

The Working Highland Pony



The Highland Pony originates from Scotland and is traditionally used on shooting estates. Their job consists of two aspects; carrying the shot Red Deer back to the larder and carrying the large Pannier baskets full of birds down the inaccessibly rough terrain of the Scottish mountains.



On the occasions where the Highland Pony has to carry the Panniers it is expected to deliver the shooters morning breakfast and lunch up the mountain and on its return, with (if all went well) two baskets full of either Grouse, Pheasant or Ptarmigan depending on what breed was shot that day (each bird has its own day) ready to be plucked and prepared for the dinner table.



In most cases, the highland pony will work as a pair, with one tied to the back of the front ponies saddle. Using this technique meant stalkers can come home with two stags or two hinds and two calves depending on the time of year and the season.

Taking two ponies out is also a great way for the young pony to learn the ropes from the more experienced pony. Not only do they have to accept carrying the deer but they also need to learn the difficult Scottish terrain. Avoiding the peat bogs is a main concern but learning how to scramble out of them should they become bogged is also a skill in itself, especially if heavily laden with a 20 stone stag on their backs.

Foals are often taught to walk the hill at an early age by following their mothers whilst she has a day working out the hill.

The Tack

The Equipment used to enable the pony to carry a red deer off the hill is made up of a thick leather saddle with anchor points front and back of the saddle to tie the deer on. One wide girth (strap that goes around the belly behind the elbow) with three buckles either side to tie the saddle snugly on the ponies back and a long over girth that wraps around both the saddle and the wide girth.

It then has two forms of breaching - front and back to stop the load and saddle from slipping forward or backwards whilst ascending or descending the steep mountains. This back breaching also acts as a handbrake for the pony to stop should the saddle slide forward to allow the pony ghillie (handler) to re-adjust the saddle for the ponies comfort.

Six straps are used to tie the deer onto the saddle in a complex manner to help balance the deer and hold it in place.

For using the Panniers, the above is repeated, however, instead of the deer being loaded the baskets are placed carefully over the ponies back and tied in place using a strap under its belly. It is very important when the baskets are being loaded with birds to be done evenly to avoid slipping and to keep it balanced.

Regardless of all this equipment the most important part to it, is having a great handler leading the ponies up and back off the hill. It is their job to ensure the load doesn't slip, the pony is well looked after throughout the day and most

importantly to walk in front or to the side of the ponies with a walking stick testing the ground before the pony walks over it.

To test the ground he/she will prod it as they walk to avoid any peat bogs. As explained above these are incredibly difficult to get out of once stuck in them and the last thing you'd want being up a mountain, miles from civilisation.

