

# Icelandic Horses Have Unique Gait

By Carolyn White

Strong, hardy, and friendly, the breed of horse known as Icelandic is gaining popularity across the United States.

Averaging 12 to 13 hands high, "They are big horses in little bodies," according to Bayley Donahue.

Donahue exercises the Icelandics that are raised at Hanging Valley Ranch, outside of Carbondale, Colorado. She rides nearly every day, regardless of the weather, and says "They have a lot of go, with no spoiled-pony attitudes."

Oakton Applegate, manager of the ranch, likes their consistently calm dispositions. He explains, "If you don't ride a Quarter horse for six months, he's going to be salty. An Icelandic stays smooth, sensible, and willing to please."

Shortly after taking the job in 2005, Oakton traded in his own Quarter horses. A lifelong hunter, he once tested a four-year-old Icelandic by tossing a cougar carcass over its neck. "It didn't spook at all, but just stood there," he said.

But the most unique thing about Icelandic horses is their natural ability to gait. Besides the walk, trot and canter, they do a "tolt,"

which is described as a gallop-like walk covering 20 miles an hour. It is so smooth that a rider can drink from a glass of water without spilling a drop.

Another, the "flying pace," is a two-beat movement that's most commonly used for short-distance racing. In the pace, both legs on one side alternate with both legs of the other, allowing the horse to reach speeds of up to 30 miles an hour.

The owners of Hanging Valley, Garry and Sharon Snook, imported three prized mares after falling in love with them in 1999. Using artificial insemination, they "mixed and matched" the mares with three prized stallions to get the finest animals. In 2015, two of their horses were judged "highest evaluated in the U.S." Most are sold for trail, pleasure, and competition, being shipped as far away as Alaska, Kentucky, and North Carolina.

The Icelandic is one of the purest-bred horses in the world, having originated around 865 A.D. with stock that belonged to Norsemen. No other breeds have been brought into the country since then. Once an animal leaves, it cannot be brought back in,



Icelandic horses have a natural ability to "tolt" - a gallop-like walk so smooth that a rider can drink from a glass of water without spilling a drop.

thus ensuring that pureness.

Temperatures rarely rise above 50 degrees in their native country, so Icelandic horses are well-adapted to harsh weather. They grow thick, heavy coats and long, luxurious manes and tails.

"We leave ours outside all year long, even

when foaling," Oakton said. Although there is a spacious barn on the property, "we only stall an animal if it's being inseminated or needs special care."

For more information go to [icelandicmountainhorses.com](http://icelandicmountainhorses.com) or email [oakapplegate@hotmail.com](mailto:oakapplegate@hotmail.com).

## English Fell Pony Numbers On The Rise

It didn't take long for Jenifer Morrissey to get hooked on Fell ponies when she purchased her first one in 2000. She immediately appreciated their rarity, hardiness and intelligence. And in time she found them to be good working partners at home and in the Colorado logging and construction business she and her husband run.

When first introduced to them, there were only 30 Fell ponies in North America, with 6 of them in Colorado. Now there are about 600 Fell ponies. Morrissey has 10 of them and breeds, trains and sells them.

The Fell name comes from the Norse word for hill, which reflects the environment where the breed is from. Indigenous to Cumbria, England, likely since pre-historic times, the ponies were used by Vikings to pull sledges and plows. Later, Fell ponies transported all manner of goods including ore, fleece, fish, and woolen goods.

Today's Fell Pony is typically bred for less stressful work like riding, including competitive trail and dressage, and driving including Le Trec and CDE. But Morrissey says she is dedicated to maintaining the old traits that make Fells useful work ponies, so she also uses them for packing and draft work.

"I'm focused on maintaining pony characteristics and keeping them at or below the breed average of 13.2 hands tall. The pony phenotype is that the length of the leg and depth of the barrel are the same. Backs and necks are short. Ears are small," she says.

The Fell Pony comes in 4 colors - black, grey, bay and brown.

The Fell ponies easily fatten up, so they need attention to work or they will get bored and "entertain themselves", Morrissey says.

To do that she keeps them active and moving, and the climate stress of Colorado helps keep them hardy.

She and her husband put them to work as often as they can. Most recently that included hauling gravel 1/4-mile in pack saddles with bottoms that open, for example.

Because ponies are shorter, it's easier to put a pack or harness on them or hop up on them for a bareback ride. They also are great for trail riding.

Morrissey adds that she is impressed with their intelligence.

"It's icy in the winter, and I have ponies



Fell Pony helps pack gravel into a road-less area.

smart enough to know where to place their feet and not slip," she says. "I love playing with them. I do a lot of young stock training. I have a 2-year-old stallion and make him stand still with a tub of hay on his back. He appreciates that kind of interaction."

With growing appreciation for the breed, the Fell Pony is in great demand. Foals can be purchased for \$4,000, and older, kid-friendly Fells cost \$5,000 to \$10,000. Breeders can be found throughout the U.S. and in Canada.

More information about the breed can be seen on the website, The Fell Pony Society in England, [www.fellponysociety.org.uk](http://www.fellponysociety.org.uk). The most active North American organization is the Fell Pony Society of North America, [www.fpsna.org](http://www.fpsna.org). Available ponies can easily be found by internet search. Morrissey's website and blog have lots of information, some of which is in her 5 books about the breed.

"It is my goal to put these ponies to use as they have been in the past so that future generations can enjoy them as a living working partner," Morrissey says.

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The Canadian Horse breed played a big role in establishing other North American breeds.

## Canadian Horse Breed Making A Comeback

After dropping to an estimated 400 registered animals in the 1970's, the Canadian Horse breed numbers around 6,000 head today. The breed was first sent to Quebec by King Louis XIV in 1665. Over time the Canadian or Canadien (in Quebec) became known as "Le Petit Cheval de Fer" or "The Little Iron Horse." It survived early harsh winters with little feed and lots of hard work to spread across the country and across the border with the U.S.

"Thanks to genetic testing, we know that the Canadian was a foundation breed in developing almost all North American breeds such as Morgans, Tennessee Walkers, Saddlebred, Missouri Fox Trotter and Standardbreds," says Tina Morrison, Ontario director for the Canadian Horse Breeders Association. "Its versatility and heritage are remarkable. Many people think of Canadians as driving horses, but they excel in dressage, eventing, jumping and are great backyard horses. They can do whatever you want them to and are very sociable and intelligent."

In addition to the breed's role in establishing other North American breeds, the Canadians have been a warhorse. Thousands were exported to the U.S. during the Civil War. Canadians were also exported to Africa for use in the Boer War, and more than 150,000 were shipped to Europe during World War I.

"The Canadian Horse breed may be our country's best kept secret," says Morrison. "In 2002, it became the National Horse of Canada, which achieved a lot of recognition. However, it is the work of really dedicated breeders who have made a real effort to increase breed numbers."



In the past they were used as war horses and today growing numbers are being put to work on farms.

The versatility of the breed also shows up in its genetics. Horses vary in type and size, ranging from large, big boned horses to smaller, Morgan-like animals.

Although there are only 6 recognized bloodlines, breed size varies from 14 to 16 hands and 1,000 to 1,400 lbs. Most frequently black, they may also be brown, bay or chestnut.

Morrison reports that registered, trained Canadians average around \$5,000. More highly trained horses will run higher. Stud fees run around \$800.

The Canadian Horse Breeders Association is looking for people interested in expanding the breed, says Morrison. She notes a new website has been set up to identify breeder locations with available stallions.

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