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FOR IMMEDIATE USE

Endangered ponies rescue endangered birds

Exmoor ponies, an endangered native breed, are grazing Suffolk heathland to create the ideal habitats for nightjars and woodlarks, two bird species struggling to survive.

The Rare Breeds Survival Trust (RBST), the organisation dedicated to conservation of rare and native breeds of livestock, has lent five Exmoor mares to the RSPB to graze its dry heath and arable reversion land on the Suffolk coast. Exmoor ponies are one of 12 equine breeds on the RBST Watchlist, with only 67 female foals registered in 2005.

“Native breeds of ponies, sheep and cattle are perfect for grazing important wildlife habitats and landscapes,” explains Richard Clarke, RBST chief executive. “Our partnership with the RSPB means that Exmoor ponies are doing great work grazing down the scrub and encouraging the growth of heather and other heathland plants to provide the right nesting and feeding areas for nightjars and woodlarks.”

The RSPB is managing Snape Warren, along with other heathland sites, to restore habitats for the nightjar, a summer migrant ground-nesting bird, and the woodlark, a native British bird which has re-colonised the Suffolk Sandlings heaths, as well as other heathland wildlife, such as the silver studded blue butterfly.

Andy Needle, the RSPB’s Suffolk coast Livestock Manager says, “These ponies fit so well into our management system and complement the conservation already work being done by our flock of Manx Loaghtan sheep.”

RBST encourages the use of native livestock breeds for conservation grazing. These include Hebridean sheep as well as Exmoor ponies and Highland cattle that graze on other RSPB reserves.

As part of its work to conserve and encourage the breeding of native livestock, the RBST recently bought the five Exmoor mares, which are now agisted¹ to the RSPB for long-term conservation grazing. It is hoped that the small herd in Suffolk will increase in numbers following the introduction of a suitable Exmoor stallion.

RBST is reviving the policy of agisted stock with the purchase of four Leicester Longwool sheep with lambs, now grazing at Warriner School,

¹ Agisted livestock is a legal term that means livestock belonging to another person which has been taken in by the tenant of an agricultural holding to be fed at a fair price

Bloxham, Oxfordshire, and an Irish Moiled bull on the Isle of Wight, as well as the Exmoor ponies.

“Purchasing livestock from specific bloodlines and lending them to organisations and farmers who have suitable habitats puts conservation theory into practice,” explains Richard Clarke.

“Some rare breeds are at risk of extinction because the genetic diversity is too narrow. We need to maximise genetic diversity and retain the purity of breeds such as the Exmoor pony and Leicester Longwool sheep. If we don’t maintain a variety of bloodlines, the breed could die out completely.”

Ends

Images of Exmoor ponies at Snape Warren are available from:
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Notes to Editors

RBST, the organisation dedicated to conservation of rare and native breeds of livestock, is a charity established in 1973. It works to conserve more than 70 breeds of native farm livestock. The Exmoor pony is one of 12 equine breeds on the RBST Watchlist 2007. The charity is funded by membership subscriptions, donations and legacies. www.rbst.org.uk

RSPB

1. The RSPB is the UK charity working to secure a healthy environment for birds and wildlife, helping to create a better world for us all.
2. The RSPB manages more than 200 nature reserves throughout the UK, including Minsmere, North Warren and Havergate Island on the Suffolk coast. Snape Warren, where the Exmoor ponies are grazing, is managed by the RSPB as an extension of the North Warren reserve.
3. Woodlarks are small, brown birds found mainly on heathland and woodland clearings in southern and eastern England. They favour short-grazed grassy areas.
4. Nightjars are nocturnal summer visitors with a mysterious, mechanical song heard mainly at dusk. They favour forestry clearings and heathland.