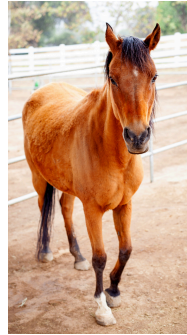


Horses of Tir Na Nog

By Emily Nye



Name that Horse...

Photo: <http://www.horsesoftirnanog.org/our-horses/>

Rose, silver, sugar, and jewel....

Common household words?

Actually, Rose, Silver, Sugar, and Jewel are horses you'll meet during your visit to Horses of Tir Na Nog. They are just a few of more than 50 horses—and other animals—that live in the Alpine horse sanctuary.

The Legend

The legend tells the story of Oisín, a young hunter in ancient Ireland. On one of his expeditions he encountered Niamh, the beautiful daughter of the King of Tir Na Nog. As is the case of many a fairy tale, the two fell in love, and he joined her in her enchanted homeland, where youth is eternal.

As a mortal, Oisín sometimes grew lonely for his homeland. After 300 years passed, Oisín wanted to return to see his family. Niamh arranged for him to return on a white mare, but he was instructed not to step foot on Irish soil.

The white mare carried Oisín through his homeland, but his heart becomes even heavier as he learned that his family was gone and the land had changed. Lost in his own pain, he neglected caring for the mare, who grew tired and less sure-footed.

As they approached the sea and sadly prepared to return to Tir Na Nog, Oisín lost his balance and touched Irish soil. He aged 300 years in the matter of moments. The mare returned to the sea.

A group of field workers witnessed these miraculous sights and rushed to help the elderly Oisín, who related his story to St. Patrick, and then died.

According to Irish legend, fishermen and lighthouse keepers sometimes see the image of the white mare, and the ghostly Niamh, still searching for Oisín.

Fiction and fantasy? Neither. In reality, Tir Na Nog is a model of compassion for how we humans need to care for our fellow Earth-mates. Tir Na Nog represents that land where life is good and time stands still, especially for horses who have come from abused or neglected backgrounds. Tir Na Nog is a protected haven for horses who deserve a second chance in life.

During your visit, you'll learn more about these animals' stories and how they found their way to Horses of Tir Na Nog.

The Horses and Their Stories

Take Rose, for example. She is what is called a "PMU colt" –a product of the inhumane Pregnant Mare's Urine (PMU) industry. Pregnant mare urine is an essential ingredient in producing Premarin, a female hormone replacement for humans. This industry requires a multitude of pregnant mares, who deliver thousands of colts in need of adoptive homes. Luckily, Rose found her way to her own safe haven at Horses of Tir Na Nog.

She is described as a gentle soul who loves to spend her time with people and her horse companions.

Sky's story is more traumatic. He is a gelding (castrated male) who was rescued during an animal neglect case in East County in 2017. Many horses at the sanctuary also come from animal neglect and abuse recoveries. Sky has health issues, including a heart murmur, as well as being hard to handle. But at Horses of Tir Na Nog, he has a comfortable home, good care, and horse friends to keep him company.

You can read on the website about each horse at the sanctuary, and learn their stories (Our Horses).

It Takes a Sanctuary (and You Can Help)

Our guide, Amy Pat Rigney, will tell you more about Horses of Tir Na Nog. She will explain how the goal is to keep their horses as healthy as possible, and to provide them a high quality of life. The refuge does this by providing veterinary care and good nutrition. Activity for horses helps manage horse behavior in healthy ways, keeping stress levels low.

If you feel inspired by our visit, there are several ways that you can help Horses of Tir Na Nog. Volunteers are needed to help with care and ranch chores. You can also provide financial support. According to Amy, feeding the sanctuary's animals costs more than \$80,000 each year.

Caring for a horse at Horses of Tir Na Nog requires food and supplies as well as veterinary and farrier services. It adds up to \$3,000 annually for each horse. If you would like to help out, you can sponsor horses, burros, llamas, alpacas, and sheep.
<http://www.horsesoftirnanog.org/how-to-help/be-a-sponsor/>



Image: Wikimedia Commons

All About Horses

To prepare for our visit, here is a quick primer about horses. Did you know they have been around for more than 50 million years? Only one species of horse exists today, but in prehistoric times there was a range of horse-like creatures (American museum). Today, horses come in more than 400 breeds. There are around 60 million horses in the world (domesticated as well as wild) (Bradford, 2015).

Horses are herbivores, (vegetarians), preferring to graze on grass. They have only one small stomach (unlike cows, which have two), so they graze all day. Each day horses can eat up to 1-2 percent of their body weight in grass or hay.

Horses are social animals that live in herds. In the wild, herds consist of anywhere from 3-20 animals, lead by a mature stallion.

A foal can stand shortly after it is born. It becomes mature when it reaches anywhere from 3-5 years old. At the age of 2, the stallion drives away other males, which band together until they find a herd of females to lead.

Horses live anywhere from 20-25 years, though they can live to past 30. Horses in their late 20s and 30s are considered to be geriatric. This characterizes some of the equines at Horses of Tir Na Nog.

Geriatric horses have lower immunity and less ability to adapt to temperature extremes. As horses age, they can develop dental issues, hormone imbalance, digestive problems, parasites, and hoof issues (Tee, 2015.)

Horses and Humans

The first horses were domesticated between 3000 and 4000 B.C. in Asia. To this day, we have a unique relationship with horses (Cothran & Podhajsky, 2018).

Throughout history horses appear as objects of art. For example, archeologists have found Stone Age drawings of horses on cave walls, their images were sculpted in jade during the Chinese Han dynasty, and Leonardo da Vinci sketched them (to name a few artistic references to horses).

A Britannica.com article calls the horse both a partner and a friend to humans. Horses have been essential to humans throughout history for farming, hunting, tracking cattle, and military transport. Horses have provided sport and recreation to humans through colorful activities like jousting, hunting, and racing. The tradition and sport of horseback riding uses terms like “chivalry” and “cavalier.” In fact, the word *chevalier* traces back to *caballarius* (similar to the Spanish word for horse—*caballo*), which reminds us of knights and a code of respect, honor, and good manners. Clearly, horses have had a positive effect on humans throughout history!

Interesting Facts About Horses

- Horses can sleep either lying down or standing up. Horses in a group don't all sleep simultaneously; at least one stays awake to serve as “guard.”
- An average horse can run up to 27 miles per hour. The fastest horse was recorded at 55 miles per hour. When horses gallop, there is a point in their movement when all four hooves are off the ground.
- Horses have the biggest eyes of any land animal. They can see almost 360 degrees since their eyes are located on the side of their heads.

- Horses have really big teeth. In fact, their teeth take up more space in their head than is occupied by their brain. A horse's teeth never stop growing.
- Horses cannot vomit!
- Horses drink a minimum of 25 gallons of water every day.
- Horses and zebras may look alike, but they are different animals. However, they can breed with each other to create "zebroids." Zebras can mate with donkeys to produce "zonkeys." The horse's closest relative is the rhinoceros.
- Horses have good memories.
- The American quarter horse is the most popular breed of horse in the world.

(45 most random, 2019; Robinson, 2019)

Summary: Back to Horses of Tir Na Nog

With all these wondrous facts about horses, it's sad that there is a high rate of horse abuse and neglect. It was difficult to substantiate an exact number, but several studies proposed reasons for this phenomenon. Perhaps what it comes down to is that while horses are domesticated, they are still working or sport animals, not the usual idea of a pet. They require land, and their feed and upkeep are relatively expensive (Finch, 2013).

An internet search shows that there are hundreds of horse sanctuaries around the country and around the world. Stories of abused horses pull at our heartstrings.

Horses of Tir Na Nog has many such stories to tell. It is unique in its broader mission of educating humans about horses. Lord John Lubbock said it well in 1894 when he wrote:

There is nothing so good for the inside of man as the outside of a horse.
"Recreation," The Use of Life.

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