

Morocco's miracle mule

(article from www.bbc.co.uk Wednesday, 2 October, 2002, 08:56 GMT 09:56 UK)



The mule's owners did not realize it was pregnant

By the BBC's Katy Kay

A mule has given birth to a male foal in a hamlet deep in rural Morocco.

No big deal, you may think, but in fact the birth was a minor scientific miracle.

A mule is the hybrid of a horse and a donkey and should be sterile - except in this instance.

There have only been two substantiated cases of a mule giving birth in the past quarter century: one in China in 1988 and the other also in Morocco in 1984.

Since 1527, (when records began on the issue) there have only been a total of 60 reported cases of mules giving birth.

"The occurrence is so historically rare that the Romans had a saying *Cum mula peperit*, meaning 'when a mule foals', the equivalent of our 'once in a very blue moon'," explained Dr. Gigi Kay, a horse vet with the charity the Society for Protection of Animals in North Africa, who has visited the mother and son.

””””

The mule's aged owner did not realize the mule was pregnant and rode her 20 kilometers to market the day before the birth.

Paying tribute

The 14-year-old mother mule gave birth on 28 August, in a small hamlet of three poor farms in the region of Oulmes, 80 kilometres south of the ancient city of Fez.

The farm is nestled at the foot of the Atlas Mountains, where the mother mule has become a cult.

She and her foal have been visited by streams of people, many of whom traveled for hours to pay tribute to the miracle birth and bring gifts to the owner and the animal.

The mule's aged owner, a farming woman whose face is covered in traditional local tattoos, did not realize the mule was pregnant and rode her 20 kilometres to market the day before the birth.

Dr Kay is running blood tests on both the mother and the foal. She said the science-defied belief.

A horse has 64 chromosomes and a donkey has 62, so a mule is left with 63, an uneven number which cannot divide into chromosome pairs. This should make a mule unable to reproduce.

The Moroccan foal looks a bit like a baby donkey and a bit like a baby mule - but not exactly like either.



The mule has become a local attraction