps to create sward structure. They will tackle gorse, rush, brambles and even bracken, and occasionally browse on other young shrubs and trees. Ponies are not affected by the movement restrictions applied to ruminants, which makes them a flexible choice. Intelligent, inquisitive and able to fend for themselves Exmoor ponies are popular with site visitors and conservation managers alike.



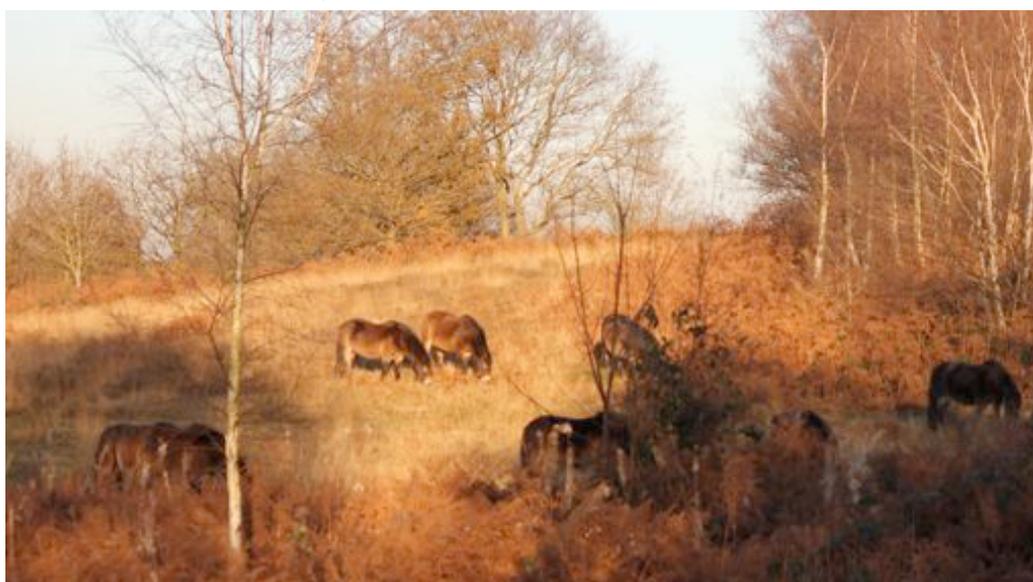


6 THE WIDER BENEFITS OF CONSERVATION GRAZING

Nowadays it is very difficult to make any commercial gain from keeping livestock on nutrient-poor habitats, particularly the more primitive breeds. However, grazing is still considered by many to be the more 'traditional' way to manage land that holds a cultural significance. This intrinsic 'heritage value' of the connection between human activity and the creation of these ancient landscapes is increasingly recognised to be important by society and policymakers and places a non-commercial value in the continuation of grazing semi-natural habitats.

The South Downs National Park is the most densely populated of all the National Parks in the country. Together with the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty they attract millions of visitors each year with nearby conurbations of Brighton, Eastbourne and Tunbridge Wells and London within easy driving distance. So besides the conservation gains of grazing, which help maintain the high wildlife interest upon these sites, the aesthetic improvement to the landscape and the attraction of the animals themselves are to the benefit of residents and visitors and the local tourist economy. Many of our pony grazing sites have public access in the form of public footpaths and bridleways. These areas have additional significance from a recreational standpoint, having been identified for use as 'right to roam' under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.

Finally and importantly, the Trust provides a valuable role for non-breeding pure bred Exmoor ponies. Their impact on conservation grazing sites demonstrates the viability of the breed both in Sussex and across the UK.





7 OUR SERVICES

Conservation grazing consultancy

- Professional advice on conservation grazing;
- Consultation and site visits to appraise conservation requirements;

Conservation grazing management

- Bespoke grazing scheme for each individual site;
- Sourcing of appropriate number of ponies;
- Transportation and delivery of ponies to site;
- Daily checks of ponies by Grazing Co-ordinators or volunteers;
- Call-out service in case of emergency or issues;
- Continued health care provision;
- Continuous monitoring of grazing conditions and the impact of pony grazing;
- Gathering and movement off-site;
- Full-insurance cover.

We offer a unique service specifically geared to the habitats in Sussex. The Trust is involved in all aspects of setting up and running a potential grazing scheme from providing advice and initial planning, to implementation of the agreed solution. The process usually begins with an initial meeting and site visit to discuss the specific conservation objectives and decide upon an appropriate grazing regime (stocking density and length of grazing period).

The next steps are to implement and manage the agreed scheme for you by sourcing ponies and preparing the site. Alternatively, we can help you to acquire your own Exmoor ponies for us to manage on your behalf.

We will ensure that all the necessary site requirements are established, including access, secure fencing, adequate shelter and water provision. Electric fencing can be provided, depending on site specifics. Once all these are in place, we can begin the process of settling the ponies on the site.

The ponies rarely need extra food and this avoids introducing additional nutrients to these nutrient-poor habitats. We are careful to decide on the correct number of ponies that the land can support, taking desired ecological outcomes into consideration.



The Trust's herd of Exmoor ponies

The Trust currently manages around 80 ponies, originally sourced mainly from Exmoor. We at SPGCT take animal welfare very seriously. We follow the **Five Freedoms** guidelines in accordance with the Animal Welfare Act 2006.

THE FIVE ANIMAL WELFARE FREEDOMS:

- 1 Freedom from hunger and thirst;
- 2 Freedom from discomfort;
- 3 Freedom from pain, injury and disease;
- 4 Freedom to behave normally;
- 5 Freedom from fear and distress.

Each group of ponies is checked every day either by one of the trained volunteer 'Lookers' or by our Grazing Co-ordinators, one of whom is always on 24hr call. In addition we have equine experts on-hand who carry out periodic checks on the condition of the ponies, and specialist veterinary care is obtained when required. If necessary, ponies with health problems can be removed to a safe site for treatment or monitoring. We keep only mature, non-breeding herds which negates the extra nutritional pressures and associated risks of keeping breeding mares.

We want everyone to be able to enjoy our Exmoor ponies. They are part of our shared national cultural heritage and a rare native breed that needs support.

Why use the SPGCT?

The main advantage of contracting us to deliver your grazing needs is that you can focus on and prioritise your conservation objectives. With sufficient planning and notice, we can tailor the grazing to your needs whilst also taking care of the welfare of our ponies. In most circumstances this works out to be a far more cost-effective way to manage grazing.

You have:

- Lower capital out-lay (stock and equipment);
- No need for specialised in-house staff skills;
- No need to provide year-round care for your animals.

8 THE IMPACT OF CONSERVATION GRAZING

All our sites are routinely checked by the Grazing Co-ordinators observing, amongst other matters the impact of pony grazing in the context of the client's aims and objectives. Accordingly the grazing period and density of ponies may be adjusted from time to time in consultation with the client. The Trust relies on these routine observations to ensure pony grazing achieves the desired outcome, together with photographic site recording and feedback from clients. Below are two Testimonials describing the positive effects of pony grazing on two of our longer-term sites.



RSPB Broadwater Warren

"...The ponies help to control purple moor grass and break up dense areas of bracken, whilst avoiding the heather as it regenerates from seeds that have lain dormant for decades. The ponies also help to naturally poach pond edges, creating micro-habitats for insects and other pond-dwelling fauna and flora. They nibble back birch and help to keep areas open and sunny for the long term." Steve Wheatley, formerly Manager of RSPB Broadwater Warren, now Conservation Projects Officer, Caledonian Forest, at Trees for Life.



"...At Castle Hill, the chalk grassland slopes are of national and European importance for the orchid-rich wild flower communities of invertebrates dependent upon them. Key amongst the many rare species are the early spider orchid and the wart biter cricket, both of which depend upon a summer grassland structure of short turf with scattered tussocks. The Exmoors effectively 'hoover up' the rough, coarse grasses during the winter and prepare the slopes for spring, ensuring that the essential summer structure develops, rather than being swamped with the dead thatch from the previous year."
Malcolm Emery, Senior Reserves Officer, National Nature Reserves, Natural England.

9 HOW DO WE PROMOTE OUR SERVICES?

The vast majority of our conservation grazing comes through inquiries and recommendations via Natural England Advisers and existing clients. The Grazing Co-ordinators actively seek opportunities to raise awareness of the work of the Trust through talks and events.

Our informative website provides the general public, volunteers and client landowners alike with useful background information, news and press coverage about the work of the Trust. The Trust maintains a database of Friends and donors to the Trust and issues regular Newsletters, as well as maintaining a presence on social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook.



10 GRAZING CO-ORDINATOR BIOGRAPHIES

Monty Larkin

Monty has been Grazing Co-ordinator for the Trust since its formation in 2005. Monty was involved in the first Exmoor Pony Grazing Project set up in 1999 by the South Downs Conservation Board. Starting with 18 ponies, the aim primarily was to deal with habitat deterioration along the extensive Firle Escarpment SSSI. Early in 2005, Monty left the SDCB together with 27 'adopted' ponies, and the Trust was formed with the support of friends and volunteers and generous funding from various bodies including the then English Nature. Earlier in Monty's career he gained a position in 1975 with ESCC on the new Seven Sisters Country Park – one of England's finest pieces of landscape. His role involved estate work, recording wildlife and taking out school parties. During this time he was involved with Seaford Head Nature Reserve and both Ditchling and Chailey Commons. Monty also managed his own flock of 35 pedigree Southdown sheep. Between 1992 and 2005, Monty was seconded to the newly formed Sussex Downs Conservation Board (SDCB) and was handed the remit of overseeing and carrying out conservation works and rights of way maintenance across the Downs between Lewes and Eastbourne. During 1997, a new task was added - Dutch Elm Disease Supervisor. This was seasonal, May to October and involved three Field Officers checking the 54,000 elms and carrying out a policy of sanitation felling. Intrigued by local history, Monty has written and published two books : 'Seven Sisters – The History Behind the View' (first published 2008) and 'In the Footsteps of Time – Geology and Landscape of Cuckmere Valley and Downs' (2006).

Anna Bogg

Anna began volunteering for the SPGCT in 2010 after graduating with a First Class Honours in Environmental Sciences. She had encountered SPGCT ponies whilst carrying out an ecological survey during her degree, and with a keen interest in conservation grazing saw an opportunity to gain valuable experience. In 2012 Anna was one of only 10 candidates nationwide to be successful in gaining a Heritage Lottery Funded 'Heritage Grazing Traineeship', organised through the Grazing Animals Project and Rare Breeds Survival Trust. The Scheme was specifically aimed towards improving skills in the field of conservation grazing. The 9-month placement with the Conservators of Ashdown Forest, a local farm and with SPGCT, provided Anna with a wealth of practical skills and experience, working with sheep and cattle as well as ponies. The Traineeship also included attendance on various short courses and certified practical training courses, so Anna has a solid grounding in both the theory and practice of the job. Anna's appointment as part-time Grazing Co-ordinator from April 2014 has brought much needed support as the Trust continues to expand and grow.



11 CONTACT

As a landowner, if you would like to know more about conservation grazing then please contact Grazing Co-ordinator Monty Larkin on 07917 420296 or by email: sussexmoors@yahoo.co.uk.

The Trust welcomes volunteers. If you would like to become involved in the work of the Trust or join the team of 'Lookers' on one of our grazing sites, please contact Monty by phone or email.

To find out more about the work of the Trust or to make a donation, please visit our website: <http://sussexponygrazing.co.uk>



The Sussex Pony Grazing & Conservation Trust

Patrons

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David Dimbleby
Beverly Thompson
Alan Wells

Committee Members

Linda Ball
Anna Bogg, Grazing Co-ordinator
Lisa Clarke
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