



# Preserve & Protect



FREE

Cape Lookout National Seashore

2009–2010 Edition

## Visiting the Wild Horses

By Sue Stuska, Ed.D.

All photo credits: Kate McLachlan, Park Volunteer

If you're interested in wild horses, searching for and watching horses is a great recreational activity on Shackleford Banks.

The first challenge is to find the horses. Sometimes, you arrive on the island and there are horses grazing right in front of you.

If you don't see any horses, take along your water, bug repellent, and camera with zoom lens. (All these photos were taken from a distance with a zoom lens.) Follow a horse path until you come to a higher area. Preserve the dune vegetation (it holds the dunes together and is an important source of food for the horses). Walk softly. Use existing trails and bare sand when possible. When climbing dunes, walk diagonally and avoid disturbing the sea oats. Use binoculars to scout for horses.

Sometimes, it appears that there aren't any horses to be seen on the island – except for the horse manure lying about.

The manure piles tell you something, though. A small amount of manure is probably from a mare (mature female). She relieves herself wherever she happens to be. A wet spot around the pile indicates that her harem stallion marked her manure. He left his scent to indicate that this mare is part of his band.

Small manure balls indicate that you can be on the lookout for a youngster.



Selected young horses from well represented genetic lines are periodically removed from the island and available for adoption through the Foundation for Shackleford Horses, Inc., the park's management partner. To adopt a horse, call (252) 241-5222 or (252) 728-6308

in the behavior pattern is to turn around and sniff the pile again, though sometimes this is omitted if the stallion is in a hurry to catch up to his mares.

Large stallion piles on well-traveled paths are likely on the way to water sources. While it's not necessary to know where the water is to find the horses, it's fun to be able to read the signs that water may be near.

The horses have fresh water to drink on the island, and you may come upon a pond or a dig. Approach with all your senses working; be ready to stop or back up. Horses have evolved to be cautious and flighty at water because their

natural predators (which don't live on Shackleford) would prey on them there. Watching from a distance will allow the horse to drink his fill while also letting you observe. When a harem (a stallion and his mares with their offspring) or a group of bachelors (young stallions in a loose association) drink, there is lots of sparring. The dominant horse(s) get to drink first. It's a particularly good place to watch social interactions.

One social interaction that can take place anywhere is a stallion checking his mare. He may be familiarizing himself with a mare who is new to his harem, or he may be checking her breeding status.

Stallions are always keeping an eye on their mares. They must guard against other males stealing them, and sometimes the mares try to leave. It is interesting to watch a

A large pile, with many additions over time, is a stallion pile. A number of stallions have diverted their paths to stop at this pile. The ritualized behavior is actually useful: sniff (Who's been here? Is it that older stallion who's more dominant than I am? How long ago was he here? If it was just recently, I should make my mares wait. I don't want him challenging me and maybe taking one of my mares.) The stallion then takes two steps forward and adds to the pile. Think of it as leaving a calling card. The final step



Stallions keep apprised of the breeding status of their mares by scent.

mare try to sneak away from the harem. When the stallion decides that the mare has gone far enough, he will bring her back by herding her. This can be done at great speed. Stay back out of their unpredictable path; the mare could run over you in her efforts to either comply or escape.



This stallion is trying to move his mare away from a potential rival.

Another fast-paced, exciting and sometimes violent interaction comes when stallions challenge each other. The safest way to watch wild horses is from far enough away that you can see all the horses in front of you with one glance. That way you are less likely to be surprised, but can see an interaction beginning. Two stallions from the same harem may fight; stallions from different harems may clash; bachelors may spar with each other. The competitors may come from opposite directions and you don't want to end up in the middle. The stallions may trot side-by-side with their necks arched in a parallel prance. Try to watch for the end of the contest and see if you can determine by their posture and actions who is the winner.



Parallel prance shows off each horse's physique to his opponent.



Foals of the year can be recognized by their short tails – at or above the hock joints.



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Remember that these horses are wild. They may look placid, and they see visitors often so they don't usually run away, but they do charge, whirl and kick in a flash.



The rearing stallion later lost this fight when he got chased away. Previously, he had held the dominant position in this harem for years.

They can seriously injure or kill people or dogs with their hooves and teeth. Do not try to approach a wild horse. Federal law requires that you keep your pet on a 6 foot leash and close to you at all times.

## Wild Horse Watching Tips, Shackleford Banks

Shackleford's 110-130 horses live in about 30 groups called "harems" (stallions, mares and foals) and "bachelor bands" (only stallions). They may be seen in all parts of the island but you may need to hunt around a bit to find them.

Remember that the horses are wild – they must find their own food and water and protect themselves from danger. Wild horses see humans and dogs as something dangerous. If you get too close to the horses they may defend themselves by charging, kicking or biting. For you and your pet's safety:

- Watch the horses from a safe distance. If the horse stops what it's doing to stare directly at you, stop there. If it starts to move away, you are already too close.
- Bring binoculars and use a telephoto lens so you won't disturb the horses or endanger yourself.
- Keep your dog on a leash for its and the horses' safety (and it's the law!).
- Always carry fresh water for yourself and your pet. During the warm months, bug repellent is recommended.

## Sea Turtles Dig The Dark

By Jon Altman

Sea turtles probably have been digging their nests on the dark shores of Cape Lookout National Seashore since the low sand banks existed. When the European colonists arrived they noted the presence of abundant sea turtles in the waters of the Southeast coast. The explorers and colonists learned how the Native Americans harvested sea turtles, which were an important source of fresh meat. When the bricks of the present Cape Lookout lighthouse were being laid 150 years ago sea turtles were present in the surrounding waters. Nowadays they are not as abundant; all of them are protected by the Endangered Species Act, but they still nest on Shackleford and Core Banks. These include the loggerhead, green, and leatherback sea turtles.

Sea turtles nest under the cover of darkness at night. This allows them to avoid daytime predators such as gulls and other birds that could get their eggs. The act of coming out of the buoyant marine environment onto dry land is a difficult task. Except for the short period of developing in the egg and the mad dash to the ocean of the hatchlings, sea turtles spend their lives at sea. In fact, males never return to land and nesting females only return every other year once they reach maturity at around 30 years. So, needless to say,



A Green Sea Turtle hatchling pauses to get its bearings before continuing down the beach to the ocean.

crawling up onto the beach puts a turtle in a strange place. Even breathing and moving is considerably more difficult with the weight of a 300 pound loggerhead turtle not supported by water. Sea turtles disturbed by lights or excessive beach activity may not come onto the beach, or they may turn around resulting in a "false crawl." A false crawl is where a sea turtle crawled onto the beach but decided not to lay a nest. Sea turtle eyes function in a dark environment



This female Loggerhead sea turtle is laying her eggs in a nest she dug with her hind flippers in the sand.

once the sun goes down. Introducing artificial light can temporarily blind and confuse a sea turtle. In addition, the hatchlings are sensitive to light pollution which can disorientate them and lead them towards danger. On a dark beach with no artificial lights the ocean is the brightest surface with the starlight and moonlight reflection and the surf foam glow. The hatchlings are attracted to this light and it leads them into the ocean.

Fortunately for the sea turtles there is no development and associated light pollution at Cape Lookout National Seashore. Both sea turtles and visitors can enjoy the dark beaches. It is important to keep beach campfires small and to minimize other uses of light when on the beach. If you are lucky enough to have a sea turtle on the beach near you, remember to give her space. Don't use lights, don't take flash pictures and otherwise remain still and watch. With a little care the visiting public and visiting sea turtles will continue to come to the dark beaches of Cape Lookout National Seashore.



In the early dawn light a female Loggerhead sea turtle crawls back down the beach to the ocean after finally finishing laying her eggs in the beach sands.