

# Assateague Island

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

Assateague Island National Seashore  
Maryland and Virginia



## The Wild Horses of Assateague Island



### A National Treasure

The wild horses of Assateague Island are descendents of domesticated animals brought to the island over 300 years ago. Horses tough enough to survive the scorching heat, abundant insects, stormy weather and poor quality food found on this windswept barrier island have formed a unique wild horse society. Enjoy their beauty from a distance, and you can help make sure these extraordinary wild horses will continue to thrive on Assateague Island.

*“My treasures do not click together or glitter. They gleam in the sun and neigh in the night.”*

*- Bedouin proverb*

### Where did they come from?

#### Were the horses shipwreck survivors . . .

Local folklore describes the Assateague horses as survivors of a shipwreck off the Virginia coast. While this dramatic tale of struggle and survival is popular, there are no records yet that confirm it.

#### . . . or settlers' horses?

During the 17th century free-roaming horses, cows, sheep and pigs caused expensive crop damage to local farms. Farmers were required

to pay taxes on all mainland livestock and fence them in.

Like people in the 21st century, these resourceful coastal residents looked for ways to avoid paying this tax. They turned to nearby Assateague Island with its abundance of food, shelter and a natural “corral” made of water to solve their problem.

It is likely that modern Assateague horses are descendents of those hardy animals turned loose on the island to graze tax-free.



### Living the wild life in Maryland

Assateague's horses are uniquely adapted to survive on a barrier island. How do they do it?

#### What do they eat?

The horses spend most of their time grazing on abundant but nutrient-poor saltmarsh cordgrass, saltmeadow hay and beach grass. The horses' short stature is a result of hundreds of years of adaptation to this low quality diet. Genetically they are considered horses, even though they are now pony size.

The Assateague horses drink over twice the amount of water that domesticated horses will due to their salty food supply. All that drinking combined with a high salt diet contributes to their bloated appearance.

#### Where do they live throughout the year?

Spring brings cool, rainy weather and fresh plant growth to the island. Many of the horses live in the marshes close to their best food sources. Foals are usually born in late spring and live with their mothers in a family group called a “band”. Each band is usually made up of 2 -10 mares, their offspring and a stallion.

Hot, humid, and full of insects, summer brings

a new set of challenges. The horses escape the mosquitoes and flies of the marsh by spending more time on the beach and in the surf, letting the refreshing ocean breezes carry away airborne pests.

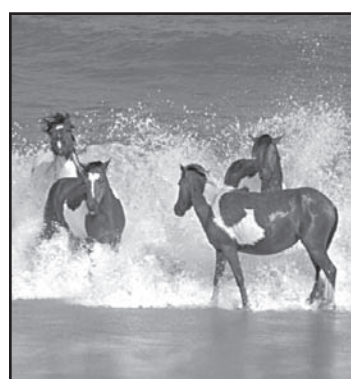
Cooler fall weather and fewer insects allow the bands to move from the beaches back to the marshes and their abundant grasses.

The horses prefer to browse in shrub thickets during the damp, chilly, winter season. Their thick, furry coats will protect them from ferocious winter winds and the occasional snowstorm.

#### Do they receive veterinary care?

While action may be taken to end the suffering of a gravely ill, seriously injured, or dying horse, no measures are taken to prolong the lives of Maryland's wild horses. As with other species of Assateague wildlife, horses that are sick or weak do not survive. This helps maintain a hardy, healthy population of wild horses.

Virginia's horses are privately owned by the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Department and receive some veterinary care.



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## Where can you see the wild horses?

### In Maryland

Maryland's horses are owned and managed by the National Park Service. They are free-roaming wildlife and could be anywhere in the park.

During the summer months many bands can be found on the beach. You can often see the horses and other wildlife by driving slowly along park roads. Protect island habitat by parking only in designated parking areas. The "Life of the Forest" and "Life of the Marsh" trails are good places to look, especially during spring, fall and winter seasons.

***Do not feed or pet the horses. Horses that learn to come up to the road are hit and killed by cars.***

### In Virginia

Virginia's horses are privately owned by the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Department and are fenced in large enclosures.

Look for the horses in the marshes along Beach Road and from the observation platform on the Woodland Trail.

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## Misty of Chincoteague and Pony Penning

Many visitors first learn about the Assateague horses from Marguerite Henry's famous book *Misty of Chincoteague*. Written in 1947, this classic children's tale tells the story of a young horse called "Misty" and the children who loved her. While the story is fiction, the characters (including the horses) were real.

The story takes place during a traditional Chincoteague festival called "Pony Penning". On the last Wednesday of July, the Virginia herd of horses is rounded up and swum from Assateague Island to nearby Chincoteague Island.

On the following day most of the young foals are auctioned off.

Proceeds from the sale benefit the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Department, which is responsible for the care and management of the Virginia herd.

Virginia's privately owned horses are kept separated from Maryland's wild horses by a fence that runs across the Maryland/Virginia state line. Maryland's horses are not rounded up or sold at auction.

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## How is the population controlled?

### In Maryland

It is important to limit the number of wild horses on Assateague. Left to themselves, the horses will quickly destroy the barrier island environment that sustains them.

The National Park Service (NPS) wanted a safe, effective way to control overpopulation. Researchers working in conjunction with the NPS developed a non-hormonal, non-invasive vaccine to prevent pregnancy. This vaccine is delivered by a dart to the hindquarters of selected mares each spring.

To keep the gene pool as large as possible each mare is allowed to have one offspring. This vaccine has successfully lowered the birth rate of Maryland's horses to fewer than 10 foals per year - enough to ensure a sustainable population.

Like people, wild horses are highly social animals that form complex, family-based societies. Using this contraceptive method the population is controlled, and their natural relationships in the wild are preserved.

Results of a 2005 genetic study of the entire herd will be used to help the NPS make wise herd management decisions. The goal of the NPS in Maryland is to keep herd size to less than 125 horses.

### In Virginia

Virginia's privately owned herd produces 60-90 foals every year. Most of the foals are sold at the annual auction, which keeps the number of horses at or below the 150 adults allowed by the grazing permit.



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## What can you do to support the wild horses?

### Be a responsible visitor.

Assateague's horses are beautiful, tough, and wild. They have learned to survive in a harsh environment. Feeding and/or petting them is detrimental to both visitors and horses.

- Horses can get sick from human food.
- Horses that learn to come up to the road to beg for food are often hit and killed by cars.
- Visitors are kicked, bitten and knocked down every year as a direct result of getting too close to the wild horses.
- Treating wild horses like tame animals takes away the wildness that makes them special.

***Protect your family by respecting theirs. Give the horses the space they need to be wild.***

### Become a Foster Parent!

Through the Assateague Island Foster Horse Program you can "adopt" a member of Maryland's herd. These funds help support the management of the horses and the environment they depend on to survive.

### Enjoy them!

There are few places in the United States where you can view wild horses. Due to their complex social structure the Assateague horses display a wide range of unique behaviors. Take advantage of the opportunity to view these horses in a natural habitat.

With careful management, the wild horses will continue to thrive on Assateague Island and provide enjoyment to thousands of nature enthusiasts, photographers, and people who just love horses!

For more information on Assateague's wild horses visit [www.nps.gov/asis](http://www.nps.gov/asis).

