



The ponies range the Cumbrian fells in search of food, such as purple moor grass, *Molinia caerulea*, heathland grasses and upland hay.

For Bill, a Fell pony outside of Cumbria is not a Fell pony. He believes that the trend towards keeping them as pets has had an adverse effect on the breed's characteristics and ruggedness.

"They're not as good as they used to be, by a long way," he says. "They are looked after better, on better ground. People are too kind to them. If I sell one and buy it back two or three years later, it'll take two years to get acclimatised to the fell again."

His ponies spend most of the year on the common above the farm. He brings them in-bye (back to the farm) at the start of June for foaling and they go back on the fell at the end of September. "The foals are a bit of work in the first year, with microchipping and passports, but after that they look after themselves," he says. "There's not very many really wild fell ponies any more. I sold my last four wild ones, and we haven't got any now that you couldn't put in a stable or put a halter on."

#### Future in conservation

Today, the Fell Pony Society is working with the Rare Breed Survival Trust and Natural England to promote the Fell pony's potential as a conservation grazer.

"Perhaps because they are so successful as working ponies, Fells have not been used as much as other native breeds for conservation grazing," says Rare Breeds Survival Trust field officer Ruth Dalton. "There is, however, a growing number of people recognising the advantages the breed can offer. They are not subject to the onerous tagging and movement regulations of farmed livestock. They are also relatively low >

## NATURAL SURVIVORS

Fell ponies are 'hefted' to their area of fell. This means they will not wander from the unfenced common they regard as their home. They learn every patch of good grazing, every water source, every hump and bump of shelter from the wind. The ponies thrive on rough grazing, feeding on a wide range of species and habitat, including purple moor grass and rush pasture, heathland, blanket bog, calcareous grassland and upland hay meadow. "They can live on snow in the winter," says Bill. A Fell pony can lose a third of its weight over winter without adverse effect, although most owners put out supplementary feed to help the animals along.

These ponies are resourceful, digging in snow to find forage, and able to break ice on drinking water. They can withstand temperatures as low as -20°C, their thick winter coats preventing snow on their backs from melting. In summer, they graze as high as 2,500ft (762m) above sea level. They wander widely throughout their range in search of food, but are sensibly cautious on difficult terrain. They maintain generally excellent health, proving very resilient to minor wounds. On the fell, their life span is up to 22 years, and longer if put on good grazing after the age of 20.