

Frequently Asked Questions



About The Local Wild Horses

Where do the horses live and who manages them?

- The Shackleford Banks (SB) horses live on federal government land.
- Shackleford Banks is part of Cape Lookout National Seashore (CALO).
- The SB horses are co-managed by CALO & the non-profit Foundation for Shackleford Horses (FSH).
- The Rachel Carson Reserve (RCR) horses live on state government land.
- Rachel Carson Reserve (including Carrot Island) is part of the North Carolina Division of Coastal Mangement's Coastal Reserve program. The RCR horses are managed by the Coastal Reserve.
- The horses do not swim back and forth between the Reserve and Shackleford.

How did horses get to Shackleford Banks?

- We don't know for sure. The legends about horses swimming ashore from sinking ships are not proven. There were shipwrecks along the coast and the horses are recognized as Colonial Spanish.
- Early European explorers brought horses and colonists/settlers bred horses.
- Overland traders and colonists moved south through the area and met Chickasaw Indians on horses.
- Two recorded events link horses to our barrier islands: Sir Richard Grenville landing 21-26 June 1585; and DeAyllon landing on Cape Feare in the 1520s. Historic Department of the Interior maps show Cape Lookout had been called Cape Feare.
- The Outer Banks were heavily used as grazing for livestock.

How long have horses been on Shackleford Banks?

- For centuries.
- Long enough to adapt to the harsh environment.

How and when did horses get to the Rachel Carson Reserve?

- There are historic accounts of horses being present on the site although this has not been thoroughly documented. We don't know how early they lived here.
- More recently, in the late 1940s, Dr. Fulcher, a Beaufort physician, had about 10 of his horses moved off Core Banks (which later became part of CALO) and put on what would become RCR.

Are the SB and RCR horses related?

- Core Banks and SB were not divided by an inlet until 1933, so it's likely that the RCR horses are closely related to the SB horses.

Are the horses of Spanish origin?

- We have genetic information about the SB horses, and since the RCR horses are related, we can draw some conclusions about them.
- Geneticists consider them Colonial Spanish.
- DNA analysis groups them with horses that originated in Spain and Portugal.
- The English had Spanish horses, too – so the horses could have come with the English.



Are they feral or wild?

- Wild means they live on their own, without help or interference from people. They do.
- Feral means their ancestors were domesticated. They were.

Are they ponies or horses?

- They are small and powerful horses. When fully grown, they range in height from 11 to 13 hands (a hand = 4”).

What breed are they? How do they relate to other wild horses? To domestic breeds?

- Like others along the Outer Banks, they are Banker Horses, often referred to as Banker Ponies.
- They are genetically closer to the other Atlantic coast wild horses than to domestic breeds such as Quarter Horses and Thoroughbreds.

Which horses am I seeing from the Beaufort waterfront?

- RCR horses are often visible.
- SB is on the far side of the RCR, across Back Sound, so the horses are too far away to be seen.



Do horses swim back and forth between SB and RCR?

- No, but they do swim between marsh islands on their respective reserves.

Why are these horses preserved?

- They are a symbol of wildness and freedom.
- They are part of our history and cultural heritage.
- Their natural social structure and behavior make them a living laboratory.
- They are considered important to preserve by equine geneticists.

How are their numbers maintained?

- Selected mares on both areas are contracepted on a year-by-year basis if needed.
- Selected SB horses are removed if needed because of population growth. Decisions on removal are made by genetics and horses are removed from the most prolific family lines.

Do mares have to be sedated, captured or handled to be contracepted?

- No. The contraceptive is delivered remotely in a dart which injects its contents and then falls out.

Do the horses receive any immunizations?

- No. To be effective, immunizations would need to be given 2x per year, which is not feasible and would impact the horse's wildness.

What happens to the removed Shackleford Banks horses?

- They go to the FSH with the goal of adoption to the general public.
- To adopt a horse, you must show that you can properly house and care for it plus pay an adoption fee.

What happens to the horses during storms?

- The wild horses take care of themselves as they have been doing for centuries.
- After storms, the horses are checked. Sometimes it takes as long as 2 months to find all the herd members on SB. RCR horses can usually be located in a day or two.

What do island horses eat?

- Horses receive their nutrients by grazing on a number of grasses including smooth cordgrass, *Spartina alterniflora*, in the marsh; saltmeadow cordgrass, *Spartina patens*; and sea oats, *Uniola paniculata*, in the dunes.
- Supplemental feeding is not necessary and can be dangerous to the horses.

Do they need fresh water?

- Absolutely. They do not drink brackish or salt water.
- Fresh water is found under barrier islands in wide, deep lenses which fill surface pools, seeps and digs.
- If it looks like the horses are drinking salt water, they are probably either eating grasses that grow under the salt water or sipping fresh water off the top of quiet salt water.
- Horses are not provided water.



How can you tell the individual herd members apart?

- Body color, white markings on face or legs, cowlicks, association with herd members, and location on the island.
- Some SB horses are freeze branded with a cold brand which destroys the color follicle but not the growth follicle so the hair grows back white

How are the Shackleford Banks horses freeze branded?

- Traditional hot branding is not used.
- Horses used to be branded during roundups, but now roundups aren't used.
- With vet assistance, the wildlife biologist darts the horse with a tranquilizer.
- The minimal disturbance to the rest of the harem and short time of anesthesia means the other harem members usually stay nearby.

What records are kept on the horses?

- IDs.
- Population: births, deaths.
- Life events: young leave birth harem, stallions gain and lose harems, older horses spend time alone.
- Body condition scores.
- Pregnancy status.
- Genetic information (DNA) for parentage and origin.

How many horses are on the island?

- The SB population is managed between 110 and 130 horses.
- The RCR herd numbers around 30.

Where can I find horses?

- Horses are scattered across their entire island homes.
- They are most commonly found in groups (herds, harems or bands) of a dominant stallion and his mares
- Sometimes males without females are found alone or with other males.
- Occasionally young or old females are found alone, by their choice.



How can I safely see the horses?

- The horses are truly wild animals and don't want people in their space.
- While they aren't afraid of people & don't necessarily run away, they will bite, kick or charge if their immediate space is invaded or if they feel cornered.
- Watch from a distance; getting too close disturbs their natural activities which can affect their health. Stay at least 50' (the length of a big bus) away. Back up if they approach. Horses have the right-of-way.
- Don't get caught off guard. Be able to see all the horses in one glance.
- Don't attempt to interact.
- Use binoculars.
- Keep your pet on a leash. Control protects both the pets and the wildlife.
- Watch for natural behaviors as a way to identify with the animals, rather than influencing those behaviors.

Are the horses protected by law?

- Yes. On SB, they are protected by federal law. On RCR, they are protected by North Carolina law and Town of Beaufort ordinance.
- Feeding, touching, teasing, or intentionally disturbing wildlife including horses is dangerous and illegal.
- On SB, if you observe someone disturbing wildlife, please take a photo and call (252) 728-2250. Anonymous tips may be left after hours.
- On RCR, if you observe someone disturbing wildlife, please take a photo and call the Reserve at (252) 838-0886; after business hours call (252) 726-1911.

Why should people avoid interfering with the wild horses?

- Horses that are too used to interacting closely with people become "habituated." Habituated horses (and other wildlife) lose in the end. If wild animals get too complacent around people and then hurt someone, the animals are likely to lose their wild lifestyle.



[Cape Lookout National Seashore](#)



[Rachel Carson Reserve](#)



[Foundation for Shackleford Horses](#)