

SHORT NOTE

REWILDING WITH HORSES IN LATVIA

Anastasija Ropa

Initiatives for rewilding using large herbivores, equines and bovines have been underway in Europe for a long time, with the last two decades witnessing an increase of interest in the subject. Truly wild horses seem to have been extinct in Europe by the Middle Ages, if not earlier, but free-roaming and feral horses were common until at least the nineteenth century and still exist in some areas today. A number of national parks and reserves have seen the reintroduction of free-living equines, mostly belonging to the Polski konik breed.

In Latvia, Polski koniks were introduced in the nature park Dviete flood-plain in 2006. The nature park was established in 2004, with its territory included in the EU Natura 2000 list of specially protected territories. According to the description on its website (LIFE+ Project Dviete), it is an “Excellent conservation area of regularly flooding floodplain grasslands of river Dviete and Ilūkste” and “One of the most diverse and richest bird sites in Latvia.” Dviete is also an “Important stopover site for migrating waterfowl in spring, with thousands of geese and ducks gathering here every year. It is also an “Important breeding site for Corncrake.” In August 2006, the first 18 Highlander cattle and 22 Konik Polski horses were introduced, and the population of both horses and cattle has been steadily increasing, reaching approximately 100 of each species in 2013. In 2016, 45 koniks were exported to Croatia, joining another national park, Lika plato. Free-roaming horses in Dviete have provided an opportunity for researchers to study the behaviour of horses in the natural environment: Vanda Gibovska, for instance, studied dominance patterns of Polski konik and photographed their interactions in the herd.

Another place where wild horses can be observed in Latvia is the Lielupe flood-plain meadows on the island behind Jelgava Palace. Over 80 horses graze on the island which, like Dviete flood-plains, is a Natura 2000 listed site. Both Dviete and Lielupe flood-plain meadows are unique because of the diversity of birds and plants; free-roaming horses are instrumental in facilitating grassland management and natural diversity on the sites.



Fig. 1. Koniks and wild cows at Dviete. Photograph by Vanda Gibovska. Reproduced with permission.



Fig. 2. Koniks resting on a warm day in Dviete. Photograph by Vanda Gibovska.
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Fig. 3. Drinking from the river. Dviete. Photograph by Vanda Gibovska.
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Fig. 4. A group of koniks, including youngsters, enjoy the muddy river bank. Dviete. Photograph by Vanda Gibovska. Reproduced with permission.



Fig. 5. Koniks thriving in winter conditions. Dviete. Photograph by Vanda Gibovska. Reproduced with permission.

References

<http://dvietespaliene.lv/en/>.

Gibovska, Vanda. "Dominance and spatial arrangement in groups of *Konik polski* in nature park 'Dvietes paliene'." Master thesis presented at Daugavpils University in 2016.