

Chincoteague

NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
BUREAU OF SPORT FISHERIES AND WILDLIFE

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CHINCOTEAGUE

A National Wildlife Refuge

ALTHOUGH the vanished Indian tribe once known as Chincoteagues is almost forgotten, its name is perpetuated by a town, an island, a bay, and a national wildlife refuge. All four are situated together on the coast of Virginia, along the Delmarva peninsula where three States, Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia, share the blue Atlantic.

Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge is an eminent wildlife haven of more than 9,000 acres of beach, dunes, and marshes, established in 1943 to save a significant portion of coastal wetlands with their unique vegetation and animal life. Twenty-two years later it became part of the new Assateague Island National Seashore. It continues to be administered as a National Wildlife Refuge by the Fish and Wildlife Service under laws applying to national wildlife refuges.

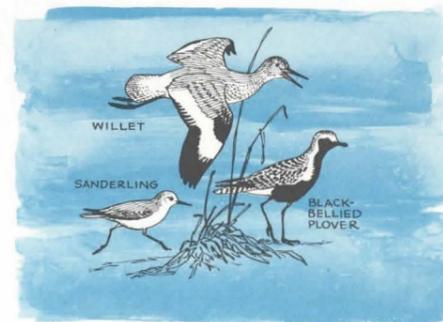
The refuge occupies the Virginia part of Assateague Island and about 400 acres in the Maryland part. It is 13 miles long from north to south, and is mostly from 1¼ to 1½ miles wide, but at the lower end opposite Chincoteague town it widens out to nearly 3 miles. It possesses one of the finest ocean beaches on the eastern seaboard. The

On preceding page: GREATER SNOW GEESE.

beach is backed by high sand dunes falling off on the landward side to ponds and marshes, with groves of loblolly pines on a few high points and ridges. The narrow waters of Chincoteague Bay separate island from mainland.

The variety of habitat at Chincoteague Refuge is reflected in its great variety of birdlife; more than 275 kinds have been identified. Each season has its own coterie of species. In March, large wintering flocks of ducks, geese, and swans leave the refuge to start their journeys north, many of them to far-off arctic lands. Other flocks come in from the south, linger briefly, and move on. By late April, all the waterfowl are gone, except for black ducks, blue-winged teals, mallards, and gadwalls that have selected nesting sites at refuge pools.

April and May are shorebird months. Enormous flocks of sandpipers, plovers, curlews, turnstones, oystercatchers, wil-

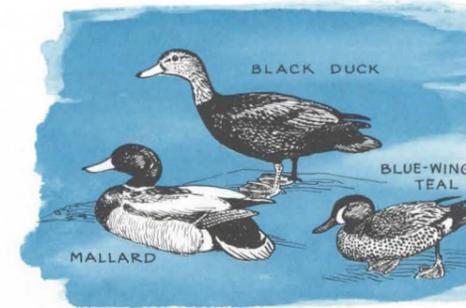


lets, and yellowlegs gather at ebb tide to rest and feed on mudflats and in shallow fresh-water pools. Birdwatchers know Chincoteague Refuge as one of the best places in the middle Atlantic region to enjoy the spectacle of shorebird migration. A particularly good place to observe it is along the surfaced road leading from Assateague Channel bridge to the beach, where the road skirts two fresh-water pools.

The refuge summer landscape is animated by egrets, herons, ibises, avocets, and ducklings feeding in the pools. Colonies of terns, laughing gulls, black skimmers, herons, egrets, and ibises nest on small islands near the refuge. Shorebirds return in renewed numbers in late July and August.

September flights of robins, flickers, and hawks denote the arrival of autumn. After some brisk October night, morning may reveal flocks of pintails, widgeons, black ducks, mallards, shovellers, gadwalls, green-winged teals, Canada geese, and snow geese in noisy thousands. Offshore, beyond the white breakers, great numbers of sea ducks appear. Rafts of scoters parallel the beach from one end of the refuge to the other. Oldsquaws, buffleheads, goldeneyes, mergansers, brants, loons, and grebes congregate in Tom's Cove and Chincoteague Bay.

In winter, large flocks of ducks, snow geese, Canada geese, brants, and whistling swans are at home on the refuge. The snow geese are of the "greater" subspecies, a race that nests in Greenland and on Arctic Ocean islands and spends the winters in the comparatively small area between Chincoteague Refuge on the north and North Carolina's Currituck Sound on the south, this latter the site of Pea Island and Mattamuskeet National Wildlife Refuges.



A destructive storm in 1962 nearly flattened the dunes of Chincoteague, permitting ocean water to flood productive marshes. New dunes were built from the remains of the old, and beachgrass was sprigged into them for protection when the next severe blow comes in from the Atlantic.

Between the dunes and Chincoteague Bay, dikes have been built to form seven fresh-water pools and marsh units. These hold about 3,000 acres of fresh water from rains. Their depth and salinity need close regulation for best production of food for waterfowl and shorebirds. Some pools are drawn down periodically, while others may have salt water from the bay added to them from time to time. Sago pondweed, widgeongrass, spikerushes, bulrushes, and various smartweeds grow luxuriantly in these pools.

Cordgrass marshes with scattered potholes full of widgeongrass and edged by bulrushes cover large areas on the west side of the refuge next to the pools. They are flooded by extremely high tides.

Although natural food plants are favored, refuge workers grow crops of millet, ryegrass, and fescue on small farm fields; these are especially liked by ducks and geese.

Bordering some fresh-water pools are patches of higher ground wooded with pines, oaks, and other trees and carpeted with thickets of myrtle, bayberry, sumac, rose, and greenbrier. The highest point on the refuge is 47 feet above mean sea level.

Sika deer, native to Japan, were released on the island by a troop of Boy Scouts in 1923. The number of this deer has grown until the size of the herd must be controlled. Other mammals include red foxes, raccoons, muskrats, cottontails, and otters.

Thousands of people come to the lower 4 miles of Chincoteague Refuge each year for its diverse recreation, which includes fishing, shell-collecting, birdwatching, sightseeing, photography, picnicking, swimming, surfing, and sunbathing. These southern 4 miles are administered as a recreational area by the National Park Service. A store-cafe concession is located at the beach, and other facilities are planned.

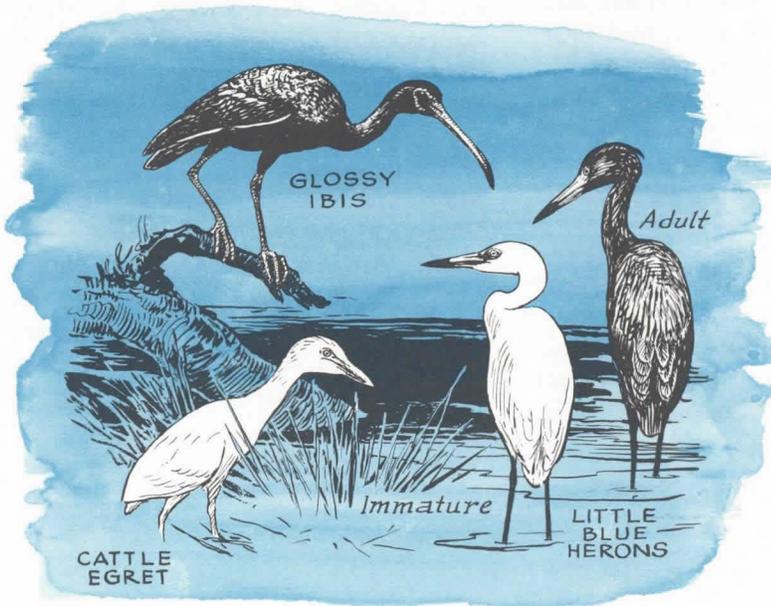
The beach above this lower 4 miles is open to the public for fishing, photography, hiking, and nature study. Foot



SIKA DEER

traffic only is permitted. A nature trail begins near refuge headquarters; parking for those using the trail is on the left hand side of the road, near the refuge entrance from Assateague Channel bridge.

During June and July surf fishermen visit the beaches in search of the highly prized channel bass, or red drum. These fish are usually caught at high tide in the evening on cut bait. Other fish sometimes caught in abundance from the beach include whiting, kingfish, flounder, black drum, bluefish, and hickory shad.



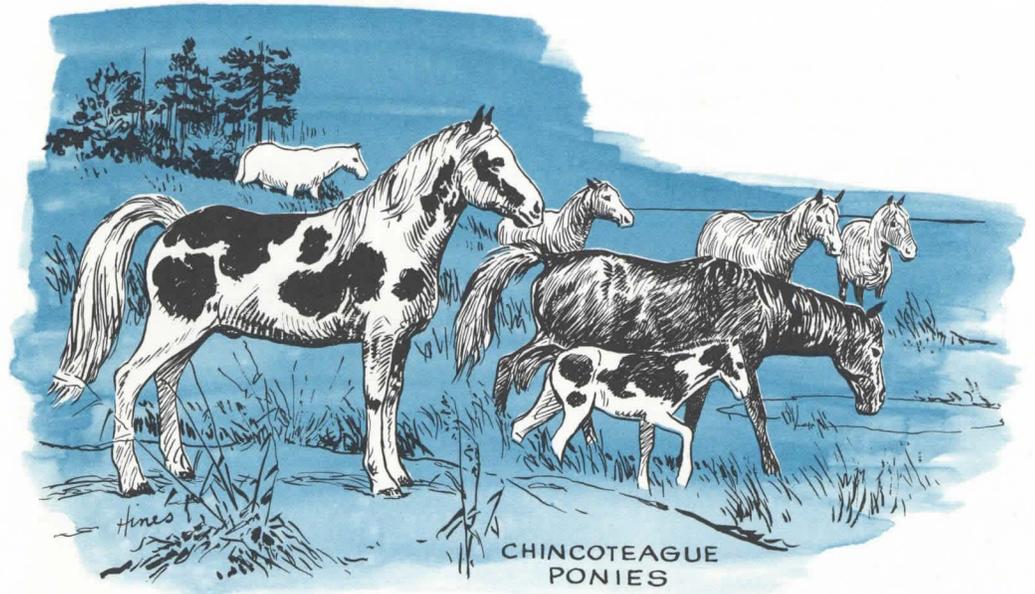
GLOSSY IBIS

Adult

Immature

CATTLE EGRET

LITTLE BLUE HERONS



The famous Chincoteague ponies roam part of the refuge; their origin is unknown, but legend says they swam ashore from a shipwreck. Another story has it that pirates put them ashore to graze. From whatever stock they descended, the ponies have been on Assateague Island a long time.

They are smaller than a horse and larger than a Shetland pony, and their coats are long and shaggy. The ponies are owned by the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Company and graze on Chincoteague Refuge under a permit issued periodically by the Fish and Wildlife Service.

The last week in July is "Pony Penning Week," time of the annual sale of the year's colts. The animals are rounded up and herded into Assateague Channel, swimming it to Chincoteague Island. There they are sold

at the pony-penning grounds to the highest bidders.

Assateague Lighthouse, rebuilt in 1866-67, is still in service. It is not open to the public.

Additional information may be obtained at the refuge office between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. except on Saturday and Sunday, or by writing the refuge manager at P.O. Box 62, Chincoteague, Virginia 23336. The telephone number is 703-336-6122.

Refuge headquarters are 3 miles east of Chincoteague town: Turn left on Main Street when entering town on Virginia Highway 175, and travel seven blocks; turn right on Maddox Boulevard and follow Maddox Boulevard extended to the refuge. Headquarters will be found about half a mile after crossing Assateague Channel bridge.