

Horse Corral

Big & Tall & Beautiful: All About Draft Horses

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Have you ever gotten close to a large animal and been amazed at the sheer size of them? We have, especially when we're around our draft horses. Despite their wide and tall stature, the most amazing part of being near these horses is their calm nature. Even though many look similar, there is a variety of draft breeds, and they all have their unique traits. At Equine Advocates, we have 21 horses within the draft breed family, including Belgian Drafts, Percherons or Percheron Crosses, Draft Crosses, and one Shire. Draft horses are recognizable by their height, large heads, and extremely muscular build. In general, they tend to have a more upright shoulder than riding horses, which gives them a more upright movement and conformation that is well suited for hauling heavy loads, plowing fields, and other pulling tasks. Draft horses have been used for this type of work throughout history due to their heavy build and calm, patient demeanor.

Percherons

Percherons originated in the Huisne River valley in western France and are the most famous French draft breed in the world today. They are believed to be descended from war horses. Percherons are well-muscled and known for their intelligence and willingness to work, as well as their ability to adapt well to many conditions and climates. Due to these characteristics, Percherons are used for agriculture and pulling work, like carriage rides. Most of the Percherons at our sanctuary are either former carriage horses, former Amish work horses, or retired Military Working Horses who helped pull the caisson, or wagon, during military funerals. However, a cruel, outdated, and completely unnecessary use of many Percheron mares and other female drafts is to turn them into PMU (Pregnant Mares' Urine) horses. Equine Advocates has rescued many of them from going to slaughter after being abused on Canadian PMU farms.

In the 1930s, Percherons made up 70% of the draft horse population in the United States, but that declined substantially after World War II due to the invention of the modern farm tractor. However, the population has recovered in the decades since.

On average, Percherons stand between 16.2 and 17.3 hands (66 and 71 inches), with a range of 15–19 hands. The tallest horse at our sanctuary, King, is a Percheron who stands at about 18.5 hands (74 inches).



Waitt, a beautiful, rescued Shire at Equine Advocates.

Belgian Drafts

The American Belgian Draft horse derives from heavy draft horse breeds imported from Belgium during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. From the 1920s onward, the American Belgian Draft was bred to be somewhat taller and lighter-bodied than the original European stock.

Like with Percherons, the rise of agriculture mechanization led to a drop in demand for Belgian Draft horses. However, numbers recovered, and it is now the most numerous breed of draft horse in the United States, according to the Belgian Draft Horse Corporation of America.

Shires

Shires are a British breed of Draft Horse and are considered the largest/tallest horse breed. The average height at the withers of grown stallions is about 17.2 hands (70 inches), while geldings stand at least 16.2 hands (66 inches) tall. Mares tend to be about 16 hands (64 inches). Their weight ranges from 1,870 to 2,430 pounds for geldings and stallions, with no set standard for mares. Waitt, a rescued Shire at our sanctuary, is about 16.3 hands (67 inches) tall, but since he's only six years old, we expect him to grow more in the next couple of years. Shires have an enormous capacity for pulling weight, which may be what Waitt was bred for, but instead, he was about to be dumped at auction by an Amish farmer before his rescue. Waitt was very young at the time and very difficult to handle. We suspect that was the reason he was being disposed of, which is why we came to his rescue when we heard about his dire situation. Since arriving at the sanctuary, Waitt has become one of our most popular equines among visitors, especially kids.

It's easy to see why draft horses are nicknamed "Gentle Giants." Their calm demeanor paired with their height and size make them treasures to be around.