

[From Spring 1996]

## **The Chincoteague Ponies**

The ponies have been the subject of much inquiry and discussion over the years since their arrival on Assateague Island. Local folklore has suggested that, before records were kept, ponies swam ashore on Assateague Island from shipwrecked Spanish galleons. Whether the folklore is true or not, it is known that domestic livestock were a part of Assateague Island's history since the time the Eastern Shore was settled during the early 1600s.

Before the refuge was established in 1943, the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Department had maintained their herd of ponies on the island. In 1946, an annual grazing permit system was established for the Chincoteague Ponies. They continue to be allowed on the refuge, subject to the conditions of a permit which limits the herd to a maximum of 150 ponies. Research has indicated that any negative effects of grazing on the overall habitat of the refuge are minimized by the 150 limit. In fact, to some extent, grazing has a beneficial effect on certain habitats.

However, fencing and maintaining the ponies within compartments is required to protect the majority of freshwater impoundment habitats, threatened and endangered species habitat, and the fragile dunes. Also, the fencing serves to maintain and enhance the wild state of the ponies and to minimize safety Hazards to refuge visitors.

Besides being a popular tourist attraction, the annual roundup and auction serve to monitor and promote the health of the herd, maintain the herd at the 150 limit, and provide significant revenue for the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Department. As a consequence, the fire department has the best equipped emergency response operation on the Eastern Shore, and one of the best in the entire state. The funds are also used to care for sick or injured ponies found at times other than during the roundups.

Since they take care of themselves in all seasons with minimum help from people, the ponies are essentially considered wild animals. They exhibit many of the same behavioral characteristics of truly wild herds. They observe a hierarchy of individuals within separate bands occupying specific home ranges. They also have adapted to the island's diet. Only in extreme cases, such as deep snow cover, is food (e.g., hay) provided. Such "good" food can be detrimental to their digestive system and over-all health.

Perhaps, the decades or even centuries of adaptation have enabled the ponies to survive the island life. One thing is for certain, the ponies will endure for many years to come.

*Larry Ulibarri,  
Refuge Operations Specialist*