

# Endangered Breeds: The Gotland Russ Pony

by Victoria Tollman, Equus Survival Trust



PHOTO: © PERNILLA HAEGG

*Gotland stallion, Swedish Champion.*



PHOTO: LESLIE BEBENSEE

*Gotlands come in many solid colors.*



PHOTO: LESLIE BEBENSEE

*Gotlands are good jumpers.*

**H**ave you ever wished for the perfect pony? Not too big, not too small. Something safe for grandma or little Susie because it's not in the nature of the breed to kick or bite? One that you could dress up with balloons and flags for the 4th of July Parade without the pony taking off like a scared rabbit for places unknown, yet one who could turn around the next weekend and willingly give you its heart and soul competing in a combined driving event?

Search no more. You've found the Gotland Russ. They are, according to long-time breed steward Leslie Bebensee, "the best little pony on the planet!"

### Origins and History

Gotland roots go deep. Whether the ancestral stock came across the land bridge 10,000 years ago from America or whether they were brought in much later by boat when Scandinavians began using horses remains a mystery. But evidence suggests the origin of this tough pony breed reaches back into the Stone Age of the Baltic Islands off the coast of Sweden. Gotlands were and still are a for-

est pony, that, like so many European breeds, are thought to be descendants of the now extinct Tarpan. Like many wild horse types, the Gotland Russ was originally a source of food, but archeological evidence tells us the breed was eventually kept semiferal for work as well.

To the locals on Gotland, the pony is known as the Russ, a corruption of "hross" – a Swedish Old Norse word for horse. They are also called skogsbaggar by the Gotlanders, which translates to "forest rams" or "little horse of the woods."

The oldest known written references to the Gotlands come in the 13th century from the Skånelagen, a legal code of the times that mentions the wild ponies.

In the early 1800s, the Russ ponies numbered around 12,000 and were in common use by the farmers as draft and pack animals. There were also free roaming herds in the forests. Often left to forage for themselves, the harsh winters assured the breed would remain tough and savvy. As the 19th Century progressed, the Gotlands were much sought after as working animals, particularly in the mines, and were heavily exported to England,



Germany, and Belgium.

The culture and land of Gotland began to change and soon the forest became crisscrossed with fences as more land was plowed under and cultivated. Foraging became scarce and as a result the ponies began invading the farmlands for food. By the end of the 19th century and with the coming of the industrial age, the remaining ponies were viewed more as pests than the useful partners they had been.

By the 1900s, numbers had dropped to an all-time critical low of 150 ponies. A few dedicated locals attempted to preserve the breed by engaging the help of the Gotland Agricultural Society who managed to generate a small amount of interest in the breed by holding summer fairs. As a result, a few stud farms sprang up and breeders were encouraged.

But the promise of growth was short lived. World War I brought a new threat. Meat was scarce and locals were poaching the ponies for food. With only 30 broodmares left at one point, the breed teetered on extinction.

Again the cry for help went out and the Gotland Agricultural Society intervened. Together with a few local farmers they created a 200-acre enclosure that still exists today and serves as their home. Into its borders were turned out three Gotlands salvaged from a failing stud farm; five more ponies were added from capture off the nearby moor, and together these eight ponies formed the foundation stock of the Lojsta Hed who are maintained in the moor enclosure – a fitting location as it is only a short distance away from the archeological finds that authenticated the ponies' place in the history of Gotland.

### General and Unique Breed Characteristics

Gotlands are a strong, primitive looking pony, still bearing a striking resemblance to the extinct Tarpans. They are of medium size, 11 to 13 hands (with the average height around 12.2) and a very sturdy build. As such, they can comfortably carry adults up to 160 pounds for pleasure or competition, and this also makes for convenient training or problem solving on behalf of less experienced young riders.

They have a typical pony head with a straight or dished profile, small ears, and huge, bright eyes. Necks are muscular, withers are pronounced, the back is long, and the croup sloped. Their hooves are strong and rarely require shoeing. Legs are also strong and enduring. The shoulder has an excellent lay and accounts for the breed's excellent trotting abilities. Movement in general should be easy going, elastic and smooth.

Overall, this is a pony sure of foot, thrifty, and extremely hardy. If properly kept, a Gotland is not prone to colic or lameness, and unlike most ponies, the Gotland rarely founders. Their muscular-skeletal system is more akin to a horse than a pony. They are also long lived and can be productive well into their late 20s and early 30s.

Due to their remote location, Gotlands didn't receive a great deal of "improvement" like some of the more mainstream breeds did, however, it is worth noting that some significant influences did occur during the 19th century at a time when the breed population was dangerously low and was in serious trouble of inbreeding. Notably, the introduction of the yellow dun coloring was primarily from the stallion Olle, a Gotland-Syrian Arabian cross (1886) and the oriental stallion Khedivan who introduced the gray coloring. There was also the introduction of two Welsh pony stallions in the



PHOTO: LESLIE BEBENSEE

**Gotlands are fun to drive and can be serious competitors.**

1950s to bolster the genetic diversity.

Likely the ancestral color was similar to the Tarpan, but today Gotlands come in any color from black to palomino. Dun and bay are most common, but the breed standard does not allow albinos, roans or piebalds. White markings are limited to an occasional sock or facial marking, but typically ponies are solid.

While most modern breeds reflect a genetic conglomeration of crosses, the Gotland is one of the few breeds identifiable by blood type – i.e., the Gotland can be identified solely on the basis of its blood because it has a distinct "marker" according to Dr. Gus Cothran, a world renowned equine geneticist at Texas A&M University. The Gotland Russ ponies tested in the USA also have a genetic diversity greater than the average Thoroughbred, an amazing fact given that there are so few Gotlands in America.

### Temperament and Personality

Gotlands are a gentle, but lively, pony not easily excitable, and are, therefore, considered a steady, reliable mount with more of a common sense "let's think-it-over" attitude before reacting. Their disposition is more like the draft horse mentality of a calm, even temperament. This makes a well-trained Gotland a confidence builder for children and novice riders. These same characteristics make them trustworthy partners in competitions.

### Modern Usage

Gotlands, like so many pony breeds, are versatile, hardy and long lived, and as such enjoy great success at a variety of disciplines. They are good jumpers and excellent trotters. In Sweden, Gotlands are used for showing and pleasure riding and also for racing, where their steady, fast trotting ability attracts the under-21 set for harness racing.

Praised as a safe child's mount, this same pony readily competes in jumping, dressage, competitive driving and trail riding, and can still work handily as a draft pony. As such their popularity as an adult's mount is increasing.

For those who appreciate the soundness, savvy, and heart of a Gotland, but prefer something taller, the Gotland sport-cross produces a mount or driving partner averaging 14 hands and can be registered as a partbred in the registry here in America.

### Current Status – At Risk

The Gotland had a false start in the 1950s when it first reached American shores. Despite what

appeared to be a positive beginning leading to the formation of a registry in the 1960s, by the 1980s the breed teetered on disappearing here.

A tragic combination of human circumstances had left only a precious handful. In 1989 the remnants of the last breeding herd were literally at death's door. An important breeder who had a Gotland riding program for the handicapped had passed away without a plan. In those days DNA and micro-chipping were not available and there were no brands, tattoos or other identifying marks. Identification of which ponies were which became an obstacle that made the ponies tough to sell as they were nearly all the same color with no white markings. The heirs, having no interest in the ponies, sent some 25 to auction. Some met their demise as pet food. Only a precious few were salvaged.

To complicate matters, the registry had also been the responsibility of the deceased breeder, and with her demise, so too went the registry, leaving a number of ponies and breeders in confusion. With no means to register new foals or record sales or the transfer of ponies, the registry stalled. The Gotland breed suffered a great loss into obscurity as some breeders gave up and their ponies were absorbed anonymously into the general equine public.

A man named Jack Jungroth who lived in a condominium in California became the unlikely savior of one of two remaining Gotland Russ stallions. Although he never actually saw the stallion during his tenure as temporary owner, he took it upon himself to buy the stallion and to bravely hold the remnants of the registry together while more long term efforts were put in place for the failing breed.

As a result of press releases and articles covering the story, a couple of the ponies were recovered, but most were never found. Eight were gathered and brought to Kentucky to begin a single-minded rescue by Leslie Bebensee, who spearheaded the effort that has secured a tentatively slow but successful growth in America.

Today, the global status of the Gotland pony is a growing success story. Diligence and determination on behalf of the breeders has increased numbers from near extinction less than 75 years ago to an estimated 8,000 today. The largest concentration of Gotlands is in its homeland Sweden, with the balance primarily in Denmark (200), Finland (300-400) and America (175-200). While this may sound encouraging, consider that the numbers for the total Gotland Russ population are less than the average annual crop of Thoroughbreds in the USA. The point is further illustrated by the fact that the foal crop in Sweden is approximately only 550 Gotlands per year. This makes it clear that the breed is still in need of careful monitoring.

Approximately 150 ponies in Gotland still run free at the Lojsta Moor enclosure, with the benefit of management by the breeders and Gotland Agricultural Society. The care includes supplemental hay in the winter, seasonal hoof trims and health checks. Every June they release the stallion chosen for that year's breeding program; every November they have a roundup to wean the foals.

Presently there are almost 200 purebreds in North America. The Equus Survival Trust lists the Gotland Pony as At Risk. ■

*About the author: a long time equine conservationist, Victoria Tollman is the Executive Director of the Equus Survival Trust (www.Equus-Survival-Trust.org) a conservation organization dedicated to the educational support and promotion of endangered equine breeds.*