

Tiny Tokara, Kagoshima's Native Horses

Tokara horses are a rare and endangered breed of diminutive Japanese horses native to Kagoshima Prefecture, where they are designated a Natural Monument.

Japan has eight native horse breeds. All eight breeds originated with horses brought from the Asian mainland, possibly beginning as early as the fourth century. Each breed is associated with a particular region of the country, and the name "Tokara" comes from the Tokara Archipelago, a small, isolated group of islands about 300 kilometers off the Kagoshima coast.

Horses were brought to the islands around 1900 and eventually developed into a distinct breed. Tokara horses are similar in size to prehistoric horses, averaging only 114.5 centimeters (or about 11.25 hands) in height and weighing an average of 198 kilograms. Their coats and manes are typically dark brown.

Tokara horses used to be numerous on the Tokara islands, where they were used as draft animals for hauling firewood and pressing sugarcane. They were nearly wiped out during World War II (1939–1945), and by the 1960s, only 32 horses remained. Several of them were relocated to sites on mainland Kagoshima for protection and breeding. Today, there are about 100 Tokara horses. A herd of them lives at Kaimon-Sanroku Nature Park, in Ibusuki, where they roam freely during the day and return to a paddock at night.