

Caspian Preservationist Louise Firouz Dies

Louise Firouz, the woman who worked to save the breed from extinction leaves lasting legacy.

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American Louise Firouz, who worked to preserve the rare Caspian horse, has died in Iran at the age of 78 after suffering from pulmonary and liver disorders. Firouz was best known as "the reviver of the Caspian pony and the best breeder of Turkmen horses in Iran."

Firouz, who graduated from Cornell University, moved to Iran in the 1950s and was living on a farm near an ethnic Turkmen village in northeastern Iran, where she conducted extensive research about Iranian horses and organized numerous national and international horse riding tours in Iran.

In 1965, Firouz discovered small Arabian-like horses living in remote villages of the Elburz region above the Caspian Sea. Through bone, blood and DNA testing, archeo-zoologists proved the horses were direct descendants of the miniature Mesopotamian horse of antiquity thought to be extinct for 1,300 years. Firouz named the horses Caspians and she was intent on saving them from extinction. Political problems in Iran were threatening the breed's survival, so with the help of Britain's Prince Phillip, Firouz worked to move some of the horses out of the country.

In 1971, Prince Phillip imported three Caspians from Iran into his stable at the Royal Palace in England. Between 1971 and 1976, nine stallions and 17 mares were imported to Europe, and in 1993 Firouz was able to get seven more Caspians into England. With thoughtful care, these horses flourished and their numbers increased.

Although the efforts have been tremendous, the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy still lists the Caspian horse as a "critical" breed, meaning there are fewer than 200 annual registrations in the United States, and the estimated global population is less than 2,000.