Horses of Shackleford Banks

Shackleford Banks, the southern-most barrier island in Cape Lookout National Seashore, is home to more than 110 wild horses. This is one of the few places in the eastern United States where wild horses can still be seen. Shackleford Banks is approximately nine miles long and averages less than a mile wide. It contains many habitats, unique to barrier islands, which support the horses.

Origin

Like the western mustangs, eastern horses were reintroduced to North America by European explorers and settlers. Records show horses living on the Outer Banks for centuries. Genetic research shows evidence of Spanish ancestry in the Shackleford herd. Shackleford adults average 12 hands in height, with a range of 11 to 13 hands (4” per hand) at the withers (between neck and back). The Banker horses, also called ponies, found up and down the east coast are somewhat related to each other in that they share a similar genetic base and a history of adaptation to life on the Outer Banks.

Wild Life

The allure of these horses is their wild lifestyle. Every effort is made to keep them wild. They are neither fed nor watered. Natural food sources are present, including Spartina marsh & island grass and Uniola (sea oats). Fresh water is available in various ponds, pools and digs along the length of the island. In places, the horses dig holes and wait for water to seep up. Protection in storms is afforded by the stretch of rare maritime forest (live oaks) and thick shrubs on the north (sound) side of the island.

Watch Without Interacting

While it may be tempting to try to approach or feed a wild horse, the animal loses in the end. When a horse has to repeatedly move away from people, it loses valuable grazing time. People feeding wild horses can cause serious digestive disorders including death.

Wild Animals

Horses can inflict serious injuries on people. They bite, may charge, and they can spin to kick amazingly quickly. Wild horses interact with each other in their own language, and an unwary human can accidentally be in the path of two fighting stallions or a mare protecting her foal.

Illegal Activity

Federal regulations prohibit “feeding, touching, teasing, frightening or intentional disturbing of wildlife.” Violators can be fined as much as $5,000 and spend up to six months in jail.

Social Life of Wild Horses

Harems and Bands

The herd divides itself into approximately 25 harems and, loosely, 7 bachelor bands. Each dominant “alpha” stallion guards a harem containing mares and their young. He directs his harem by “herding” behavior - lowering his head & moving his neck - until the mares and foals move where he wants them. Young horses nurse as long as they are with their dam (mother) unless they have a younger sibling. At some time between a year-and-a-half and five years of age, young fillies and colts leave the harem. The females join other harems while the males form loose bachelor bands. Bachelor band life gives colts a chance to spar and mature into stallions who can challenge existing alphas; continued...
Harems, continued
some day these males will be able to obtain
a mare and start their own harem.

Within and between harems, a hierarchy is
maintained by dominance behavior (pin-
nning the ears back, biting, rearing & strik-
ing, and kicking). The dominant animals
have their choice of grasses and drinking
water. Often it is a mare who will lead the
harem to water.

Management
To retain the horses’ wild lifestyle
while protecting their island home,
some management is necessary.
Population growth and mortality are
monitored. Selected young horses
have been removed during roundups,
and, more recently, individually under
veterinary sedation. They are adopted
by the public or donated to other wild
herds. Immunocontraception (birth
control) vaccines, effective for one year,
are administered in the field without
transquilizers to selected mares.

Removal and contraception choices are
made primarily on genetics (how well rep-
resented the individual’s line is). A cadre
of experts in genetics, behavior, health
and reproduction advise on maintaining
genetic diversity, natural social structure
and a healthy herd. The island vegeta-
tion, including the unique maritime for-
est, is monitored. Management decisions
are made cooperatively by Cape Lookout
National Seashore and the Foundation
for Shackleford Horses, Inc., a non-profit
organization.

Preservation
While considered a non-native species
by the park service because they were re-
introduced rather than evolving entirely
with their environment, these horses are
protected by Federal legislation ensuring
their continued presence on Shackleford
Banks. The horses are part of the cultural
history of the area and provide enjoyment
for thousands of visitors each year.

Horsewatching
Access
Shackleford Banks is accessible only by
private boat, tour boat, or public ferry.
(A list of operators may be found on
the park’s website at: www.nps.gov/
calo/.) Public ferries transport people
(no vehicles) from near-by towns all year.
Visitors explore Shackleford Banks on
foot; unlike other parts of Cape Lookout
National Seashore, there are no public
vehicles on Shackleford Banks.

Bring Along
Binoculars are recommended to allow
you to watch from a safe distance. A
telephoto camera lens is desirable for the
same reason. Bug repellent is needed,
particularly in summer, although warm
weather any time of year will bring out
pests. Ticks may be found, particularly in
the shrubs. Walking shoes that can get wet
will allow you to take the few steps off the
ferry or wade in from your boat. Low-
growing cactus and sand spurs are found in
some areas of the island; watch your step
and wear shoes instead of sandals.

Dogs
Dogs are welcome on Shackleford Banks
as long as they are on a six foot leash.
Keeping your dog with you protects him
from potentially fatal kicks from horses
and protects the horses (and other wildlife
like rabbits, raccoons, and protected birds)
from dog harassment.

Finding Horses
Horses roam the island, so be prepared to
walk to find them. When you find horses,
keep a safe distance away - at least 50 feet
from the harem. Be ready to move away
if they seem unsettled at your presence.
If they move towards you, back up to
maintain the 50 foot distance. Always stay
where you can see all the horses at one
glance. This will help you avoid disrupting
the harem or getting in the middle of
a fight. Stay alert for other stallions
approaching the harem. When in doubt,
stay back. Settle yourself at a comfortable
vantage point and watch. Your patience
will be rewarded by a glimpse into the life
of a wild horse.

More Information
For more information, contact
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