

## Beautiful, Tough, and Wild

The wild horses of Assateague are famous. Even people who have not visited this barrier island that is half in Maryland and half in Virginia have heard of the creatures. But where do they come from? And how do they survive?

The horses are feral animals, which means that their ancestors were domesticated animals that returned to a wild state. Stories say that they were survivors of a shipwreck, but no one can confirm this. Most likely the people on the mainland brought their horses to the island in the 1800s to avoid fencing laws and taxation.

The horses of Assateague are tough enough to survive on this rugged island despite the heat, mosquitos, storms, and uncertain food supply. They have split into two herds, one on the Virginia side and one on the Maryland side. The Virginia horses are sometimes called the Chincoteague ponies, as they participate each year in a festival called Pony Penning on the nearby island of Chincoteague.

Pony Penning takes place on the last Wednesday of July. People known as Saltwater Cowboys round-up the horses and swim them from Assateague to Chincoteague. The next day, the foals are auctioned off to people who

want to buy one of the beautiful horses. This practice helps keep the herd numbers manageable and raises money for their upkeep.

The wild horses of Assateague have been described as “beautiful, tough, and wild.” The park service emphasizes the “wild” part, reminding people not to treat them like domesticated horses. Feeding them human food can make them sick. It also trains them to come to the road for treats where they get hit by passing cars. Petting them can be dangerous. They are not tame and will kick, bite, and knock down people who get too close.

It is best to view the horses from a distance and to respect the social structure that they have built in their natural habitat. There are few places left in the United States where people can see wild horses and learn about their unique behaviors. With careful management, the wild horses will continue to thrive on Assateague Island and wild horses and people can co-exist in peace.



This page has been intentionally left blank.

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

1. What is NOT mentioned as a feature of the rugged island environment?
  - a. Storms
  - b. Mosquitoes
  - c. Heat
  - d. High waves
  
2. Who are Saltwater Cowboys?
  - a. Chincoteague ponies
  - b. People who round up the horses for Pony Penning
  - c. People who swim from Chincoteague to Assateague
  - d. Assateague horses
  
3. What is the most likely origin of the wild horses of Assateague?
  - a. They were shipwreck survivors
  - b. They were brought to the island by their owners to avoid taxes
  - c. They came from Maryland to Virginia
  - d. They arrived during Pony Penning
  
4. Which of the following is NOT mentioned as a reason not to feed the wild horses?
  - a. Human food makes them sick
  - b. They get hit by cars
  - c. They kick people
  - d. They only like to eat apples

Instructions for teachers:

These questions can be used to assess understanding of the reading passage.

The item in bold is the correct answer for each question.

1. What is NOT mentioned as a feature of the rugged island environment?
  - a. Storms
  - b. Mosquitoes
  - c. Heat
  - d. High waves**
2. Who are Saltwater Cowboys?
  - a. Chincoteague ponies
  - b. People who round up the horses for Pony Penning**
  - c. People who swim from Chincoteague to Assateague
  - d. Assateague horses
3. What is the most likely origin of the wild horses of Assateague?
  - a. They were shipwreck survivors
  - b. They were brought to the island by their owners to avoid taxes**
  - c. They came from Maryland to Virginia
  - d. They arrived during Pony Penning
4. Which of the following is NOT mentioned as a reason not to feed the wild horses?
  - a. Human food makes them sick
  - b. They get hit by cars
  - c. They kick people
  - d. They only like to eat apples**