

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 eight 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 North Carolina Outer Banks for centuries. Genetic research shows evidence of Spanish ancestry in the Shackleford herd. The Banker horses found up and down the east coast are somewhat related to each other as they share a similar genetic base and a history of adaptation to life on the Atlantic coastal islands. Shackleford horses, also called ponies, average 12 hands in height, with a range of 11 to 13 hands (4” per hand) at the withers (between neck and back).

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;

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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 (pinning the ears back, biting, rearing & striking, 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 tranquilizers to selected mares.

Removal and contraception choices are made primarily on gentics (how well represented 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 vegetation, including the unique maritime forest, 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 is on the park’s website at: www.nps.gov/cal/) 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 repellant 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 prevalent; watch your step and wear shoes instead of sandals.

Dogs
Dogs are welcome on Shackleford Banks as long as they are restrained on a six foot leash. Keeping your dog with you protects him from potentially fatal bites and 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. 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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