

Cape Lookout National Seashore Shackleford Banks Horses 2025 Annual Report

**National Park Service
Cape Lookout National Seashore
131 Charles Street
Harkers Island, NC 28531**

Site Location and Description

Cape Lookout National Seashore (the park) is located in the southern Outer Banks of North Carolina between Beaufort Inlet and Ocracoke Inlet. Here, the National Park Service (NPS) manages 56 miles of barrier islands. Shackleford Banks is the southernmost island in the park between Beaufort Inlet to the west and Barden's Inlet to the east. It lies south of the Town of Beaufort and Harkers Island. Shackleford Banks is approximately 8 miles long and ranges from 0.1 to 0.8 mile wide.

Management Directives

Federal legislation passed in 1998 as 16 U.S.C. §459g-4 [1] and the subsequent 2005 Amendment by Congress 109-117;119-§2526 [2] to the legislation protects the wild horses within Cape Lookout National Seashore. The horses are cooperatively managed by the park and the nonprofit Foundation for Shackleford Horses, Inc., (Foundation). This annual report on the status of the herd covers the 2025 calendar year.

Horse Population

Legislation directs the park to allow a herd of not less than 110 horses, with a target population of between 120 and 130 horses. However, there is no requirement that the park increase the number of horses where the herd numbers fall below 110 as a result of natural causes. [2]. At the end of 2025 there were 102 horses on Shackleford Banks. Since 2005, when the last roundup was conducted, the year-end population has ranged between 105 in 2013 and 126 in 2009. No roundups are planned in the foreseeable future.

Gender and Age Structure

At the end of 2025, the herd was 61% female and 39% male. Part of the reason that there are more females is that some females are living longer. The oldest horse on the island is a 27-year-old mare. The 14 oldest horses, ranging in age from 27 to 19, are female. The oldest male is 18. Contraception has been linked to increased longevity among treated females [3].

Birth and Mortality

Seven foals were born in 2025. Of these, 4 remain on Shackleford Banks. One failed to survive; two were removed, one at birth and the other at 10 days old because they were observed alone and had become separated from their dams. They were transported to and provided intensive care at Institute Mobile Veterinary Clinic in Institute, NC, with funding for their care provided by the Foundation, and after release by the veterinarian, they were adopted together.

Herd mortality was 17% (20 horses). This is above the 6% average mortality from 1999 through 2024, inclusive, and raises the average annual mortality of the herd to 7%. Evidence shows that the increased mortality is primarily due to the herd adjusting to the available vegetation on the dynamic barrier island. As a result, the majority of the deceased horses were in thin body condition.

The 20 deceased horses include a 31 year old mare and 6 other mares over 20. A stallion died at 20, which is old for a Shackleford Banks stallion.

Genetics Data

Dung was collected from the foals of 2025 by standard collection protocol [4] to determine offspring genotypes. Analysis was done according to protocol by the Laboratory for Ecological, Evolutionary and Conservation Genetics at the University of Idaho [5]. The maternal and paternal genotypes are known from previous analyses, and, using them, foal paternity is being determined. The resulting lineage data will be used for decision making for management actions by the park and Foundation.

Contraception

Contraception has been used adaptively to manage the wild horse population beginning in 2000 [6,7,8,9,10]. Contraceptive doses are additive but strategically reversible, with one dose providing, on average, one year of birth control. Eleven mares with young offspring were contracepted in 2025 which should prevent them from conceiving for two to three years before they return to fertility.

Junior Ranger Activity: Wild Horse Protector

Junior Ranger Wild Horse Protector activities continued on Shackleford Banks. This activity is designed for students in grades 6 through 8 but can be adapted to younger or older students. An adult checks out a backpack holding binoculars, handheld GPS, salinity meter, range finder, a glossary, and instructions. Participants work through activities like those the wild horse Biologist performs during census work. On completion, students receive an award and are certified as Wild Horse Protectors.

Education Campaign

The Wild Horse Public Education Campaign (WHPEC), begun in 2012, continues. This is a collaboration between the park, the Foundation, and the nearby Rachel Carson Reserve. The aim of the campaign is to educate people about the horses with an emphasis on the safety of the horses, park and Reserve visitors, and pets. The general message is to enjoy watching the horses without interacting with them or interrupting their natural behavior.

The acclaimed Pony Patrol continued in 2025 with 46 volunteers roving the islands during the summer. During the 260 patrols, an average of 15 visitors were contacted adding to 3900 visitor interactions. The program will be renewed in 2026, and the application and planning process for the season has begun.

Foundation for Shackleford Horses

During the year, the Foundation contributed over 3515 volunteer hours performing diverse work related to the Shackleford Banks horses both on and off the island [11]. Its Board of Directors is comprised of seven volunteers; additional volunteers contribute significantly to the Foundation's work. Any horses removed from the island are turned over to the Foundation. Removed horses are typically cared for by the FSH and may be made available for adoption, if possible. In addition to supporting the removed horses, the Foundation funds a number of wild horse program needs, including DNA and parentage testing, birth control, and Pony Patrol program expenses.

Citations

1. US Government Publishing Office Federal Digital System document, accessed February 22, 2016, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/granule/USCODE-2011-title16/USCODE-2011-title16-chap1-subchapLXIII-sec459g-4>.
2. US Government Publishing Office Federal Digital System document, accessed February 22, 2016, <http://uscode.house.gov/statutes/pl/109/117.pdf>.
3. Jay Kirkpatrick, et al., "The practical side of immunocontraception: Zona proteins and wildlife." *Journal of Reproductive Immunology* 83 (2009): 151-157.
4. Lisette Waits, "Scat Collection Protocol," January 10, 2009.
5. Adams, Jennifer and Lisette Waits, "Paternity Analysis of Nine Foals Using Fecal Samples", Preliminary Report, January 11, 2016.
6. National Park Service, Cape Lookout National Seashore, Management Plan for the Feral Horse Herd on Shackleford Banks, 1996.
7. National Park Service, Cape Lookout National Seashore, Management Plan for the Feral Horse Herd on Shackleford Banks, 1999.
8. National Park Service, Cape Lookout National Seashore, Management Plan for the Shackleford Banks Horse Herd, 2005.
9. National Park Service, Cape Lookout National Seashore, Management Plan for the Shackleford Banks Horse Herd, 2010.
10. National Park Service, Cape Lookout National Seashore, Management Plan for the Shackleford Banks Horse Herd, 2024.
11. Foundation for Shackleford Horses. "Foundation for Shackleford Horses Volunteer Hours 2024-2025."



A two-day-old colt communes with its dam on a low sandy dune. Photo taken with 600mm lens. Credit: Lisa Cueman Photography.

To the press: this photo is available as a JPG; please inquire.