

HORSES



Shackleford Banks, the southern-most of the three barrier islands in Cape Lookout National Seashore, is home to 100 - 110 feral horses.

This island is approximately nine miles long and half a mile wide. It contains many habitats, only some of which support the horses.

... feral

The last human residents of Shackleford moved to the mainland after the storms of the late 1890's, leaving their cattle, sheep, goats and horses behind. Today only the horses remain on the island. These horses are called "feral"

because they are descendents of domestic stock, and "wild" because they are free roaming. In the west, horses like these are referred to as "mustangs."

... ponies

"Ponies" stand 14.2 hands or less at maturity. A hand is 4 inches, and the measurement is taken at the withers (between neck and back). The Shackleford ponies average 10 - 13 hands, but local tradition refers to them

as horses. Their small stature reflects their diet. The coarse marsh grass that you see on the sound (mainland) side of the island is *Spartina* which makes up about 50% of their diet.

... preserved

While technically a non-native species, a representative herd of horses is maintained on Shackleford Banks according to the national seashore's General Management Plan. This preserves a cultural aspect of the Outer Banks and provides enjoyment for hundreds of visitors every year.

In the summer of 1998, President William J. Clinton signed two laws, P.L. 105-202 and P.L. 105-229, which provide for a partnership between the National Park Service and the Foundation For Shackleford Horses, Inc., to co-manage the herd.

... management

Cape Lookout purposely preserves the herd's wild lifestyle. This way, visitors can see horses in their natural state. Human contact, socialization, and intervention are strictly limited. In the wild, the population would grow and either the herd territory would expand or the grazing would be compromised. Because these are not viable alternatives, the Park Service and Foundation periodically remove selected horses for adoption and use immunocontraceptive (birth control) drugs on others. Genetics and herd lineage scientists help

identify suitable candidates and the herd is periodically reviewed for population, structure and health. Adoptions will be handled by the Foundation according to their strict screening process. The contraceptive drug may be administered as an injection or, more suitably, remotely by personnel trained in such use. The short duration drug, given to mares, inhibits fertilization but does not effect current pregnancies or behavior. Thus, pregnancies can be limited and the population will remain at a reasonable level.

... herd social life



Shackleford horses allow the visitor a rare glimpse of the social life of free-roaming herds. Each dominant stallion (mature breeding male) jealously guards his harem of mares (mature breeding females). The harem also includes younger offspring of these mares.

Mutual grooming involves two animals scratching each other on the necks and backs. In fly season, pairs of horses will stand side by side, head to tail, to protect their faces - their partner's tail is an effective fly swatter. They also submerge themselves in the ocean when the insects are particularly bothersome. Within and between harems, a hierarchy is maintained by dominance behavior (pinning the ears back, head snaking, biting, rearing & striking, kicking). Youngsters are generally lower on the social order than adults, but foals born to mares higher on the social order will

enjoy a higher position in the harem. The dominant animals get their choice of grasses and get to drink first.

Drinking water is hard to find in the beach environment. These horses have learned that fresh water is often just beneath the surface in certain areas. In order to reach the water, they paw a drinking depression in the sand. Sometimes these depressions become quite deep.

Young males of breeding age are chased away by the dominant stallion. They form "bachelor" bands until given the opportunity to start their own harem. When a bachelor is old and strong enough, he will challenge other stallions with harems - the winner takes the group - or he will try to steal a mare from an existing harem.

... horse watching

Binoculars and, in summer, bug repellent, are helpful for horse watching.

To find horses, walk or boat along the beach. Depending on the season, weather & insects, you'll find harems or bands on the dunes, in the swales between the dunes, on the marsh or in the forest.

When watching the horses, you will observe their instinctive urge to keep away from potential danger. Soon after one member of a group spots you, the others will watch you intently. The stallion will most likely position himself between you and his mares. If you approach too closely, they will move away. If you watch quietly from a distance, you may be able to see them in social interactions or watch them paw drinking depressions in the sand.

When you spot a horse or horses, get comfortable and wait. Approaching them will likely cause the horses to move away, while your patience and distance will be rewarded by a glimpse into the life of a feral horse.

Remember that horses can inflict serious injuries by their bites and kicks. They can spin around and kick amazingly quickly. Do not approach them or try to feed them for your own safety.



For more information, contact the Wildlife Biologist at
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