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HOW MANY? There are approximately 130 head in Virginia and 40 in Maryland. These are split into numerous bands of from 2 to 20 animals. A fence separates the two herds at the MD./VA. state line, which also marks the boundaries of the National Park Service and Fish and Wildlife Service land.

OWNERS? The National Park Service owns the Maryland herd. The Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Company owns the Virginia herd, which is allowed to graze under a special permit issued by Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge. The Virginia herd is known locally as "Chincoteague" ponies.

MILD? Since they maintain themselves in all seasons without any assistance from man, they are truly wild animals.

FOOD AND WATER? The horses eat only natural vegetation (dune and marsh grasses and shrub leaves) and drink from brackish ponds.

PONY SWIM AND PENNING? On the last Wednesday in July the Virginia herd is swum across Assateague Channel to Chincoteague in the vicinity of Chincoteague Memorial Park. On Thursday the excess young are sold at public auction.

SAFETY? Petting and feeding ponies is dangerous and prohibited, as the ponies can quickly change from docile to aggressive. Visitors have received severe bites and/or hoof contusions.

"EVERYTHING YOU HAVE WANTED TO KNOW BUT WERE AFRAID TO ASK"

If you have seen horses on Assateague but are not sure they were the famed "Chincoteague (or Assateague) wild ponies", rest assured that you saw the real McCoy. They are often referred to as "Chincoteague" ponies since many of their ancestors originally inhabited that island. They are called wild horses because they are not fed or sheltered as domestic horses are. Many are actually gentle enough to pet. However, each year visitors are bitten or kicked while petting or feeding the ponies. REMEMBER: PETTING AND FEEDING HORSES IS DANGEROUS AND PROHIBITED! "Just a little bit" of "junk" food multiplied by hundreds of handouts will result in the development of an unnatural dependence on man as well as general poor health for the ponies.

ORIGINS: No one is certain where the horses came from or how long they have been here. A popular legend tells how they swam onto Assateague from a stranded Spanish galleon. Another has it that pirates put them ashore. Recent research suggests that the ponies may be descendants of colonial horses that were driven by settlers to many barrier islands during the 17th Century when crop damage caused by the numerous free roaming animals led colonial legislatures to enact laws requiring fencing and levying taxes on all livestock.

PONY PENNING: Whatever their origin the ponies have adapted and thrived on Assateague. In the 17th Century, unmarked and unpened animals could be claimed if captured and marked in the presence of "neighbors". That was probably the beginning of "Pony Penning", which is still held on the last Wednesday and Thursday of July in Chincoteague. It is at this time that the herds from the Virginia section of Assateague swim the channel to Chincoteague in what is popularly called "the pony swim". Today the ponies in the Virginia section are owned by the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Department. Bids vary depending on the quality of the animal and the number available for sale, however, the average bid is \$225. Proceeds from the sale of young ponies help provide fire and ambulance service for the community. Successful bidders must be able to provide safe and humane transportation for the colts. New owners will find that the Chincoteague colts readily adapt to new pastures and most domesticate well.

RESEARCH: Only in the past few years has intensive research been done on the sociological and biological behavior of the ponies. As in any new scientific investigation, nearly as many questions have been raised as have been answered. With National Park Service assistance, Dr. Ronald Keiper of Penn State University will continue his research to find some of these answers.

POPULATION: Since acquiring the Maryland herd in 1969, the National Park Service has found the numbers have fluctuated only slightly from the original 40 head. This group is never rounded up or administered to by a veterinarian on a regular basis. The role territorial requirements and carrying capacity of the land takes in maintaining these numbers is not clearly understood. Certainly a "population explosion" has had ample opportunity to occur. Probably the horses have found their natural niche in the Assateague environment.

In Virginia most male colts and yearlings are auctioned off each year. The larger numbers in Virginia can be attributed to the management of the herd for maximum yield. If the Virginia herd were left untouched, most likely they would stabilize.

The "pinto" (calico) trademark is a characteristic that results from much cross breeding. The size of small bands often depends on the stallion's ability to hold his mares together. He will usually defend his herd against the intrusions of another adult male, but occasionally one or two is lost and a new band is formed. These individual herds may contain up to 20 animals.



"ADULT PONY GRAZING"

INSECTS: If you are pony watching during the period from May to November, you may be able to observe the unique relationship that exists between the ponies and the cattle egret. Cattle egrets feed on ticks, mosquitoes and horseflies that are associated with the ponies. It is not uncommon for an egret to remain perched on a pony's back for an hour or more. Although egrets are a great aid in reducing "pest" population on or near the pony, it is seldom enough relief. During periods of heaviest mosquito or fly infestation, the ponies may use many techniques such as walking over the tops of shrubs to brush the pests off. A pair of ponies may stand head to rump and switch their tails to drive insects away from the eyes and face. The horses may also be seen wading in the surf and bay or "rolling" or "rubbing" more frequently. In desperation, they may even resort to running periodically to escape their tormentors!

FOOD AND MIGRATION: During the winter months the ponies graze on American beach grass in the dune areas or on marsh elder and salt meadow hay in the high marsh. In the summer they prefer the salt marsh cordgrass of the low marsh.

Some nights, in winter months, or during storms, the ponies will seek the shelter of wooded areas. During the summer each group appears to have a territory of sorts, but during winter, overlapping may occur as the ponies seek shelter and food. A fence on the VA./MD. state line separates the two primary herds. Other fences in Virginia exist to keep ponies out of areas of high public use or special waterfowl management zones.

SURVIVAL: Most horses could not endure the rigors of barrier island life. These ponies have survived through adaptation. Their thick furry coat coupled with their stockiness enables them to endure the harsh winters as well as the insects of summer. Contrary to popular thought, it is during the hot, humid, insect-ridden summer months and not during the winter that the ponies are most severely put to nature's test.

Stunted by the low nutrition of salt marsh grasses, the animals are somewhat smaller in size than a "normal" horse. Their size and stature parallels that of the Welsh Pony. The high salt content of their foraged food may exaggerate the ponies abdomens.

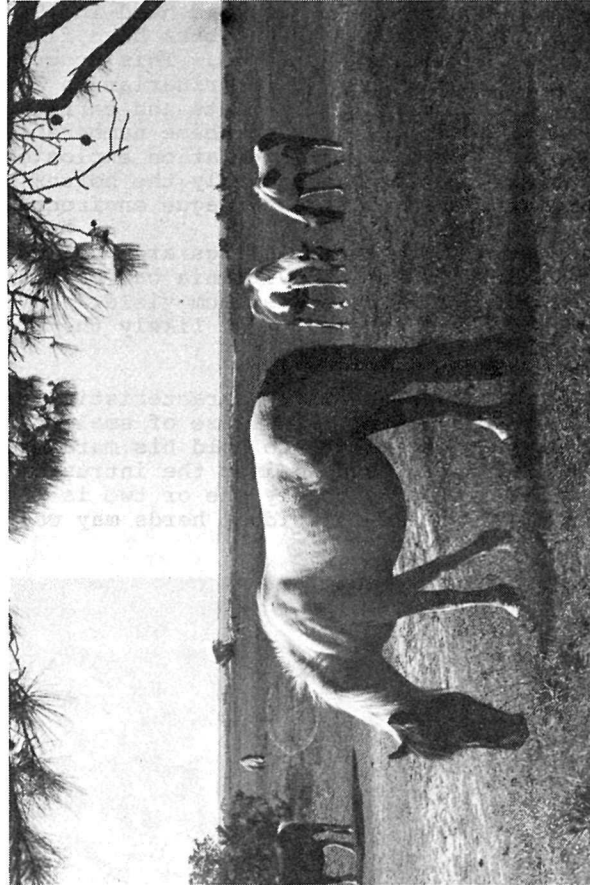
While equine infectious anemia (Swamp Fever) was discovered on Assateague in 1975, it is thought that this disease has long been present. The disease which is transmitted by mosquitoes is not known to infect humans, and the natural quarantine provided by the island effectively prevents any spread to the Mainland. Only ponies certified free of the disease can be sold at auction.

While neither the firemen nor the managing agencies will permit undue suffering by injured or dying horses, no extraordinary efforts are made to prolong life. Such action could result in a population increase that disrupts the delicate environmental balance that now exists. Although each year 10 or 12 of the old or weak may perish, spring brings the promise of survival for this hardy species with the arrival of new-born foals.

THE FUTURE: With the publication of Marguerite Henry's book Misty and its subsequent release as a movie, fame came to the ponies. Protection and continuation of the species seem assured. The U. S. Department of the Interior, through the National Park Service and U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, has determined that present numbers appear compatible with other forms of wildlife. Careful observation and research will continue to insure that the ponies remain in harmony with all of the island resources.



"SPRING FOAL"



"TYPICAL HERD"



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