

The Baudet du Poitou

A collection of texts found on Internet and collected by the Swedish Poitou association.

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THE BAUDET DU POITOU

The Baudet du Poitou, or Poitou Donkey, is arguably one of the oldest "purebred" breeds of donkey in existence. It is also one of the most unique. This French breed is best known for its long tangled coat, known as the "cadenette." But these natives of the Poitou region of France are more than just a long coat. Known to breeders as "l'âne de grand espèce" or the big species of donkey, these giants can stand up to 15.2 hands (1 hand= 4inches) high.

Before coat, a breeder looks to the foot to determine the quality of his donkeys. A good purebred will possess a hoof which is markedly larger and more open than a donkey of similar size of another breed. It is said that cross-breeds can immediately be distinguished from purebreds by noting the size of the foot. The bones and joints of the legs are equally large, as is the head. A 15 hand Baudet will wear the same size bridle or halter as a 16.2 hand draft horse. These donkeys are also unique in that they possess a long, silky mane and forelock more like to those of a horse than a donkey. Other characteristics of this breed which must be noted are its total lack of a dorsal stripe or cross, the grey under belly and the halo of red hair which separates its white muzzle and eye rings from the brown coat.

It has always been tradition to keep these donkeys in their tangled and matted coats. The coat gets its start from the long hairs found on juvenile donkeys which becomes tangled. Each year as the donkey sheds, the new hair growing in becomes matted with the existing hair and the mass grows longer and longer. However, when groomed and allowed to shed properly, they will eventually lose some, if not all, of the long coat which is replaced with a thick, dark, often curly coat. On a good Baudet du Poitou, the legs will remain covered in semi-long hair in all seasons.

For centuries, the traditional profession of the Baudet du Poitou was the production of mules for use in the military and agriculture. Developed alongside the Baudet was the Cheval Mulassier (or mule-producing horse). Mules produced from the cross between these two natives of Poitou were considered by many to be the best mules in the world. In its heyday, the Poitou region of France produced many thousands of mules which were sold all over Europe. However, with the rise of the automobile and mechanized farming, the demand for mules plummeted after WWII. The Baudet du Poitou was left without a vocation and breeders abandon their donkeys for more profitable ventures. By 1977 only 44 purebreds could be found. This great breed was teetering on the brink of extinction.

Thanks to the efforts of some die-hard old breeders and concerned groups like la SABAUD (the Association to Save the Baudet du Poitou), the Poitou Donkey is enjoying a resurgence of interest and numbers are beginning to rise again. However, because of the high prices fetched by purebreds, unscrupulous breeders have stooped to selling cross-breeds represented as pure. These animals come complete with false papers. Due to the number of imposters, the Poitou is now threatened by a new foe...loss of type. Many of these cross-breeds very closely resemble a purebred, but throw some very un-Poitou characteristics into their offspring. Now breeders must re-double efforts to preserve the genetic heritage of the Baudet du Poitou.

Standards of the Baudet du Poitou

Description of the Baudet du Poitou by the Stud-Book

Since 1984 The head is large and long with long, open ears covered in long hair. The neck is strong and the withers are low. The back is straight and long. The loin is well attached. The hips are a little prominent and the croup short. The thigh is long and muscular. The shoulders are straight. The sternum is prominent and the sides round. The legs are powerful with large articulation. The feet are large and open, covered with the hair of the legs.

Average size: Baudet, 140-150 cm. Anesse, 135-145 cm. The aness is not as large as the baudet but has wider hindquarters.

Color is bai brun (bay brown) occasionally leaning toward yellow (called fougere). The muzzle is greyish white. The eyes are ringed in greyish white. The transition between the white and brown of the body is a halo of reddish hair. The underbelly is clear grey. The coat must never be chestnut or grey or carry a dorsal stripe and cross.

Measurements

These measurements were established by examination of more than 200 subjects by the veterinarian Leon Sausseau upon closing the Stud-book in 1923 (a stud-book is said to be closed when only animals who are born of parents already registered in the stud-book may be inscribed). The Stud-book after a brief reorganization is once again closed, except to those animals of exceptional merit who conform to the standards and whose lineage can be established in fact.

Measurement	Baudets	Anesses
Taille au Garrot (height at withers)	136 to 156 cm average: 144	131 to 149 cm average 139
Tour du Canon circumference of cannon	19 to 24 cm average: 21,5	18 to 21 cm average 19,5
Largeur du Sabot (width of hoof)	9 to 12 cm average: 10	8,5 to 10,5 cm average: 9,5
Vide Sous-sternum (from the sternum to the ground)	74 to 88 cm average 81	71 to 85 cm average 77
Perimetre Thorax (heart girth)	145 to 168 cm average: 154	143 to 163 cm average 153

In Search of the Perfect Poitou

By Suzon Murray

If you're like me, everytime you hear the words "Baudet" and "For Sale" in the same sentence, you practically crawl out of your skin. You're ready to run right out and plunk down cold hard cash. When this happens to me, I need to remind myself to take a deep breath and put the breaks on long enough to really look at this donkey in front of me. With so many "off-type" donkeys being offered for sale out there under the name of "Baudets du Poitou", it is the duty of every serious breeder to familiarize him/herself with what the true standard of this breed is. Armed with this information we can purchase better examples of the breed to improve our stock and keep the true essence of the Baudet du Poitou alive. So let's take a look at what makes a real Baudet du Poitou.

Overall:

First of all, you're looking for a fairly large donkey. Ideally you would see a male between 14 and 15 hands or a female between 13 and 14.2 hands. Old time breeders sought an ideal of 15 hands for both males and females, and they felt that most animals larger than 15 hands became out of proportion. Today, many purebreds have lost their large size due to inbreeding or poor conditions during their growth. Some females are as small as 12.2 hands while some males are between 13 and 14 hands. Every-thing about the Poitou should be heavy...large head, thick neck, tremendous bone in the legs, big feet, deep girth et cetera. A Poitou is "clunky" in appearance. Their movements are loose with an action all their own.

The Coat:

When you mention Poitou Donkeys, what comes to mind first is the volumous coat. The coat should be heavy. On younger animals the long (6 inches or more) coat, which is the animal's trademark, is very evident. This outer coat will range from dark to medium brown depending on how much sun the donkey is exposed to. Coat quality will vary between animals. Some will have very straight silky hair, while others will have more curl; still others will have so much body to the coat they will resemble an alpaca. If the animal is groomed or allowed to roll and scratch, the long coat can disappear as early as a year and a half, though between two and four is more common. The coat that is left is thick and dark. However, the legs will remain very hairy all year round. If left to mat, the coat will grow in a great "cadenette" and remain with the animal for life. The cadenette gets its start from the juvenile long hair which becomes tangled. As the coat sheds, the matted hair tangles with new hair growing in and the whole covering gets longer and more tattered with age. The cadenette will also contain bedding, manure, sticks and a coating of urine.

The official color of the Baudet du Poitou is "bai brun" or bay brown. This color can vary, however, from absolute black to, occasionally, a yellowish brown defined as "fougère." Grey, roan or red colors are not recognized. No matter what the color, a baudet never bears a visible cross. The Head: The head of a Baudet du Poitou is large, long, thick and wide. It is not a delicate head by any stretch of the imagination. A 15 hand jack may well wear a draft size halter. The ears should be very open and long, fringed with long hair. The ears may be alert or loose, even lopped. The nose should be white and the eye rings pronounced. Between the white of the nose and eyes and the brown of the body, there should be an obvious ring of red. The nostrils are slightly narrow and set well down on the nose. The lips must be very loose

The Baudet du Poitou

and camel-like. Due to the shape of the nose, the donkey may have a “growl” when he enjoys a good scratch or is putting up with something he doesn’t like. He may even sound heavy or asthmatic. The expression of a Baudet is generally passive and a little sleepy.

The Neck:

The neck is thick and strong, though slightly short in comparison to the overall length of the body. This breed is less inclined to develop the fatty neck roll than other breeds of donkey. A Baudet du Poitou has a mane more like a horse than a donkey. Its hair is fine and falls down the side of the neck and can be as much as a foot long. The Baudet, unlike other breeds, also has a forelock.

The Back:

The back is considered best if it is long, as this was believed to produce the best mules. It should be a straight, flat back; neither roached nor swayed. The withers are more pronounced than other breeds, but still flat in comparison to the horse.

The Shoulder:

The shoulder is strong and very straight. This gives the Baudet a draft-type of movement.

The Barrel:

The barrel is very deep though a little slab sided. In general, the Poitou does not carry a great deal of flesh over his ribs. When he is in short coat, they may still be slightly visible when he is in good weight. The loin, as with the back is slightly long.

The Croup:

The croup is short and steep with wide hips. From the rear a good Poitou will look more rounded over the hips than another species of donkey. This is especially true of anesses (jennets) who are even wider through the hips than a baudet.

The Legs:

The legs should be well endowed with both bone and hair and should have a very drafty appearance. Even in summer there should be enough hair on the legs to obscure the shape their. The legs should appear as though the donkey is wearing trousers. In a good example, the hair should flow down over the hoof. This is described as “bien talonné.” The forearms and gaskins are quite long and the hock low-slung. A Poitou will often prefer to stand camped out behind. Toe-out in the breed is common, but the goal should be for straight conformation.

The Hooves:

This is where a breeder distinguishes animals of the best quality. It is said that in order to tell a purebred from a cross-bred, one need only look at the foot. Foot size can not be stressed enough. A good baudet must have a very large open foot, much larger than another breed of donkey of the same size. The old French breeders place foot size well above the coat in terms of importance.

And there you have it...the Bigfoot of the donkey world. Accept no imitations.

THE POITOU DONKEY, A breed put at risk by its own success

by Marc-Andre PHILIPPE Ph. D-CESA, ing. D.P.E. Professor associated (University of Tours-France)

Abstract:

The Poitou Donkey is the oldest breed of donkey. Stud-book records have existed since 1884. Poitou donkeys are used for reproduction purposes: for donkeys and also for mules. A drop in the production of mules which started in the 60's has brought about a drastic reduction of Poitou donkeys. Numbering only about 60 animals in the 1980's. The Poitou donkey is a breed threatened with extinction in the short term. A protection program set up by the Parc Naturel Régional du marais poitevin and various partners, including the Government Stud-Farm (les Haras Nationaux), has enabled a new start to be made in the breeding of the Poitou donkey. This new start has been accompanied by these animals being sent all over Europe and the United States of America.

Brought about by a need to satisfy a growing demand in the face of limited supply, the increase in cross-breeding between the common donkey and a Poitou donkey can result in the risk of destroying genetic links, thus vulgarising the breed, because of an ineffectual control of the stud-book.

A census of the Poitou donkey breed population carried out in 1994 reveals more than 200 animals of pure race and several hundreds of animals of crossed-breed. New stud-book rules adopted in 1995 allowing for electronic chips identification of animals, research work into its reproduction and tight management of follow-up methods should ensure a future for this remarkable genetic and cultural heritage, which is, however, still threatened.

INTRODUCTION

The Parcs Naturels Régionaux were from the very start involved in the protection of local domestic species and breeds. As public service organisms, the Parcs régionaux set themselves the mission of protecting the living domestic heritage, as well as the wild flora and fauna, their habitats or their cultural identity. The methods employed by the Parcs Naturels of France have varied perceptibly according to the situation of each species on according to the situation of each species on their territory, the degree of knowledge and the mobilisation of their local partners. The Parcs have had to make choices and to adapt themselves thus: faithful upkeep is often costly and difficult. "For this conservation, we must thus choose the species, breeds, fruit and vegetables varieties which are most typical, those which display the greatest degree of originality." (Federation des Parcs Naturels de France, 1990)

The Parcs Naturels Régionaux represent support structures which are wellanchored in the various regions, from the administrative as well as the local point of view. The Parcs Naturels Régionaux are able to assume two roles, both indispensable for the long-term realisation of their actions: the coordination of the partners participating on these programs and the promotion of local breeds which incite a cultural an emotional attachment, particularly by means of research into specific outlets. However, "an analysis of the financial and staffing means which are put at the disposal of the Parcs Naturels proves that real policies have still to be implemented at regional level as well as at national level." (Stievenard, 1989)

Right from its creation in 1979, the Parc Naturel Regional du Marais Poitevin decided to act to protect the Poitou donkey and I was put in charge of this mission.

THE POITOU DONKEY, AN ORIGINAL BREED

Origin and importance of selection:

The Poitou donkey owes his name to both his original home, the province of Poitou in the west-Atlantic and to its use: the male, the "baudet", produces strongly-built mules by interspecies breeding with mare of a particular race of horse, the Mulassier poitevin.

The Poitou donkey was defined as a breed from 1700 onwards. "The further back a breed goes, the more it represents an original genetic and cultural heritage" (Chauvet et al.,1993) Originality is a constant feature of the Poitou donkey breed, whether it be from the historical, scientific, zooethnical or commercial point of view.

The Poitou donkey population has been managed and indexed without interruption since 1884. Its genealogical book is the oldest of the donkey species. The stud-book of the mulassier species shows two different breeds: the Poitou donkey and the poitou Mulassier horse. No animal can be entered in the stud-book "except by totally exceptional circumstances, unless its origins can be justified from registered parents". For 150 years selection in the origins of the Poitou donkey has been maintained, without modifying its spectacular conformation or its original and exclusive use: the production of mules.

Because the donkey breed has always represented economic, social and cultural interests to a lesser degree than horse species, there are a great many fewer new breeds of donkey. In the case of most breeds of donkey, there has been a total or partial abandonment in their selection during the course of the 20th century: the Catalan donkey, the Martina Franca, the white egyptian donkey, the grand noir of Berry, the Provence, Cotentin, Normand, Pyrenee, the Zamora y Leon.... Other breeds, such as the American breeds of donkeys, Kentucky, Mammoth, Miniature.... are recent. This is not so in the case of the Poitou donkey who has due to his very special uses been blessed with longstanding support of local Poitou officials or the public sector such as the Federal Government Stud farm, the Haras nationaux.

By virtue of the above claims, the Poitou donkey rightly holds a place as the oldest and the most original breed of the donkey.

Description:

The morphology of this breed contrasts sharply with the rest of the species. The most outstanding characteristics of the poitou donkey are: its height (1,35 in to 1,55m) its heavy build (300 to 430 kilos) and above all the distribution of its coat. Its coat forms a thick mat of long brown-bay cotton-like hair' except around his muzzle and eyes which are silvery-grey and edged with a red line. The belly and the inside of the tighs are light grey. The characteristic distribution of the coat is invariable, to the point where is it is difficult to distinguish with any degree of certitude one Poitou from another.

The standard for this breed were codified in the middle of the 19th century and have not changed since. The earliest photos of the Poitou donkey date from 1865. The animals pictured show a remarkable similarity with their present-day descendants.

Evolution of outlets and numbers:

The Poitou donkey is not a yoke-animal, a work-animal nor a pack-animal. Its breeders would bring them to the Poitou donkey shows in a cart so they didn't get tired. This fact is unique in the history of a species which is considered above all as a beast of burden. The commercial value of the poitou donkey lies in the hybrid offspring born by the Mulassier mares of Poltou, the mules.

The basis of selection has been founded on the reproductive capacity of the donkey stallion with regard to hybridation, the result of which is the phenotype of the breed. The exported hybrid progeny, male or female Poitou mule, is licensed as a matter of course, as it is infertile. This peculiarity has enabled the management of the breed to be controlled by a veritable caste of owners-breeders manager of the poitou donkey population, breeders from one generation to the next, called the Stallion-Masters.

As a procreator of great worth, the Poitou donkey has always been a breed of deliberately limited numbers (from 800 to 1500 animals) in order to control the revenue coming from the male and to guarantee the management of the Poitou donkey population. Over the centuries, the revenue coming from the covering of 25.000 to 40.000 Mulassier mares "taken each year to the Baudet stallions" and from the sale of a few male Poitou donkeys.

The demand for mules has fallen as mecanisation has increased. The annual local mule production was from 9.000 to 15.000 mules before the First World War and dropped to a few hundred in the 50's and to forty or fifty today. Numbers of the Poitou donkey have dropped in correlation with the fall in mule production. For the first time in its history, from the beginning of the 60's, the breeding of Poitou donkeys costs more than it brought in.

All the Stallion-Masters reduced bit by bit their livestock holdings, some got rid of them completely by sending their few remaining Poitou donkeys to the abattoir in the belief that the breed was doomed.

The population which numbered 800 Poitou donkeys at the beginning of the century, dropped to 300 just after the Second World War and became limited to about 60 individuals around 1980.

In this unfavourable climate, we should note the arrival on the scene in 1972 of a new breeder of Poitou donkey, in fact an official employed by the Haras Nationaux who undertook to save several animals. This should have been a stroke of luck for the protection of the breed from within the Government Stud-farm, a public administration whose interest in the donkey species is relatively recent. We are forced, however, to recognise that the strategic position of this breeding activity came to have quite negative effects because of questionable practices used with regard to reproduction, following up of the stud-book and by exporting of animals away from the breed's native area.

THE POITOU DONKEY, A RACE THREATENED WITH EXTINCTION

We owe it to Annick AUDIOT (1978) to have drawn the attention of the powers-that-be to threat of extinction in the short-term of the Poitou donkey because of the evolution of its population and the difficulties in management of breeding in Poitou (7 breeding local syndicates and a loss of the trace of 40% of the animals). This study was the starting point which led to a protection program being set up by the Parc Naturel Regional du Marais Poitevin and other bodies including the Government Stud-Farms, les "Haras Nationaux".

Creation of the National Experimental Donkey Farm, the "Asinerie" :

In December 1979, the creation of the National Experimental Donkey Farm for the Poitou donkey was decided upon by the Government Stud Farms and the Parc Naturel Regional du marais poitevin, in order to combat consanguinity, increase numbers in due course, promote the breed and valorize mule production. The last five breeders active in the breed's birthplace and keepers of the stud-books insisted on taking over personally the management and the reproduction of animals of pure race.

The first objective of the Donkey Farm is to realise a mixing of genes by means of putting into operation a scheme of controlled cross-breeding.

At Dampierre-sur-Boutonne (Charente-Maritime), an isolated agricultural holding comprising a large number of farm buildings and about 21 hectares was rented and subsequently bought from Ms Suzanne Auger, president of the Poitou donkey breeders. In 1981, 12 female donkeys were imported from Portugal by the Haras Nationaux on behalf of the Parc and installed at the Donkey Farm to be covered by pure-breed Poitou donkeys.

The descendants of the 7th generation of cross-breeding (F7 = 127/128e of blood) will be able to be incorporated in the original race, which will eliminate the possibility of genetic derivation (consanguinity) and will allow an increase in the population without weakening the racial characteristics.

The investment, the rental and the promotion were paid for by the Parc (1.5 million francs). The Government Stud Farm at Saintes detailed two people on a permanent basis to look after the animals. This Donkey Farm is open to the public and to the breeders who use it for the covering their Mulassier mares and female donkeys (about 150 a year). The promotion campaigns designed to increase public awareness and encourage new breeders were not long in bearing fruit.

In 1987 the publication of 3,500 copies of an advertising booklet "Save the Poitou Donkey..." by the Parc Naturel regional was a success. This booklet was brought up to date, translated and edited in English by the International Donkey Protection Trust. Since 1989 the opening of an exhibition center for the Poitou donkey at the Donkey Farm has brought 10,000 visitors a year who can visit the breeding facilities and has also created employment.

THE POITOU DONKEY, VICTIM OF ITS OWN SUCCESS

Following information diffused by the media, there was a sharp increase in interest for the Poitou donkey in its own homeland but more still in the rest of France, Europe and the U.S.A. From 1980 onwards, contrary to the persistent decline in the mule there was a strong demand for Poitou donkeys for conservation reasons and also for leisure reasons. After several visits to the Breed's native area, some American vets made several purchases of male and female donkeys in 1983 at high price. Purchase prices soon regained their previous levels, demand largely outstripping supply. Today an adult Poitou donkey, male or female of guaranteed origins, fetches from 30000 F to 60000F. Purchase at these prices are consistent with the tradition of high commercial value which this breed enjoys after a decline of twenty years.

It is a desire to protect this breed and its origins in the heart of the donkey species which motivates these purchases. The new breeders regard the use of the Poitou donkey for mule-breeding as of secondary interest. Some German buyers went as far as to try the Poitou donkey as a harness animal having failed to find mules sufficiently well-trained. The number of cross-bred donkeys was unimportant in the history of the Poitou breed up to present times. The Stallion-Masters fought vigorously against the introduction of foreign blood because cross-breed males were of no interest either at an economic or genetic level.

Difficulties in managing the breed:

In face of demand, stud farms using common female donkeys covered by Poitou donkeys multiplied at first locally and then further afield. As the stud-book was officially closed, the cross-breed donkeys were introduced into the original breed by taking advantage of laxity in the keeping of the genealogical records. The pure race inscriptions in the stud-book of this period are significant. Between the publication of the updated stud-book no 51-1976, in accordance with the rules and the following updates (n° 52-1980, n° 53-1982, n° 54-1984, n° 54-1984, n° 55-1986) there appeared to have been a relaxing of the required controls of the administrative commission with regard to the stud-book. In order to put an end to the confusion which had developed, the administrative council of the stud-book had to rectify the erroneous inscriptions and open a section for half-breed (stud-book B) in September 1989. "After examining the genealogical records of the stud-book on the origins of donkeys, some individuals recorded in Stud-Book A (pure breed) were rerecorded in Stud-book B (cross-breed) ... that is a total of 23 males and 16 females - the progeny of animals with a grey coat will not be entered according to the rules". This rectification was difficult to put into practice because from the first Generation the Poitou phenotype is dominant. This makes easy for ill-informed buyers to confuse an original animal with cross-breed animal.

In the second generation (F2 or F3= 3/4 blood) the Poitou phenotype rarely allowed the detection of the phenotype of the grandmother, be she a female donkey far removed from standard (grey marking, loss of long hair, small head, saint Andrew's cross, narrow chest). Some animals look exactly like Poitou donkeys in particular certain males. Their descendants are sometimes not so lucky...In the majority of cases, the heterosis phenomenon displays itself in the coat and the size but rarely in the thickness of the members or size in general. The hoof and the head usually stay smaller than in the original breed.

A new association for research:

Several personalities, not indifferent to the future of this breed, including the descendants of the Stallion-Masters, were brought together in 1988 in order to create an association for the protection of the Poitou donkey. The association was called "SABAUD"* a play in words which recalls a saying of the Stallion-Masters who were distrustful of uncontrolled breeding: " in order to recognise a Poitou donkey of trustworthy origin from a cross-breed donkey, you need only to look at the hoof." (J.Moreau, 1958)

* the hoof = the "sabot " in french = SAve the BAUDet.

This association, with the support of the Parc Naturel Regional, received scientific, technical and financial help from an English foundation for the protection of the donkeys (I.D.P.T.-The Donkey Sanctuary). There were several fruitful exchanges of information on pathology, parasitology, methods of identification and management. There is a plaque commemorating this exchange at the Donkey Farm in Charente-Maritime and at the Donkey Sanctuary in Devon.

The dissipation throughout France of the best Poitou donkey stallions bought by the Government Stud farms in order to encourage the breeders, the sale of animals of pure race to the highest bidder and as far away as possible in order to avoid local competition, a laxity in the management of the stud-book which allowed cross-breed animals to be entered as being of pure race ... all these factors contributed to the increase in numbers of animals of pure race in name only.

A good number of crossbreed males, looking more or less like the real thing, were approved for the reproduction of Poitou donkeys of pure breed. This brought about a rapid weakening of the breed and a great confusion amongst the breeders and the buyers of common female donkeys, crossbreed female and pure breed Poitou donkeys. Several hundred matings approved for the reproduction of Poitou were registered by the offices of the Government Stud farm of the ministry of Agriculture/. Thus the number of matings intended for the reproduction of purebred donkeys officially passed from 164 in 1987 to 832 in 1994 ! The appellation of the race was no longer controlled or protected.

A protection program is put into operation:

The last two herds of Poitou donkeys considered to be the best were put up for sale in 1990. Their purchase was organised and coordinated by the Haras nationaux, the Parc Naturel Regional and the SABAUD in order to avoid the splitting up these animals. The eleven Poitou donkey stallions and thirteen Poitou females and their offspring are at the Donkey Farm being used as genetic stock.

The last few years of mounting prices and increasing demands for purebred animals has given rise to a joke told in the Poitou market places which demonstrates the risk of possible substitution to the detriment of the buyer: "a breeder owned two female donkeys both with foals at foot, one purebred and other crossbred. One of the foals died -- which one was it ? " In 1991 a fool-proof system of identification was perfected for Poitou donkeys by means of an electronic chip. The goal is to protect the genetic heritage of the breed, for the benefit of the serious breeder as well as for the buyer, by identifying the mare's progeny. The electronic marking system will in time remove all risk of confusion, substitution or theft.

A principal based on theory and confirmed in practice, says that a donkey showing any grey in its coat always has one parent with a grey coat. This means that Poitou donkeys registered as pure breed, but which display such outward characteristics, do not have a genetic line corresponding to that given on the certificate of origins. Such cases are exceptional. Because of these questionable practices and the lax upkeep of the stud-book, the number of pure Poitou donkeys doubled at the beginning of the 1990's according to some sources.

The race inventory is brought up to date:

At a meeting of the technical and scientific committee of the National Experimental Donkey Farm, I put forward a proposal to cry out for an exhaustive inventory with the participation of all interested parties, private and public, to make a stringent check on origin papers, to take measurements and to carry out electronic marking of each registered animal.

It was in fact between 1992 and 1994 that a census was carried out of the pure breed Poitou donkey population which had been scattered throughout Europe. This census was taken by a committee made up of representatives of the Haras Nationaux, the SABAUD, the Breeder's Union - stud-book and the Parc Naturel Regional du Marais Poitevin. The committee was to identify each reported animal, examine its origin papers, its conformity to standard, take its measurements, photograph it and above all, implant an electronic chip which identified the animal in the presence of its declared breeder. The Haras Nationaux (ministry of Agriculture) and the Parc Naturel Regional financed this operation which resulted in a detailed report being published at the end of 1994.

This inventory shows that the population in pure breed is three times greater than that of fifteen years ago. In 1995 there were over 200 animals. The sex-ratio of the breed is equal. It is a young and growing population: to date a third of the animals are sub-adult (less than 4 years old). There are over 50 breeders. Most breeding establishments have both a pure breed male and female. There are as many private owners as collective (zoos, associations,...) which are interested in the heritage aspect of the breeding and by its presentation to the public. These organisations, owners of over half the population, bear a responsibility which would appear essential for the future of the breed because of the means at their disposal.

The geographical distribution in Europe is new in the history of the Poitou donkey: a third of the animals are in the region of the breed's birthplace, a third scattered over the rest of France, a third are overseas in particular in Germany, England, Belgium, Holland and Switzerland. To that, we must add about a dozen animals in five farms in the United States.

Nearly all the registered owners have confirmed that they are prepared to adhere to the stud-book rulings and are looking forward to a stricter Organisation of the breed from its birthplace. However, this geographical distribution will complicate still further the management of pairing, which has yet to be put into operation on the population as a whole.

Research program come to the aid of the Poitou donkey:

In 1992, thanks to help from the Parc Naturel Regional and from several private sponsors, the SABAUD put into operation a program of research into the reproduction and parasitology of the Poitou donkey with regional laboratories and National veterinary schools. This programme has perfected methods for freezing sperm. October 1995 saw the first birth at the Donkey Farm to result from artificial insemination of sperm frozen in liquid nitrogen thanks

to professor Daniel Tainturier and his team from the reproduction pathology unit of the National Veterinary School at Nantes.

Sperm freezing comes into its own in the question of a population which is threatened and scattered as it allows the establishment of a sperm bank, which can be managed in the best genetic interests of the breed. The increase in crossbred donkeys being put forward as being Poitou donkeys has led to demands for a stringent control of the breed appellation and of its descendants. The genetic pollution which results is still limited because it is coming from a small number of known breeders. These short-sighted practices were threatening to bring out a drop in the value of the Poitou donkey to the benefit of other breeds of donkey which are less costly to buy. Breeders situated outside the breed's native region have to give up an important element in the original selection of the Poitou donkey: the Mulassiere progeny, and have to settle instead for a selection based only on conformity to standard and on ascendancy.

The Poitou Mulassier horse, adapted to damp regions and to mule production, has decreased in numbers. Soon there will be as many Poitou donkeys as Poitou Mulassier horses! The census of Mulassier horses carried out in 1994 numbers 43 stallions and 189 mares. These figures should be compared with the 40,000 mares registered in 1925. The Poitou Mulassier horse is in danger of disappearing in a few years, because the breed is handicapped by its speciality: when a mare is covered by a Poitou donkey in order to produce a mule it is a lost year of reproduction for horse species.

IS THERE A FUTURE FOR THE POITOU DONKEY

In February 1995 a new stud-book rule was adopted after amalgamation of the 7 breeding organisations which control the two breeds, Poitou donkey and Poitou Mulassier horse. On the demand of the Government Stud Farm, the Poitou donkey stud-book is separated from the horse stud-book. Put together jointly by those involved in the census, this new stud-book includes a book of pure breed donkeys and a book of crossbred donkeys for a population of selected females. All the animals registered have to be identified while at foot by means of an electronic chip. An inventory of crossbred female donkeys should be finished by the end of 1995 by means similar to those adopted for the inventory of purebred animals (Parc Naturel regional with Union breeders/stud-book and the Sabaud).

Only those Poitou donkeys stallions from Stud-book A (purebred) will be used for mounting purposes under the appellation of Poitou donkey. The stud-book will become once more a genealogical book closed on December 31, 1995. As from January 1, 1996, crossbred male donkeys will no longer be used for reproduction purposes and their progeny will be classed simply as "donkey". Taking as starting point a female donkey of 7/8 blood (F3 = third generation) the progeny from stud-book B of cross-breeds could be incorporated in the original breed after a favourable decision from the stud-book committee "only if they represent a particular genetic interest for the conservation of the breed".

The National Experimental Donkey Farm owns 16 cross breed donkeys at the F2 (3/4 blood) stage and 4 at the F3 (7/8 blood) stage. The Parc also owns two Mulassier mares, a Mulassier stallion and three Poitou mules which will be put to harness. It has taken eleven years of sustained effort to arrive at the first birth of an F3 female donkey at the Farm. Experiments carried out at the Donkey Farm have shown that it would be unwise to discourage breeders who have invested in ongoing crossbreeding methods and carried them out with perseverance.

A modification of the stud-book ruling has been requested in order to clarify the situation of such breeders. The Parc is committee member of the two stud-books.

The computer handling of certificates, of origin, the control of mating books for reproducing males which have been authorised for the public, the preservation of the appellation of the breed, all these will be carried out on this basis by an independent public Organisation: l'Institut du Cheval-SIRE (Identification System for Indexing Horses) at Arnac-Pompadour. This will hopefully bring to an end the genetic weakening and the errors of the past. This computer network should enable those responsible for the breed to carry out at European level an efficient management of the whole population.

The agricultural breeders are growing old. They have the know-how from their parents. For them, breeding has to show an immediate profit. That is why their children, who are engaged in an agricultural world which has become more and more specialised, have progressively abandoned the breeding of these threatened breeds, as not profitable, not well-understood and limited-. About 30 individual Poitou donkey breeders are split equally between professional farmers and neo- rurals.

The neo-rurals, either salaried or professional people, make up for their lack of know-how by a passion and dedication which are truly remarkable. The financial considerations of this breeding are for them, to a certain extent, of secondary importance.

The future of the breed rests with the breeders. The farmer-breeder and the neo- rural breeders have in common a deep emotional attachment to the Poitou donkey. Nothing can replace a breeder's care for his animal. It is the breeders who will protect the Poitou donkey. The Donkey Farm, the public authorities and the associations are there to help them in this work. If the public sector wishes to protect these threatened breeds, it must come to the aid of these breeders no matter who they are.

And if the new role in the economy of the poitou donkey is to leave for a while the farming sector in order to grow in the leisure industry or to promote its role as a companion? In this economic domain, the Poitou donkey has many attractive features. Such ideas are considered to be heretical in their native region... Market forces will eventually decide this question which has already been translated into fact, as can be seen by the first competition of German breeders of Poitou donkeys organised in Hamburg on October 29th 1995 in the presence of the French stud-book committee.

Never has the Poitou donkey been threatened with extinction to a such degree; scattering of animals, genetic pollution, management by corporatism, progressive neglect of mule breeding selection... when at the same time important means were being put in place for its protection.

For the breeders, for the stud-book as well as for the public sector units, a great many technical and financial efforts will be needed over the next few years. In order to speak definitively of success with regard to protection several elements must be brought to a conclusion: the feasibility of sperm bank, the Organisation of reproduction in the face of an scattered population in geographical terms, the strict management of the new stud-book rulings, the promotion and the protection of the appellation of the breed in an impartial manner, the assembling and informing of all the owners concerned with protecting the breed... The progress to date is still insufficient and conditional to talk of the saving of the Poitou donkey.

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The Poitou donkey belongs to his breeder for his eventual profit but his genetic protection concerns all of us. Born in the mists of time, the Poitou donkey deserves the benefit of all our efforts if we wish to assure for him a future in keeping with his past.

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Baudet some new texts

The origins of the Poitou, as with many ancient breeds, is a bit vague. It is said that the donkey and the practice of mule breeding was introduced to the Poitou region of France by the Romans. The two breeds, Poitou (donkey) and Mulassier (horse) seemed to have been developed side by side for the sole purpose of producing mules of exceptional quality. It is not known when the people of Poitou began selecting for the type of mule-sire which we know today as the Poitou, but evidence shows that the breed was already well established by 1717 when a memoirs of the king's advisor described the donkeys of Poitou thus: "There is found, in northern Poitou, donkeys which are as tall as large mules. They are almost completely covered in hair a half-foot long with legs and joints as large as a those of a carriage horse." Up until the years following World War II, the Poitou played an important roll in supplying quality mules to France and the rest of Europe. It is said that the mule resulting from the union of a Poitou and a Mulassiere is the finest working mule in the world. Whether this is undisputably true, we can not say, but a Poitou mule, more often than not, fetches a higher price than any other. It has been estimated that in the heyday of the industry, the Poitou region produced as many as 30,000 mules per year.

After the war, mule production began to drop off. Tractors and automobiles were replacing draft animals in every profession. Without a reason to produce mules, there was little reason to raise Poitous. The decline of the breed was swift. By 1977, only 44 donkeys of any age could be counted, held by a few dedicated breeders. Fortunately, the cry was raised and efforts to save the breed began. To day, there are perhaps as many as 180 purebred Poitou Donkeys, but that number is still far from safety.

The Poitou is noted for its large size. The Andalucian ass is the only other European breed of comparable size. Early breeders of these animals selected for large ears, head and leg joints. The belief was that jacks with these features would result in exceptionally large and strong mules. As a result, the ears of some individuals of the Poitou are so large that they are carried horizontal.

By standard, a Poitou should stand between 1.35 m and 1.50 m at the withers. His coat is black or brown with a grey underbelly and a white nose and eye rings. A Poitou must never have a cross upon his shoulders and back. The head is quite large and long, set on a strong neck. The withers are unobtrusive and the back flat and long. The croup is short and the haunches round. The limbs are strong with large joints and loose movement. The feet of a Poitou are larger than those of other donkey breeds and covered with the long hair of the legs. The ears should be large and open, again, covered in long hair. The actual coat of a Poitou Donkey is longer and softer than that of other donkey breeds. When the animal is left ungroomed, it will often retain the long hair of its youth which becomes matted and tangled, growing down into a great coat. Tradition dictated that these animals with their great "cadenettes" were most highly valued.

Changing attitudes in husbandry and hygiene finds many donkeys being allowed to shed their great coats, but one can still find a few Poitous "bourailloux" (with coats of great length).

In 1977 a census of Baudets who could be traced in heritage turned up only 44 animals of all ages, including foals. The pride of the Poitevin was teetering on the very brink of extinction. For centuries, the Baudet du Poitou has been used in producing quality mules for agricultural and military use. With the rise of the automobile and farm machinery, the demand for good mules fell into a steep decline. The Baudet, bred to breed mules, followed suit. Thanks to the help of some dedicated breeders, the Baudet is now struggling back. It's numbers have more

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than doubled since the 1977 census, though that's still far from being on safe ground. It will need continued intensive care if it is to eventually reach higher populations levels. The Baudet du Poitou is unique among donkeys in that it is one of the few truly big species. A mature Baudet will stand more than fourteen hands, some more than fifteen. They are powerful, heavy set animals. They are noted for their large feet and heavy boned legs as well as a large, broad head, topped with very long wide ears. But perhaps what most people remember about a Baudet is his coat. Tradition has dictated that the longer and more tattered the hair of a Baudet, the more he is prized. Because of changing attitudes in husbandry, not all of today's purebred Baudets retain their long, ragged coats throughout their lives, but the characteristic can still be seen on many individuals. Today, the coat of a well kept Baudet is luxurious to experience in its softness. When groomed and kept on pasture, a Baudet du Poitou can expect to keep his long "baby coat" into his three year old year. After that his coat remains a thick two inches long with longer hair covering the legs and ears. Baudets also have a fine, almost horse-like mane, much different from other donkeys.

La sauvegarde du baudet du Poitou

L'âne du Poitou (ânesse et baudet) est le plus ancien des ânes. Il ne peut être confondu avec l'âne commun... "Il constitue une aristocratie dans l'espèce, une caste privilégiée fort peu nombreuse faisant l'objet d'un élevage particulièrement surveillé et d'un commerce fructueux" (Léon SAUSSEAU, 1925).

Il est sans doute l'élément principal de la qualité de la production mulassière poitevine et améliore de même la production des juments des autres races. De ce fait, le Baudet du Poitou est depuis sélectionné pour la production de mules.

La "grande espèce" asine du Poitou est en effet une réalisation millénaire de l'agriculture et de l'élevage du sud de cette province : union d'une très grande masse avec une grande finesse de tissus, comme le prouve la ténuité du long poil soyeux de sa robe, ce à quoi on a toujours attaché un grand intérêt (baudets bourailloux ou guenilloux).

Pour des raisons différentes les deux espèces du genre Equus, les chevaux et les ânes, ont été utilisées par l'homme. L'âne a été domestiqué avant le cheval. L'âne servait aux paysans et aux marchands. Le cheval, d'abord chassé pour sa viande, devint la monture des guerriers avant d'être sélectionné en races aptes à tous les usages.

L'idée est venue de croiser ces deux espèces pour obtenir des animaux hybrides qui combinerait les qualités bien différentes de l'âne et du cheval. Ce croisement entre les deux races est possible de deux façons :

- .. soit entre le cheval (étalon) et une ânesse, ce qui donne le bardot ou la bardine ;
- .. soit entre un âne (baudet) et une jument pour obtenir une mule ou un mulet.

C'est le croisement baudet + jument qui a été préféré de tous temps. L'hybride obtenu de sexe mâle est le mulet, celui de sexe femelle, la mule. Sauf cas exceptionnels, mules et mulets sont stériles et ne peuvent donc pas se perpétuer .

Les difficultés rencontrés par les éleveurs pour obtenir par ce croisement peu naturel des mules et des mulets les ont conduits à sélectionner les ânes et les juments les plus aptes à cette production.

"Toute jument n'est pas mulassière, c'est une race particulière au Poitou, spécialement propre à cette production... pour qu'une jument produise des mules; il lui faut des dispositions occultes et inconnues..." (d'Availles, 1864) La jument mulassière est issue du croisement des chevaux poitevins (aujourd'hui disparus) et des chevaux brabancons venus de Hollande et de Belgique pour assainir le Marais Poitevin. C'est ainsi que les mules engendrées par l'accouplement du Baudet du Poitou et d'une jument qualifiée de "mulassière" furent pendant très longtemps les plus appréciées de France et sans doute d'Europe et du monde entier. Eugène AYRAULT, vétérinaire à Niort, estimait en 1867 à plus de 18 000 le nombre de mules et de mulets mis en vente chaque année dans le Poitou.

Un siècle plus tard, l'évolution des techniques et les transformations du monde agricole rangeaient la production mulassière dans les pratiques dépassées. Le Baudet du Poitou restait

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à l'esprit comme l'image même de l'ancien temps. Ses mérites furent oubliés. La race elle-même manqua de disparaître à jamais, faute d'effectifs.

Pourtant des efforts sont faits pour préserver et améliorer la production mulassière. En 1884 est mis en place le stud-book (livre généalogique) répertoriant les animaux selon des caractéristiques spécifiques : le baudet du Poitou doit avoir une grosse tête, les oreilles longues gamies de poils longs. Sa robe est bai brun avec de longs poils frisés et soyeux. Il doit avoir des membres puissants, les pieds larges et ouverts, recouverts de poils, une taille de 1,40 à 1,50 m au garrot pour les mâles, et 1,35 à 1,45 m pour les femelles.

Aux centaines d'ânes du Poitou du siècle dernier, ne succédaient plus en 1975, qu'une poignée d'animaux maintenus par la vigilance de quelques éleveurs encouragés par l'Administration des Haras Nationaux qui les aident encore aujourd'hui à organiser des concours mulassiers.

Aussi, était-il urgent d'entreprendre une opération de sauvegarde de la race asine du Poitou.

.. en 1977, une enquête réalisée par Annick AUDIOT, élève-ingénieur, indiquait clairement la disparition probable de la race des baudets du Poitou avant la fin de ce siècle par manque de reproduction du cheptel existant et surtout par indifférence générale.

.. en 1978, il reste environ 60 baudets du Poitou en France. Le constat de la disparition de nombreuses races domestiques et la perte de la diversité biologique est générale, d'où la nécessité, d'une conservation du patrimoine génétique.

.. en 1979, eut lieu une réunion décisive au siège des Haras Nationaux à Paris regroupant tous ceux que la disparition annoncée du Baudet du Poitou ne laissait pas indifférents. Des décisions importantes concernant l'opération de sauvegarde furent prises :

- effectuer un recensement de tous les spécimens d'ânes du Poitou.
- créer un livre A (Stud-book) pour recenser les sujets de race pure et un livre B pour connaître les sujets croisés (ceux ayant un parent de la race asine du Poitou et l'autre de la race commune car le caractère poitevin domine et peut porter à confusion)
- prévoir la création d'une asinerie expérimentale aux fins d'amélioration génétique, de perfectionnement des techniques d'élevage, de recueil des traditions et d'information du public.

.. en 1980, création de l'Asinerie nationale expérimentale du Baudet du Poitou à la Tillauderie sur la commune de Dampierre/Boutonne (17) par les Haras Nationaux et le Parc Naturel Régional du Marais Poitevin, les Conseils Généraux de Charente Maritime et des Deux-Sèvres pour lutter contre la consanguinité.

.. en 1988, création de l'Association pour la Sauvegarde du Baudet du Poitou (la SABAUD) à l'initiative du docteur vétérinaire Jacques Fouchier, ancien ministre et ancien parlementaire des Deux-Sèvres.

.. le 8 juillet 1989, ouverture de la Maison de l'âne du Poitou à l'Asinerie de la Tillauderie qui accueille environ 10.000 visiteurs par an. C'est là que se reproduisent les meilleurs éléments de la race.

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∴ en 1991, mise au point de l'identification des Baudets du Poitou par marquage électronique pour protéger la race d'origine d'un risque de dilution génétique dû à la multiplication des croisements.

∴ en 1992, lancement des recherches sur la reproduction et l'état sanitaire par le Parc Naturel Régional du Marais Poitevin et la SABAUD, en liaison avec les laboratoires régionaux et ceux des Ecoles nationales vétérinaires.

∴ en 1993, recensement de la population en race pure de Baudet du Poitou en Europe avec pose de puces électroniques et mesure des animaux par une commission composée des Haras Nationaux, du Syndicat des Eleveurs, du Parc Naturel Régional et de la SABAUD.

∴ en 1994 réalisation du 1er inventaire de la population "Baudet du Poitou" (livre A) par le Parc Naturel Régional qui regroupe environ 200 animaux de race pure dans le monde.

∴ en 1997, réalisation par la SABAUD, de l'inventaire exhaustif, des populations en race pure et en croisement de tous les animaux recensés dans le monde.

Mais la race du Baudet du Poitou n'est pas pour autant sauvée. Car pour préserver nos races anciennes, il faut utiliser les techniques les plus modernes et les plus performantes : l'échographie, l'insémination artificielle, la congélation de la semence, le transfert d'embryon, la réserve génétique, etc...

L'Ecole Vétérinaire de Nantes et le Professeur Tainturier ont travaillé sur la méthode de réfrigération du sperme et de l'insémination artificielle. Ils ont abouti, puisque le 9 octobre 1994 est née "Galaxie" premier produit de cette technique.

En juin 1997, est née le premier produit issu d'un transfert d'embryon. La prochaine étape sera sans doute le transfert d'ovocytes. Il s'agit de récupérer sur des ânesses infécondes pour différentes raisons, des ovocytes qui sont ensuite transférés sur des ânesses domestiques qui joueront un rôle de mère porteuse.

Ainsi, des lueurs d'espoirs apparaissent ici ou là. Une reprise du commerce des mules, bien que timide, a lieu. Durera-t-elle ? Comment l'organiser vers les pays demandeurs ? Saurons-nous conserver l'élevage en race pure ? Des volontés qui s'exprimeront pour répondre à ces défis dépend la sauvegarde de la race asine du Poitou.

Produit d'un savoir-faire jalousement préservé au cours des âges, le Baudet du Poitou et son complément d'industrie mulassière ont périclité dans cette deuxième moitié du XX^e siècle. C'est presque pas hasard qu'un animal de renommée internationale comme l'âne du Poitou n'a pas disparu.

Les efforts commencés doivent aboutir pour qu'il soit possible de parler de réelle sauvegarde. Le Poitou peut s'enorgueillir de cette prouesse zootechnique même si elle ne recouvre plus l'intérêt économique de jadis.

Le Baudet du Poitou est mal connu dans son histoire comme dans sa physiologie et son potentiel. Un grand travail reste à faire. Issu de notre plus lointain passé l'âne du Poitou peut-il espérer un avenir ?

Le Baudet du Poitou

Son Origine

Le Baudet du Poitou est issu d'une très ancienne sélection effectuée dans l'espèce asine (ânes communs) grâce à des générations d'élevurs. La race est décrite avec précision en 1717 où elle est déjà très renommée.

Cette race pourrait remonter à l'époque gauloise. L'origine du Baudet du Poitou reste un mystère. Les éleveurs de Baudets du Poitou se sont organisés pour perpétuer et garantir ce patrimoine génétique considéré dans le monde entier comme la race la plus ancienne et la plus originale.

C'est à Niort, en 1884, que se met en place le livre généalogique du Baudet du Poitou. C'est le premier stud-book de toutes les races d'ânes. La tenue de ce livre généalogique se poursuit grâce à la vigilance des éleveurs de Baudets du Poitou regroupés en un syndicat. Un livret donne chaque année la liste des nouveaux animaux agréés et les dates des concours.