Grade 4 Task

“The Wild Horses of Assateague Island”

A National Treasure

The wild horses of Assateague Island are descendants of domesticated animals brought to the island over 300 years ago. Horses tough enough to survive the scorching heat, abundant insects, stormy weather and poor quality food found on this windswept barrier island have formed a unique wild horses society. Enjoy their beauty from a distance, and you can help make sure these extraordinary wild horses will continue to thrive on Assateague Island.

“My treasures do not click together or glitter. They gleam in the sun and neigh in the night.” –Bedouin proverb

Where did they come from?

Were the horses shipwreck survivors...

Local folklore describes the Assateague horses as survivors of a shipwreck off the Virginia coast. While this dramatic tale of struggle and survival is popular, there are no records yet that confirm it.

or settlers’ horses?

During the 17th century free-roaming horses, cows, sheep and pigs caused expensive crop damage to local farms. Farmers were required to pay taxes on all mainland livestock and fence them in.

Like people in the 21st century, these resourceful coastal residents looked for ways to avoid paying this tax. They turned to nearby Assateague Island with its abundance of food, shelter and a natural “corral” made of water to solve their problem.

It is likely that modern Assateague horses are descendants of those hardy animals turned loose on the island to graze tax-free.

Living the wild life in Maryland

Assateague’s horses are uniquely adapted to survive on a barrier island. How do they do it?

What do they eat?

The horses spend most of their time grazing on abundant but nutrient-poor saltmarsh cordgrass, saltmeadow hay and beach grass. The horses’ short stature is a result of hundreds of years of adaptation to this low quality diet. Genetically they are considered horses, even though they are now pony size.

The Assateague horses drink over twice the amount of water that domesticated horses will due to their salty food supply. All that drinking combined with a high salt diet contributes to their bloated appearance.

Where do they live throughout the year?

Spring brings cool, rainy weather and fresh plant growth to the island. Many of the horses live in the marshes close to their best food sources. Foals are usually born in late spring and live with their mothers
in a family group called a “band.” Each band is usually made up of 2-10 mares, their offspring, and a stallion.

Hot, humid, and full of insects, summer brings a new set of challenges. The horses escape the mosquitos and flies of the marsh by spending more time on the beach and in the surf, letting the refreshing ocean breezes carry away airborne pests. Cooler fall weather and fewer insects allow the bands to move from the beaches back to the marshes and their abundant grasses.

The horses prefer to browse in shrub thickets during the damp, chilly, winter season. Their thick, furry coats will protect them from ferocious winter winds and the occasional snowstorm.

Do they receive veterinary care?

While action may be taken to end the suffering of a gravely ill, seriously injured, or dying horse, no measures are taken to prolong the lives of Maryland’s wild horses. As with other species of Assateague wildlife, horses that are sick or weak do not survive. This helps maintain a hardy, healthy population of wild horses.

Virginia’s horses are privately owned by the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Department and receive some veterinary care.

Where can you see the wild horses?

In Maryland

Maryland’s horses are owned and managed by the National Park Service. They are free-roaming wildlife and could be anywhere in the park. During the summer months many bands can be found on the beach. You can often see the horses and other wildlife by driving slowly along park roads. Protect island habitat by parking only in designated parking areas. The “Life of the Forest” and “Life of the Marsh” trails are good places to look, especially during spring, fall and winter season.

Do not feed or pet the horses. Horses that learn to come up by the road are hit and killed by cars.

In Virginia

Virginia’s horses are privately owned by the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Department and are fenced in large enclosures.

Look for the horses in the marsh along Beach Road and from the observation platform on the Woodland Trail.

“Wild Ponies of Chincoteague”

by Annika Brynn Jenkins

The last Wednesday and Thursday of every July are amazing days at Chincoteague (SHING-kuh-teeg). That’s pony-penning time on this island just off the coast of Virginia.

The ponies normally live wild on nearby Assateague Island. To keep the herd from getting too big, some new foals are sold each year at the auction on Chincoteague. To get there, the ponies are rounded up and herded across the narrow channel between the two islands.

Wednesday Morning—Really Early!

My family and I woke at 4:30 in the morning to drive to Chincoteague. I was so excited, I jumped out of bed. The drive from our home in Virginia Beach was just two hours, but it seemed like a week.

After we got there, we took a small boat into the channel. The weather was wet and dreary, and I felt like an icicle as raindrops fell cold against my cheeks. But in my mind I was dancing! All I could think was, It’s almost time for the ponies to cross!

First, I heard faint whinnying sounds drifting through the salty air. Then I could see the ponies on the Assateague shore. The “Saltwater Cowboys” were rounding them up. I loved the ponies at first sight! I wondered if they were thinking, What’s happening? Where are we going?

The cowboys waited a bit for the tide to change. Meanwhile, I imagined myself flying through the wind on a black-and-white mare. Oh, how I wished I could have a horse like that! Then, all of a sudden, I heard a shout from the crowd on the Chincoteague shore. I nearly jumped overboard with excitement! The ponies were stepping into the channel.

Before I knew it, pony heads were bobbing in the water. The swim across the channel didn’t take long, but I wish it could have lasted a lifetime. It was so beautiful that I took a photograph of it in my mind.

Going to Town

After the crossing, the ponies had a chance to rest. Some slept, and some of the foals suckled their mothers’ milk. They were getting their strength back for the next event.

That would be the pony parade to the carnival grounds, where we would watch the auction. I could see a ferris wheel and a roller coaster, but I kept going. I wanted only to see the ponies. The cowboys were herding them right down Main Street!

My sisters and I sloshed through the mud to get to the corral where the ponies were held for the auction. I couldn’t believe it when I got to pet a brown-and-white foal through the fence. It felt like love itself! His coat was coarse and smelled like a salty sea breeze. I was surprised that his nose felt so soft, like velvet. I imagined him thinking, Can I go home with you?

Later, I got to ride a tame Chincoteague pony. When I first climbed on, a shiver of excitement went down my spine. He was ready to go, and I wanted to gallop away with him.
Day of the Auction

There were so many people at the auction, I couldn’t see what was happening. I had to stand on my tiptoes to get a glimpse of each foal that was brought out. But I could hear the bidding and the crowd going wild. When the price was as high as it could go, the auctioneer yelled, “Sold!” Then another foal would come out, and the bidding would start all over again.

After it was over, we visited Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge on Assateague Island. There were tall grasses, shady trees, sandy beaches, and mosquitoes—lots of mosquitoes. I also saw the corral where the ponies stayed before their swim.

Going Home

On Friday morning, the ponies that weren’t sold at auction swam back across the channel. I sat on the rocks on Chincoteague’s shore and looked to Assateague. It’s a nice, peaceful place, I thought. The ponies are lucky to be home where there’s grass to graze and land to roam.

In the afternoon, I got to ride again. The pony was strong and spirited, and I had to hold him back. Riding him is something I’ll always remember. And how could I ever forget the gallant ponies swimming across the channel—their hearts so full of courage and wildness!

“Chincoteague Ponies Make Annual Swim” Video Transcription

Elizabeth Beirsto:
We’re coming to the Chincoteague Pony Swim because we love to watch the pony swim. We’ve been doing it for a couple years now.

Hana Hawthorne:
Um, I just love seeing the horses catch up, go swimming in the water and then, um, come here on the land and then see how interested people are in this and I love seeing it.

Walter Marks:
We’re sitting here waiting for the horses to swim and our job on this side is to make sure that they, uh, don’t go through the back fence. Keep’em in until they get rested and then we take’em down the street to the carnival grounds. What’ll happen is that the coast guard will set off a red flare when it becomes slack tide. They swim at slack tide whether it’s high or low water. Once they see the flare they’ll bring the ponies down the marsh here across the inlet. And, uh, then they’ll run them in the water and they’ll swim straight across here. They’ll be herded by boats and then when they come aground, come ashore here they’ll move on up, start eating, settle down, and rest. And then after that then we’ll take them all outta here, go down on Ridge Road, make a right turn on Bunting and then go down Main Street to the carnival grounds.

Lisa Fusillo:
I came here to watch the ponies swim and that’s exactly what I did. I didn’t know, um, the path that they would take so I was really surprised to see that they actually walk them across the very narrow part of the channel. And we thought that’s all there was gonna be and then when they got back in the water and they actually swam to the pony swim lane it was phenomenal, it was just phenomenal. You don’t know how wild they are, you don’t know what to expect. And they were, particularly the foals were charming and sweet and just trying to find their mamas. Um, it was, it was heart wrenching to think that they were gonna be sold off, but I understand. But it was the most exhilarating, exhilarating experience to see nature take its course.

Grade 4 Prompt: Your class has been studying about the survival of the ponies on Assateaugue Island. Using information from the articles and the video, describe the roles that both the horses and the humans play in the horses’ survival. Use evidence from the articles and the video to support your answer.