



# Handle with care

## Donkeys

**Species: Domestic donkey**  
**Scientific names: *Equus asinus***

### Description

Most donkeys in the UK are a grey dun colour but some are also brown or black. They look a little like ponies but have larger ears, longer heads and coats of a different texture. They all normally have a cross over their shoulders and a stripe running down their backs; their coats are quite thick and soft. Donkeys stand between 10 and 14 hands high and their life span is about 30 years or longer. They are normally friendly and inquisitive animals.

### Life in the wild

Domestic donkeys are related to wild asses and wild donkeys which are herd animals that live on grassland and semi-arid areas. A herd normally consists of eight or ten females directed by an experienced stallion. In winter, the small groups combine into large herds. In this way they protect themselves from the worst of the weather and from predators. The donkeys in the UK are descended from donkeys that were first domesticated in Egypt 6,000 years ago.

### Source of animals

Donkeys can be bought from reputable breeders – the Donkey Breed Society should be able to provide a list of breeders in your area. A veterinary surgeon who specialises in large animals may also be able to advise on suitable sources. Some RSPCA animal centres also have donkeys for re-homing from time to time. The Donkey Sanctuary in Devon provides an advice service for prospective owners, and will loan donkeys to suitable homes.

### Prior knowledge and preparation

Before keeping donkeys it is crucial that any potential owner finds as much out about them as they can. Only then can they decide if donkeys are the right pets for them and if they can provide the specialist care, time, financial means and long-term commitment to look after them properly. Accommodation, food and the necessary accessories, should all be in place before taking a donkey home. A potential donkey owner should also talk to other donkey keepers for further advice and also to a veterinary surgeon who specialises in this area.

### Vet care/costs/holiday cover

Donkeys will need regular veterinary care and vaccinations against diseases like, tetanus and equine flu. Regular faecal sampling for worm egg counts and worming only when appropriate plus twice yearly dental examinations are required as well as visits from a farrier for hoof trimming every six to ten weeks. A veterinary surgeon can advise on costs of consultations and provide information regarding their care and treatment. Insurance to cope with unforeseen veterinary care and treatment is also recommended.

Holiday cover can be difficult and costly to arrange. It can involve putting donkeys into livery (occasionally) but more likely finding another reliable donkey owner who will look after your animals while you are away. Donkeys need to be looked after every day by someone who understands their complex needs.

### Unhealthy/healthy animal signs

A healthy donkey will have bright eyes with no discharge. It should not be coughing and its breathing should be easy and even. Its coat should be thick and woolly and its skin should be supple with no sign of sores. There should be no swellings on a donkey's legs or body. Its ears should be alert and follow you around and its mouth and nostrils should be free from discharge. A donkey's tail should not be clamped between the legs or dirty with loose faeces, and its mane should not have any sparse patches. Healthy donkey hooves should not have any horizontal grooves or vertical cracks and the horn must not be broken or split where it meets the ground. Obesity is a common problem in donkeys – an owner should be able to see where the ribs end, but not the shape of individual ribs. The back should be slightly ridged, not totally flat.

## **Why are donkeys vulnerable when kept as pets?**

Donkeys are completely dependent on their owners to provide veterinary care, correct accommodation and food. Many owners are not prepared for the cost of keeping donkeys – veterinary and farriery bills can be very expensive. Donkeys' hooves grow very quickly and need regular attention from a farrier.

Many people forget that donkeys are not native to the UK and are not as hardy as native ponies. Because their coats are not waterproof they need a draught proof and waterproof shelter otherwise they will become ill.

They are also time consuming – they need to be exercised, groomed, their feet checked before and after exercise, and their shelter or stable mucked out every day. The cost of accommodation, fencing and maintaining a pasture is also expensive. Donkeys should never be ridden by anyone weighing more than 50kg.

## **Handling/transporting the animal home**

Donkeys are sensitive animals and are easily frightened or upset. Approach their heads slowly and cautiously, speaking as you do so. Sudden noises or unexpected movements can cause alarm and make the donkey difficult to handle. Donkeys enjoy being groomed and gentle handling. Anyone thinking of keeping a donkey should gain experience handling other donkeys beforehand. The Donkey Sanctuary in Devon can provide suitable training materials. Donkeys can be transported in a trailer or horsebox.

## **Needs: grouping, diet, accommodation and environment**

Donkeys are herd animals and will get upset and bray if they are kept alone. Human company is also important. Donkeys form very strong bonds with each other and will be happier if they are kept in pairs. It is not advised that a donkey be kept on its own but if it is it is vital that it is in a field or paddock close to the house where it has human companionship.

Two donkeys will need at least one acre of pasture with strong and safe fencing. This must be well managed and ideally divided in two so that one area of grass can be rested while the other is used. Poisonous plants like ragwort should be removed from the pasture. Donkeys need a shelter or a stable to protect them from cold, wet or windy weather. The shelter should be built facing south and so that the opening faces away from the prevailing winds.

It should be sited on well-drained land, preferably on hard standing. It should have a wide entrance, a weatherproof roof and a half-door fitted to provide extra warmth in bad weather and for when the donkey is unwell and needs to be kept inside. The shelter needs to be well ventilated – even when the doors are shut, and should be mucked out regularly. There should always be enough fresh straw to make a warm, dry bed.

Donkeys need a constant supply of water. Their diet should consist of mainly good quality barley or oat straw with the addition of some hay in the winter – in a net positioned high enough to stop the donkey getting tangled in it and a salt/mineral lick. Some older donkeys may require supplementary feeding. Products should be high in fibre and suitable for laminitics, e.g. high-fibre nuts and laminitic safe chops.

**THIS IS BASIC INFORMATION ONLY.**

**If you still believe that you could care for this animal then you must obtain further specialist information prior to taking on the responsibility.**