

The Chincoteague Ponies of Assateague Island, VA



Condensed from the Kindle Book
Wild Horses of the Atlantic Coast: An Intimate Portrait
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Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge and Assateague Island, Virginia

Chincoteague, a small island community on the Eastern Shore of Virginia, historically made its living from the sea. It has long been world-famous for its oysters. In 1947, Marguerite Henry's book *Misty of Chincoteague* brought the tradition of island pony penning to the attention of children all over the world. Today the promise of both tasty seafood and a glimpse of wild ponies brings thousands of annual visitors to this unique little island.

Although there are festivals and activities in Chincoteague year-'round, the biggest tourist draw is the ponies, which live across the channel in the Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge on Assateague Island. Every year public interest climaxes in a Pony Penning, the culmination of the month-long Firemen's Carnival. The event is well attended by spectators and covered by news media around the globe.

Every July, Saltwater Cowboys—volunteers from the Chincoteague Fire Company and the local community ride to Assateague on their own horses, gather more than 200 free-roaming ponies on the refuge, and secure them in holding pens

On the last Wednesday of the month, they herd the ponies to the water's edge and wait for slack tide, the time of the least current. The Coast Guard fires a red starburst rocket into the air to signal the start. As thousands watch, the Cowboys press the ponies into the channel for the seven-minute swim to Chincoteague. The ponies emerge from the waters into a lush green meadow, rest before a contingent of admiring onlookers, and then parade up Main Street to the carnival grounds. The following day, young foals are removed from the herd and sold to begin new lives as domestic horses. Each year certain foals, usually fillies, are designated buy-backs. These foals are sold at auction to charitable individuals who donate them back to the fire company for re-release on Assateague as breeding stock.

Until the 1920s, Chincoteague was a fishing village accessible only by boat, with schools, a post office, and many homes, mostly made of wood. The streets were narrow, and the houses were built close together. When a building was destroyed by fire early in the 1900's, people realized that they needed to purchase firefighting equipment and train a team how to use it. They bought a hand pump engine, and later a gasoline engine. But when a serious fire struck fifteen years later, the neglected equipment malfunctioned. Twelve homes and businesses were lost. Four years later, another fire took most of the buildings on the west side of the island. Chincoteague residents vowed that this preventable tragedy would never recur. In May, 1924, the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Company was born. To raise money for fire equipment, the annual Firemen's carnival was organized, which included the roundup and auction of the Assateague ponies. Revenue from annual carnivals and auctions allowed the fire company to keep pace with the requirements of a growing population.

The development of wetlands and the black market for waterfowl and their feathers was pushing many native species to the brink of extinction. The Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1943 as a breeding and wintering area for migratory and resident waterfowl on the Virginia part of Assateague. The refuge protected about 9,000 acres of coastal wetlands and wildlife. The land in question, however had been free-range grazing land for hundreds of years, and locals petitioned the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to continue this generations-old practice.

Rachel Carson, world-renowned marine biologist, environmentalist, and editor-in-chief for the Fish and Wildlife Service, wrote in 1947 that when the refuge was created, the agency permitted residents of Chincoteague to graze 300 head of horses and cattle on the refuge. (This is twice as

many animals as permitted today.) She noted no adverse effect on waterfowl: “The presence of these grazing animals is not detrimental to the waterfowl for which the refuge was established.”

Later, the Fish and Wildlife Service removed the cattle and opposed the ponies as a nuisance that trampled vegetation and competed with the birds for forage. They erected fences to restrict their range to only 5 percent of the refuge. Almost all of this land was salt marsh, which provided abundant food, but no way to escape the torment of insects, and no high ground to climb in storms. When the Ash Wednesday Storm of 1962 flooded the Assateague lowlands, 22 ponies in the refuge drowned (as well as about 100 on Chincoteague). In 1965, the fences were reconfigured to give the ponies access to high ground and to let them range more freely.

In 1947, Marguerite Henry published the best-selling book *Misty of Chincoteague*, which became a successful movie in 1961. This fictionalized account of the Assateague ponies and the adventures of two Chincoteague children remains popular today and contributes to tourist traffic on Chincoteague.

Misty was a real pony born on the Beebe ranch—not on Assateague, as in the book. Henry fell in love with the week-old Misty while visiting Chincoteague, and bought her. Paul and Maureen Beebe, who inspired the characters by the same name in the book, halter-broke and gentled the pony during her stay on their ranch. When Misty was weaned, Henry had her shipped out to her home in Illinois to provide inspiration while she wrote her famous story. While the story line of Misty is not factual, the setting is true to life, and Henry presents a fairly accurate portrayal of pony penning around the 1940s.

Legends tell of Spanish shipwrecks that brought the ponies to Assateague Island. Scientists and historians, however, tend to believe that they descend from livestock, owned by local settlers, that grazed Assateague as early as the late 1600s.

Over the years, the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Company has increased the genetic diversity of the herd by purchasing ponies that were true to the original bloodlines from local owners and by introducing outside horses. Historic accounts indicate that until the early 20th century, Assateague ponies were mostly chestnut, bay, brown, or black and showed conformation very similar to the North Carolina barrier island herds. Rugged Shetland ponies were introduced to the herd in the 1920s to give the ponies flashy pinto coloring. Bob Evans, an Ohio restaurateur, donated two buckskin Spanish Barb stallions. In 1939, the fire company brought in twenty mustangs from the West, and in 1978 added forty more. The addition of the forty mustangs in 1978 was in response to an outbreak of Equine Infectious Anemia that had reduced the herd substantially. In 1975, half the herd tested positive, and affected individuals were destroyed three years later to halt the spread of the disease. Mustangs were brought in from the West to revitalize the gene pool and rebuild the population. But as hardy as these mustangs were, many could not adapt to barrier island life and died within the first year.

The fire company gathers the ponies three times a year for vaccinations, worming, veterinary inspection, and farrier attention. If a horse is injured, the firefighters bring the horse in off the range and doctor its injuries. The animals breed at will, but foals are sold at auction each July, the proceeds benefitting the fire company.

Assateague Island is fortunate to have escaped the clutches of civilization, although man has left his mark in many places. The Wildlife Refuge is easily accessible to visitors. Many come to see wild ponies, but birdwatching is also popular, especially during spring and fall migrations. Massive flocks of snow geese make their dramatic entrance in November. The lighthouse is open for climbing, and there are excellent hiking and biking trails. The ponies are numerous, not at all shy of visitors, and easily viewed from an observation platform or fences along the roadside.

Barbed wire keeps them off the pavement and away from people. Separation is safer for both ponies and visitors, but can make it difficult to view them at close range. When they are on the refuge, good photographs usually require a telephoto lens. The Chincoteague Natural History Association offers educational bus tours, led by knowledgeable guides, to parts of the refuge that are otherwise only open to pedestrians. You will almost always see ponies, often at close range, as well as waterfowl and other wildlife. Additionally, numerous boat tours take visitors to Assateague and afford close-up views of ponies and other wildlife.

While Chincoteague watermen still ply their trades in the nearby ocean and estuaries, this seven-mile-long island is covered with tourist-driven businesses and remains lively with visitors though most of the year. Whether you are visiting to relax on the beach or enjoy the little shops, Chincoteague is a world apart.



Chincoteague ponies graze on the salt marshes of Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge, on Assateague Island, Virginia. The Fish and Wildlife Service says that the grazing of the 150 adult ponies and their foals damages the marshlands that have been set aside for the use of other wildlife. Certainly, if these marshes were not grazed, the grass would be taller and more gulls would nest in these wetlands. Grazed marshes, however, support larger numbers of small invertebrates such as crabs and snails, which provide food for foraging birds. Marshes grazed by horses have fewer birds, but greater diversity of species.



Chincoteague Island is famous for its annual roundup, swim, and auction of Chincoteague Ponies. Each July, the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Company gathers the herd and swims them across a narrow channel to Chincoteague. Swimming comes naturally to these ponies. In fact, it is common for them to swim to Chincoteague of their own accord and on their own timetable.



The Joining of the Herds is another landmark event during Pony Penning Week each July. The Saltwater Cowboys gather the ponies from the North Range of the refuge and herd them down the beach to where the South Herd is corralled. There they wait for the climactic swim to Chincoteague Island.



The Joining of the Herds is a well-attended event. Hundreds of people line up along the beach at dawn to watch the ponies arrive, kicking up sand and surf as they proceed down the beach.



Salt Water cowboys laugh and joke among themselves as they chaperone the north herd of Chincoteague ponies to the corrals.



A pinto stallion surveys the competition on the other side of the fence. The corrals bring many stallions together in close contact, and they must posture and fight to maintain status and retain their mares.



Young foals get acquainted in the Assateague corral. Like children, foals make new friends easily, and engage in games and races with other youngsters.



Adult stallions often harass adolescent colts. Confined in the corral with no real escape, this knot of youngsters clustered in a corner, fearfully anticipating the return of an aggressive stallion that had spent the morning terrorizing them. Eventually, the cowboys separated the youngsters to avoid further conflict.



The ponies seem to enjoy the short swim to Assateague. The annual event is televised worldwide. The best view is from a chartered boat, but thousands of onlookers watch from the shore as the ponies cross the water.



After the swim, the ponies rest and graze in, separated from the crowd by a flimsy barrier. Mares and foals call to each other with excitement, and stallions square off, prepared to battle.



The first foal to emerge on Chincoteague is designated “King or Queen Neptune” and is raffled at the fairgrounds.



A stallion calls to his family as the Saltwater Cowboys gather the ponies for the annual parade down Main Street.



One hundred fifty adult ponies and their foals rush for the Fairgrounds in a cohesive mass.



The Saltwater Cowboys surround the ponies and guide them to the fairgrounds, to the delight of onlookers.



All of the foals are sold at auction to the highest bidders. Some will return to Assateague, but most will leave the island to find new lives as domestic horses.



Abruptly separated, mares and foals whinny frantically to each other. Whereas wild horses typically nurse their offspring for 1-2 years, Chincoteague foals are usually separated from their mothers after only 2-4 months. The foals, weaned onto the nutritionally balanced diet of a domestic horse, typically thrive and might grow taller than their brethren on the island. The mares also benefit; most are pregnant with next year's foal, and are more likely to carry to term if not burdened by lactation.



On the day after the auction, the saltwater Cowboys herd the ponies to the water's edge for the return swim to Assateague.



Ponies emerge from the water like mythical sea creatures.



The ponies need no guidance to return to Assateague. They know the way, and are eager to return.



Historically, the horses of Assateague were mostly solid colored- chestnut, bay, and black. Shetland ponies were added to the herd in the 1920's to encourage pinto markings. Over the years, Arabians, mustangs, and other breeds have been outcrossed into the herd to improve conformation and to deepen the gene pool.



Tens of thousands of people visit Chincoteague during Pony Penning week – yet it is still easy to get a good look at the ponies. These kayakers had the unforgettable experience of watching the swim-back at eye-level with the ponies, and following the herd back to Assateague.



Overjoyed to return to their homeland, the south herd gallops along the water's edge.



Chincoteague ponies are well insulated against the cold, stormy winters.



The Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Company gathers the ponies three times yearly to provide basic veterinary care, deworm them, and administer vaccinations. At the time of the April roundup, mares are just beginning to deliver that seasons foals.



Cattle egrets feast on the invertebrates churned up by the feet of grazing ponies, and use the ponies for perches and roosts. The ponies do not seem to mind.



Salt marsh cordgrass is the preferred food of barrier island horses. Each band has a preferred home range and over the course of the day migrates to different locations within the range- to the marshes and grasslands for grazing, to the beach to escape insects, and to the maritime forest for shade.

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