



Maintaining the Purity of the Breed

The Shetland Pony Stud Book Society constitution enshrines the duty upon members to, in furtherance of the charitable purposes, maintain unimpaired the purity of the breed of Shetland ponies.

Serious concerns have been raised with the SPSBS as Mother Stud Book about the worrying trend of introducing weird and wonderful colours never seen before into our breed. Of particular concern is the increasing appearance of Silver colouring in ponies within daughter stud books especially when this is not a colour that exists within the indigenous population of ponies in the UK. There is debate on the continent as to where the Silver colour has appeared from, with one particular bloodline identified.

There are those who will hark back to the breed standard that says Shetland Ponies can be all colours known in horses except spotted but it must be remembered that when this breed standard was written there was no concept of silver as a colour and nowhere does it appear in the first early stud books. The important factor is that the ponies must be pure bred.

The Silver colour in equines occurs due to a gene mutation and is closely associated with an eye defect, Multiple Congenital Ocular Anomalies (MCOA), which if it had ever existed in Shetland Ponies on Shetland would have, no doubt, resulted in them dying out due to this defect. MCOA is characterised by several different ocular defects occurring in the anterior and posterior segment of the eye. The severity of the syndrome is dosage related. Horses with 1 copy of the silver gene have less severe signs, typically in the form of cysts (or fluid filled vesicles). Horses with 2 copies of the silver gene have cysts and additional abnormalities such as enlargement of the cornea, abnormally formed iris and/or retina, among others. Research suggests that there may be a progressive change in vision in horses with the silver mutation.

We now have the advancement of science to aid us in genetically identifying colouring, and this has given the ability to test for this gene mutation. An initial study undertaken by the SPSBS in conjunction with UC Davis, California has revealed no silver gene carriers in the samples tested, all of whom are from pure bred pedigree UK ponies. The objective of this study was to evaluate a representative sample set of confirmed registered Shetland ponies to determine if the mutation was present in this population, and if so at what frequency. The study suggests that the silver mutation is either not present or at a very low frequency in the registered Shetland Pony population in the UK

The natural conclusion to draw is that silver as a colour does not exist in the UK pure bred herd and as the foundation stock for all Shetland ponies means that this colour should not exist in pure bred pedigree Shetland ponies. We would urge extreme caution when embarking on a breeding programme based on colour rather than the breed standard. Further research into this is necessary to assess the best way forward to maintain and protect our breed. We must not allow "fashions" to adversely affect our breed particularly where there is an associated inheritable physical defect. We must always remain the guardians of the breed.