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## Small Wonders

### *Pony Breeds of Great Britain and Ireland*

By Kate Tully

The ponies of the United Kingdom and Ireland prove that good things do indeed come in small packages. Originating in the rocky hillsides and rainy fields, several outstanding breeds have developed from fuzzy feral ponies into athletic and versatile mounts for children and adults.

*These Fell ponies enjoy a semi-feral lifestyle on the fells of England. Photo by Laura Hart*

#### **Fell Pony**

As with many native British breeds, these striking ponies have been documented for centuries. Originating in the Lakeland region, Fell Ponies have undergone many changes in color and characteristics to make them the elegant and sturdy ponies they are today. Possibly as far back as Roman times in Britain, the Fell Ponies were used for plowing and transporting materials like iron ore from the mines in northwest England to the smelting works in the northeast, traversing over rough terrain. They were also useful on the farm, where they were able to perform labor-intensive duties all day.

The Fell Pony Society in Great Britain is working hard to preserve these ancient ponies and their way of life. For centuries they roamed the northern Fells in a semi-wild state. Some still do, but in much smaller and more isolated herds. Now that they are mostly used for recreational riding or driving, there has been renewed popular interest in the breed (their numbers fell dramatically after their need as workhorses diminished). Some Fell Ponies still help with farming and logging. Although still largely unknown in North America, and still on the endangered list for British breeds, the Fell Pony is gaining in numbers.



They are intuitive, sure footed, and smooth to ride on the trail or in the ring. The Fell Pony Society holds performance trials in the U.K. for the ponies to compete against one another, and it tests them on a variety of terrains that they would encounter in the wild, from steep hills to muddy bogs. There

is also an annual breed show held in Cumbria, England that features classes such as riding, driving, and in-hand. For some of the youngsters shown in hand, it is one on their first times being handled at all. The ponies who are allowed to live in a semi-feral state have little contact with handlers. It is thought by some that it is best to allow the foals to mature a little without human handling. Therefore, when they are taken off the land to be trained or shown, they are more easy to train and have a greater respect for their handlers. These ponies who live more true to their heritage also are able to acquire the natural abilities of being sure-footed and strong, able to handle the elements and manage easily over difficult terrain.

They are fun to jump out on the hunt or in a ring, although jumping is not always their strongest discipline. The ponies excel at driving, having more stamina than speed. However, in the past they were known to partake in trotting races. Their size, which is on the larger side (the ideal height is 13.2 hands, but many reach 14 hands), makes them suitable for many different jobs and they can carry riders of all sizes and levels. Although their history is as work ponies, they have adapted to new athletic challenges of all kinds. Their unfailing soundness and health, along with their excellent stamina and intelligence make them wonderful mounts.

Fell Ponies have nicely sloping shoulders, and square and strong hindquarters. Hooves are round with open heels with the blue horn, and forelegs should be straight with short cannon bones. Hind end has muscular thighs leading to clean cut hocks. The heels are adorned with lots of fine hair, and mane and tail are left to grow long.

Most of the Fell Ponies still reside in Cumbria, in northwest England were they originated. The breed, while rare in the U.S., has a few very dedicated supporters who are doing their best to promote the Fell Pony according to the British standards. Laura Hart, the liaison to North America for the society, imported a Fell Pony gelding for herself after falling in love with the breed in England. She admires their intelligence, saying that “you need to engage their minds.” In regards to their distinctive look, she stresses the point that Fell Ponies, when groomed in a fashion that is true to the breed standard, makes them stand out from other breeds in this country. The Fells should not be trimmed (those fuzzy coats and long manes are part of their heritage, after all), which means that they will look rather different from the other horses at open shows. Laura is concerned that the special characteristics of the breed will be compromised so that they will fit in more on the open circuit. Only time will tell, as more of the ponies are either imported to or bred in the U.S., and as their athletic talents are recognized and they gain in popularity.

*Other breeds included in this article:*

*The Welsh Pony*

*The Connemara Pony*

*The Dartmoor Pony*

*The Shetland Pony*

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