

Wild ponies ride to the rescue of unique Czech ecosystem

February 16 2015, by Jan Marchal



Wild horses in their enclosure in Milovice, a small town just east of the Czech capital of Prague

Wild ponies vanished from Czech soil thousands of years ago but are now making a comeback thanks to an imported herd that conservationists hope will rescue an unique ecosystem.

The 14 light brown mares chomp on grass in a small enclosure in

Milovice, a small town just east of the capital Prague, as they recover from a long journey from Exmoor National Park in England.

The stocky animals with black-and-tan noses, who stand four feet (1.25 metres) tall, are one of just a handful of wild horse herds living in Central and Eastern Europe.

Archaeological research shows that groups of wild horses galloped across this part of the continent as far back as 4,700-3,700 BC before being domesticated.

"It's the first time the Czech Republic will use ponies to save an ecosystem—a steppe in this case," says Dalibor Dostal from the non-profit organisation Ceska krajina (Czech countryside).

Behind him stretches 40 hectares of plains covered in grass, plants, bushes and small trees—all delicacies for the ponies, who happily snack on leaves and branches.

Miroslav Jirku from the Czech Academy of Sciences is betting that the newcomers will devour the invasive species that are choking rare indigenous specimens of flora and fauna.

"The butterfly and the plant are the indisputable kings and queens of this area," Jirku told AFP, pointing to the Alcon Blue butterfly and the tiny blue plant Cross Gentian as examples.

Steppe steeped in history

"These precious organisms would disappear and the steppe would turn into a forest if the English ponies hadn't arrived," Jirku said.



A keeper pets a wild horse at their enclosure in Milovice, a small town just east of the Czech capital of Prague

Various species of birds, reptiles and other animals also risk being driven out of the area should efforts to save the steppe fail, he added.

The ponies' new home on the plains is a military zone established by the Austro-Hungarian army in 1904.

Milovice housed a prisoner camp during World War I.

The remains of 5,170 Italians, 521 Russians and 51 Serbs are buried at a nearby military cemetery.

The Czechoslovak army took over the zone in 1918 but was expelled by the Nazis in 1939.

German field marshall Erwin Rommel—nicknamed "Desert Fox" for his Africa campaign—trained his Afrikakorps in this sandy area.

After Soviet-led armies occupied Czechoslovakia in 1968, the zone was transformed into a giant Soviet garrison.

The last Soviet soldier left in 1991, two years after the Velvet Revolution ended communism in Czechoslovakia, which then split into the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1993.

Natural habitat



A wild horse seen in its enclosure in Milovice, a small town just east of the Czech capital of Prague

The regular army still exercises on the land, their movements helping to preserve the natural features of the steppe by quashing less robust alien species.

"In a way, the activities of the army resembled those of the wild bison, bovidae and horses of the past," Dostal said with a smirk.

The Exmoor pony, which has always lived in the wild, was chosen for the programme because of its size and pelt, which researchers say are closest to those of the [wild horses](#) that used to inhabit the area.

Dostal said the Czech steppe was similar to the ponies' natural habitat 1,000 miles (1,500 kilometres) away in southwest England.



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"I've been here four or five times and I don't think there's any problems, hopefully they'll go on and breed and do well," said Richard Caley, the English driver of the truck that brought the ponies to Milovice.

"The Exmoor kind are a little bit endangered so... they're moving them away from England and they're bringing them here, making up a new breeding programme. Which is good," he told AFP.

Co-financed by the European Union, the project is managed by Ceska krajina in conjunction with the Czech Academy of Sciences, European Wildlife and several Czech universities.

The herd is expected to grow by dozens of animals after a stud stallion arrives this spring.

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