



wild horses

Native breeds of domesticated horses exhibit natural behaviours that shape ecosystems. They are commonly introduced to nature recovery initiatives as a proxy for the extinct Eurasian wild horse. Their impact on ecosystems helps create a diverse vegetation structure and boost populations of other species such as dung beetles, birds, and fungi.

Environmental Benefits



Grazers

Horses are primarily grazers but will browse throughout the year according to their nutritional needs. They graze close to the ground and avoid areas where they dung, creating a diverse vegetation mosaic that enhances plant biodiversity and provides habitat for other wildlife.



Vegetation Diversity



Consuming Coarse Vegetation

They have sharp, continuously growing teeth which allow them to consume coarse, fibrous plants, including thorny and thatched vegetation that other herbivores tend to avoid.



Tree Disturbance

Horses contribute to woodland dynamics through debarking, which generates patches of deadwood that support invertebrates and cavity-nesting birds while helping open up dense woodlands to sunlight.



Seed Dispersal

Horses are highly efficient seed dispersers, spreading seeds via their dung, coat, and mane and tail which can be full of burrs carrying seeds. Horses are particularly important dispersers of bryophytes.

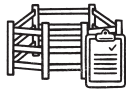


Stallion Dunging

Stallions compete with each other by making large dung piles, boosting biodiversity and creating patches of fertile soil that contributes to a mosaic landscape and further enhances habitat diversity.

Managing Horses in a Rewilding Project

Key management considerations include:



Necessary Infrastructure

The need to microchip and register requires getting in close proximity to individuals; therefore, suitable handling facilities must be available.



GPS Collars for Tracking

GPS collars make locating horses and carrying out the above health checks easier, but technology to manage where they can access, such as NoFence, is not licensed for horses.



Population Management

Ensure appropriate social structures for each species is observed and maintain appropriate densities based on the carrying capacity of the area.



Dedicated Staffing

Regular health checks and monitoring are required, so a dedicated team and access to veterinary advice are essential.



Suitable Breeds / Species

Most native breeds of horse are suitable for nature recovery initiatives, and once a herd is established, careful selection is required to breed the most appropriate animals for the site.

Consider Wilder Horses

Przewalski's horse (a different equine species entirely), is considered fully wild and therefore possess completely natural behaviours, making them strong contenders for future nature recovery initiatives. However, this species is subject to different licences required for their introduction.



Legal Restrictions

The management of domesticated equines in Britain must comply with specific legal and regulatory requirements:



Microchipping

Horses must be identified by passport and microchip and the ID application must be made six months from birth or by 30th November, whichever is later.



Passports

Horses must be examined and registered with an appropriate issuing body for an identification document. Individual passports must be kept with veterinary treatments records detailed.



Fallen Stock Rule

Carcasses of deceased individuals must be removed from land and disposed of without wildlife gaining contact.

A note on Diverse Herbivore Assemblages

Each herbivore has unique physical and behavioural traits that shape the environment in different ways and create habitats for a variety of species. Their combined impact supports a broader range of species and rewilding projects should therefore aim to introduce a variety of herbivore species where possible. Please refer to our other herbivore guides for more information.

The Large Herbivore Working Group (LHWG) is a UK-based network of experts formed in 2022 to support the restoration and introduction of large herbivores as part of nature-recovery efforts. It develops guidance, informs policy, and shares best practice across the sector. The LHWG is currently funded until 2027 and hosted by the Landscape Recovery team at The Wildlife Trusts.

Please note these species and nature recovery profiles produced by the LHWG are not legal advice and are intended to provide a high-level overview to support your understanding of considerations needed for large herbivore introductions and management for nature recovery initiatives in England.

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