

# The Caspian Horse

By Tracey Adams

## History

In 1965, Louise Firouz, an American woman living in Iran, was searching for ponies for her children to ride. As ponies were not common in the area, most Iranian children rode full sized horses. Her quest took her to the isolated mountain villages of Northern Iran, not far from the Caspian Sea. There, she would make the incredible rediscovery of an ancient breed, lost to the rest of the world for over a thousand years!

In 1965, Louise stated "... there exists a breed of small pony which I have never seen described in books, and which is practically unknown outside its own territory".

Louise was convinced that these horses were the same ancient breed she had seen carved on the walls of ancient Persian ruins. After painstaking analysis, scholars and scientists concluded that these little horses of modern Iran were likely the same breed as those depicted some 2500 years ago, on the palace walls at Persepolis. The researchers also concluded that the horses likely remained mostly pure since 3000 BC, classing them among the oldest pure breeds in existence. These were the descendants of the tiny brave chariot horses that pulled warriors and kings into battles and on lion hunts.

Between 1965 and 1968, Louise undertook a careful census of the smallest horses in the region. The grim reality was that she could find no more than fifty horses that exhibited the unique traits of the breed. She knew their best hope for success was to collect them and breed them herself.

What followed was a process of careful selection, breeding only the horses that fit into a rapidly developing breed standard. Only horses that consistently produced offspring true to this standard, were kept in the herd, and eventually entered into a new registry.

The Caspian breed was first brought to the public eye in 1971, during the Peacock celebration for the Shah of Iran. His Royal Highness, Prince Philip, attended as an invited dignitary, and when he showed interest in the Caspians he saw there, he was presented with a stallion and a mare. In the next few years, only a small number of Caspians were allowed outside of Iran, most of which went to Great Britain and Australia.

During the 1970s and 80s, the Iran-Iraq war and the years of political unrest caused the Caspian herd to be systematically confiscated and scattered on several occasions. Louise had a strong determination to save the breed. She endured many set-backs and personal hardships, including imprisonment, trying to save her beloved Caspians.

Outside Iran, the British and Australian breeders worked very hard to increase the numbers of Caspians while maintaining genetic diversity. However, after almost twenty years of breeding with a very limited number of bloodlines, the future of the breed was in peril. Just in time, a new shipment of Caspians was exported in 1994, and breeding programmes were expanded with several new bloodlines. That year also saw the first shipment of breeding stock to reach American soil.

## Characteristics

Looking at photographs without any point of reference, most people think that the Caspian is a full size horse. In truth, the Caspian is still remarkably much the same horse it was some 5,000 years ago; very small by modern standards, averaging 11 to 12 hands.

Extensive research has been concentrated on these very unusual little horses. Much of which was conducted by Dr. Shahram Dordari in Iran and by geneticist, Dr. Gus Cothran of Kentucky. Archaeological remains, unique features of Caspian hemoglobin, the marked differences in skeletal structure, and the results of the extensive genetic testing, lead to some profound conclusions. Apart from Przewalski's Asiatic Wild Horse, the evidence overwhelmingly points to the Caspian as one of the most ancient sub-species of domestic horse known today. The Caspian appears to be the missing link as the ancestor to the modern hot-blooded breeds. The studies show a strong DNA connection to the ancient Arabian.

It is not surprising that a breed as ancient as the Caspian would exhibit several differences from modern-day horses. Extra molars can be found in the top jaw where modern breeds have wolf teeth. The lack of a parietal crest in the skull, allows for a domed forehead. The shoulder blade is longer, and wider at the base than the top. The forearms are longer and slimmer in comparison to other horses, and the length from the point of the hip down to the hock is longer. The first six vertebrae of the back show a pronounced elongation. The hooves are narrow and oval-shaped, and extremely hard.

The overall impression of a Caspian should be one of elegance and nobility. The head exhibits deep, prominent cheeks with good width at the throat latch. The head is broad above, usually domed, and tapers to a tiny muzzle. Their coats often have special properties that make them appear iridescent in the summer sun. The height range is 10 - 13 hands.

Caspians come in solid colors, and rarely have white markings; a testament to their ancient heritage. Primitive markings such as dorsal stripes, grulla bars, and "spider webs" are common, and they are occasionally born with curly coats, a primitive trait seen in some Central Asian horses.

### **Usage and Temperament**

Having been used for war and lion hunting in ancient times, the Caspian retains an incredible braveness. They are highly intelligent and alert, while being kind and willing. This makes them an ideal first pony for children. With proper training and supervision, even stallions can be handled by experienced youths. Their "big horse" ride and phenomenal jumping abilities can often match the performance of a full size horse. The potential of a Caspian as a hunter/jumper is outstanding.

As driving prospects, Caspians rate second to none in their height category. This is the one area where adults can enjoy the fun and excitement of the breed. These little horses have plenty of strength, suppleness, and style to compete with the best. Their speed makes them an easy choice for scurry driving.

### **Chromosomes**

It is to be noted, that, just as ponies, drafts and light horses each have their distinctive characters and physical qualities, so do the Caspians. In several studies, it was determined that many Caspian horses have 65 chromosomes, as opposed to the usual 64. Comparisons were drawn, and it is probable that the Caspian horse is actually a hybrid cross of the domesticated horse, *Equus Caballus*, and the Przewalski horse, *Equus Ferus Przewalskii* (which has 66 chromosomes). This helps to explain why the Caspian horse is quite different from other breeds.

### **Types**

There are four sub-species of *Equus Callabus*, that gave rise to the modern horses and ponies that we know today. Of these four sub-species, two were pony types, and two were horse types. Pony Type I is most closely represented today, by the English Exmoor Pony, which is a small pony. The larger Scottish Highland Pony best illustrates the closest evolution from Pony Type II. Horse Type III is recognizable today in the endangered Akhal-Teke from the steppes of Central Asia.

Until the rediscovery of the Caspian Horse in 1965, scientists believed the Horse Type IV sub-species to be extinct. Thus, they could only speculate as to their role in the evolution of the modern horse. Also known as the Oriental Horse, it is likely the ancestor of the hot-blooded breeds such as the Arabian. It also roamed Central Asia, but was much smaller in stature, averaging 9 to 10 hands.

Over the millenia, the types morphed into the ones we easily recognize today. Climactic influences, random migrations, and eventually the intervention of humans, lead to the development of the pony, the draft and the light horse.

But, there was a missing link. The discovery of the Caspian horse provided the last piece in the puzzle, and helped to explain how the light breeds evolved from the prehistoric horse. The theory is now gaining support, that the Caspian horse provided the foundations for the most influential horse breeds. These include the Arabian, Barb, Akhal Teke and Turkoman. These are the breeds that were gradually imported to the North, to add quality and refinement to the heavy and coarse breeds that existed there.

### **Endangered Breed**

The Caspian is considered an endangered horse breed, with a status of Critical. This means that there are less than 300 active breeding mares in the world. The breed is best established in Great Britain, where it has been propagated since 1972. From 1995 to 2010, the Caspian population in North America has grown to about 450. The first breeding herds in Canada arrived in Eastern Ontario in 2006, and in Alberta in 2007. Caspians can also be found in small numbers in Scandinavia, Europe, Australia and New Zealand. In Iran, the government maintains a breeding herd of about 160 horses, and they have been declared a national treasure. The total world population of living registered Caspians is about 1200. It is suspected that there are a few dozen registerable Caspians, still at large on the Caspian Seashores, but there are currently no resources to locate and process these horses.

### **Conclusion**

What luck, for one person to have stumbled upon such a perfectly preserved specimen of the equine species. After 1,000 years of obscurity, the Caspian horse has walked out of our imagination and into our hearts.

Words and pictures are insufficient to truly portray their exquisite beauty and unusual personalities. When you finally meet a Caspian, if you open your mind, you will feel the same wonder you might, if you were to touch a unicorn.