Chapter 3

Assateague, Maryland

Camping with Horses
At the Maryland end of Assateague Island, visitors to the state and national parks can get quite intimate with free-roaming horses. Too intimate. The 600-lb-plus (270-kg) animals troop across campsites, block access to bathhouses, and tramp over beach towels. Bands of ponies unpredictably cross the main road, causing unsuspecting motorists to hit the brakes fast or even hit the ponies themselves. Some ponies purposely block traffic to thrust searching muzzles into open car windows, hoping for a taste of human food.

Most of the Maryland horses have little fear of people. They brazenly wander into camp-sites in search of good grazing and any tidbits that they can beg from obliging humans. They walk under clotheslines and step on bathing suits. They track sand across tarpaulins while families work to pitch tents. They sniff and sometimes sample food cooking inches from open fires. Itchy foals view most human contraptions, from barbecue grills to truck bumpers, as potential scratching posts. They tear large holes in screen houses and walk on in, even if there is nothing inside. Campers shoo them away with the loud clanging of a spoon against a pot. It does not frighten them, but usually signals the animals that they are not welcome and should take their activities elsewhere. On hot days, when insects became intolerable, they cross the dune line to the open beach to stand at the waterline beside the bathers.

In his book *Into the Wind* (1994), Jay Kirkpatrick writes about an Assateague stallion “intelligent enough to take advantage of civilization’s amenities” (p. 45). Slash, a pinto stallion “with long, white slashes down his side reminiscent of seagull droppings,” would avoid the biting insects by keeping to the areas of the park that employees fogged with insecticide. When he was thirsty, he would stand by a water faucet until a camper came by, whereupon he would draw attention to himself by stamping one hoof. Eventually a camper would figure out what Slash wanted and turn on the water faucet so that he could drink. “As if to thank the camper,” Kirkpatrick writes, “Slash would reward his trainee with an amazing array of facial expressions signifying his satisfaction, then drink his fill of sweet, fresh water” (p. 45).

Assateague is a 37-mile-long (60-km) island populated by two herds of feral horses separated by a sea-to-sound fence at the Maryland-Virginia line. Historical records document the presence of livestock on Assateague Island since the late 1600s. There are two versions of the story of their origins. For generations, local people grew up believing that the original horses swam to shore from a wrecked Spanish galleon. According to the U.S. National Park Service, they probably descended from domesticated stock owned by early settlers to the region. In colonial America, residents used grassy islands and necks as grazing commons that substituted bodies of water for fencing to contain horses, cattle, sheep, hogs, and goats. Periodically, stockmen conducted communal roundups, or “pennings,” to brand, sell, or remove livestock to the mainland.

The village of Chincoteague, Va., revived Pony Penning in the 1920s after a brief hiatus, penning and selling young Assateague ponies to benefit the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Company. When much of Assateague Island became a national seashore in 1965, most of
the free-roaming horses had been moved to the Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge at the Virginia end of the island, which allows the firefighters to keep horses there by special agreement.

At the Maryland end of Assateague there remained a smaller group of native ponies. Authorities disagree on its size and growth rate. Barry Mackintosh (1982/2003), author of the official history of Assateague Island National Seashore, says that the Maryland herd descends from 10 horses that seasonal resident Paul Bradley donated to the Berlin, Md., Jaycees in 1965, and that the Jaycees donated the herd to the Park Service three years later. Dr. Ronald Keiper, a zoologist who has studied the horses extensively over the past 40 years, wrote that the Jaycees donated 21 horses in 1965—9 stallions and 12 mares (1985). Zimmerman et al. (2006, p. 45) claim that there were 9 horses in 1961, “10+” in 1966, and 21 in 1967.

Eggert et al. (2010) say there were 28 horses when the Park Service acquired the herd in 1968. The team analyzed the pedigrees and DNA of the Maryland ponies and traced the current population to 39 founders with 11 maternal lineages. The number of maternal lineages in a population cannot exceed, and often is much lower than, the number of individuals. If the Assateague herd ever shrank to 9 horses (Zimmerman et al, 2006) or 10 (Mackintosh, 1983/2003), it could not have preserved 11 matrilines. Either the founding herd was larger than reported, or there were undocumented introductions later.

In the 1960s, two agencies began establishing parks on the Maryland section of Assateague. The National Seashore owns most of it, but Assateague State Park occupies about 850 acres/344 ha. The horses roamed freely between federal and state property. Spencer P. Ellis, director of the Maryland Department of Forests and Parks, wanted the ponies removed, viewing them as destructive and a potential safety hazard for children (Mackintosh, 1982/2003). Superintendent Bertrum C. Roberts of the national seashore preferred that the Park Service acquire them as a desirable exotic species, limit their reproduction, and manage them as wildlife.

In October, 1970, Roberts wrote to a colleague,
The Service-owned herd of Assateague ponies have finally, after five heavy use seasons, become accustomed to human activity. On the surface this appears to be a great boon for the visitor. This year, however, we experienced our first cases of horse bites and kicks because of the “taming” of these wild little beasts. This according to our Solicitor must result in “do not feed, pet, or otherwise get involved with the pony” signs at the seashore entrances as well as in the appropriate park literature. It is difficult to conceive that this problem is with us at a seashore, but it is. (Mackintosh, 1982/2003, p. 105)

“All over the country, feral horses roam on federal lands managed by the National Park Service, the Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Bureau of Land Management,” said Lou Hinds, former manager of the Chincoteague NWR (personal communication, May 21, 2010). “The American public often cannot see the distinctions between these federal agencies, and often do not realize that each agency might have a different way of looking at the animals.” One thing unites all the agencies responsible for wild horses: they prefer to eliminate them from public lands.

For most parks, management plans hinge on whether the goal is to conserve species or to preserve natural processes (Houston & Schreiner, 1995). If the park prioritizes conservation of species that may be compromised by wildfire, grazing, or predation, officials manage the park to protect them from these pressures. If the goal is to allow nature to take its course and accept any consequences, park managers do not interfere with those processes. If the goal is to allow natural processes to occur unless they produce undesirable outcomes, park personnel intervene only when unacceptable results appear likely (Houston & Schreiner,
The horses of Assateague are small, only 12–13.2 hands (48–54 in./1.22–1.37 m) at the withers. Their short stature is partly due to generations of living in harsh conditions and partly due to genetics.

Most larger national parks in the United States are managed in accordance with this third option with a strong emphasis on allowing natural processes free rein.

Two federal agencies manage the free-roaming horses of Assateague. The Park Service has total management control of the island north of the fence that runs from ocean to bay and keeps the herds mostly separate. In the past, the Park has sometimes transferred problem horses from the Maryland end of the island to join the Virginia population. Now, a wandering horse will stray around the fence occasionally, until the one of the managing agencies can return it to its home range.

The Maryland herd is managed differently from the Virginia herd. In Maryland, the Park Service owns the horses, manages them as wildlife, and has targeted a herd size of 80–100 animals. The horses north of the fence live with minimal human interference, as wild as the deer that share their habitat (Ingle, 2005). The horses in the Virginia herd reproduce at will, and the foals are sold annually during the Pony Penning festival. A few of the best foals each year are “turn-backs” purchased to be donated back to the herd as breeding stock that will spend their lives on Assateague. The herd is regularly vaccinated, wormed, and given veterinary and farrier attention. In many ways it is managed similarly to Western ranch horses.

The herds have a common origin, however, they have probably been present since the 17th century, and they have become a unique and relatively homogeneous breed. These horses are pony-sized to be sure; their average height is only 12–13.2 hands (48–54 in./1.22–1.37 m) at the withers. (Judged solely by height, any horse under 14.2 hands (58 in/1.47 m) is a pony.) They are built like ponies—short legs and backs, dense bones, and thick manes and tails. There are also genetic distinctions between ponies and horses. Centuries ago, the
The Assateague horses are in good condition overall and go about their lives with a relaxed, unwary attitude, unlike most Western mustangs. Even so, when a band lies down to rest, one horse remains standing as sentry. At the time the author took this picture, it had rained heavily for 11 straight days, and with the reappearance of sunshine, the ponies took the opportunity to nap on the drying grass.

animals were taller and built more like horses. Although it is possible that the foundation stock was mostly Spanish, outside genes have been introduced over the years. According to Keiper (1985) and others, Shetland Ponies were added to promote pinto coloration in the 1920s, and their genes might have also decreased the height of descendants. Despite out-crossing with ponies, both herds are still genetically horses, and foals sold to the mainland from Chincoteague often outgrow their island brethren.

Genetics, then, is not solely responsible for their diminutive stature. Their small size today probably results from the interplay of many influences. It is possible that tight space on Assateague limits not only their numbers, but also their size. When large animals live in small areas, particularly islands, their size often decreases over many generations in a phenomenon known as insular dwarfism. Harsh environmental conditions and low-nutrient forage also restrict growth. The horses of Sable Island, off the coast of Nova Scotia, endure a colder, stormier climate but remain larger because they have different bloodlines that predispose them to greater stature, even under adverse conditions.

Other breeds flavored the Assateague horses over the centuries, but no documented outside introductions of stock have been made to the Maryland herd since the Park Service took over its management in 1965. Until that time, there was no real difference between the Virginia and Maryland bloodlines. Since then, managers have added outside horses to the Virginia herd to improve bloodlines. The current Park Service contraception program limits fertility while maintaining maximal genetic diversity in this closed population.

Assateague horses, especially those in the prime of life, remain round and robust even after a difficult winter. Carl Zimmerman, former resource manager for Assateague Island
A pregnant woman reviews her video footage while her toddler pets the muzzle of a wild mare. A man stands with a stroller, one hand stroking her glossy coat. These horses are unafraid of people, but they are not tame. Ponies shift gears quickly and often kick, bite, or trample people standing nearby.

NS, attributed their apparent good health to a combination of comparatively good nutrition and the use of birth control to limit reproduction (personal communication, 1998). Ponies in general tend to have efficient metabolisms and are usually “easy keepers” that stay plump on minimal forage.

From the time Assateague first became a national seashore, the horses have been free to live as wild horses, exhibiting natural behavior and subject to natural processes. Ponies may display lacerations, hoof overgrowth, or other injuries or signs of illness. Age takes its toll; elderly horses may develop prominent ribs, sharp spines, and rough coats. Because it regards the horses as wildlife, the Park Service summons a veterinarian only if human activities have caused injury.

Many domestic horses have a far greater fear of human implements and toys than these supposedly wild ponies do. Bright umbrellas flutter in the wind, screaming children race by them to the sea, and boogie boards wash up in the surf, yet the ponies seldom shy or spook. In a camping area, inline skaters swiftly blade down the pavement, passing so close to grazing horses that they could reach out and give them a pat. In fact, some do. Many domestic horses are at least somewhat intolerant of wheeled people whizzing by on bikes, skates, or other devices, yet these animals largely ignore the children on pedal toys that nearly collide with them at regular intervals. Dogs bark savagely at the equine interlopers visiting the campsites, but the ponies seem to know that dogs at the seashore must remain on a 6-ft/1.8-m leash—they are unimpressed with the bravado.

No matter how crowded the park may be, the horses attend to their activities unmindful of the audience. Stallions duel violently among parked vehicles and barbecue grills. Bachelor males chase one another across campsites at a mad gallop. Stallions enthusiastically mate with mares in the shade of the bath houses while bystanders pretend not to watch.

Only a small part of the Maryland section of the barrier island is tourist-friendly, and many of the horses prefer to live in the areas not frequented by people. These horses are more shy and reclusive than those that frequent the campgrounds. To the north and south
The hoofprint of a wild horse on the abdomen of a very lucky girl. This kick could have easily fractured her ribs or ruptured her spleen. Aimed slightly higher, a kick to the head or the sternum could have killed her. Photograph courtesy of the National Park Service.

beyond the camping area, Assateague is undeveloped and relatively unused. Only a small percentage of visitors ever leave the developed section. Consequently, much of this well-used park remains undisturbed and natural.

Park Service rangers impose fines of $175 per incident when they catch visitors feeding, petting, or approaching within 10 ft/3 m of horses or other wildlife. Many park visitors have trouble accepting that these friendly, curious animals pose any threat to them or vice versa, but they are not tame; they are just unafraid of people.

Unknowingly putting themselves in danger, tourists crowd around the horses when park personnel are absent, stroking them, braiding their manes and sharing bits of a picnic lunch. Unfortunately, this intimacy often has consequences unforeseen by many tourists: visitors are frequently kicked and bitten. The Park Service has a collection of photographs that illustrate the damage a pony can do to the human body. Often the perpetrator was docilely accepting a pat moments before the scene turned ugly.

One Park Service photograph shows a bare-midriffed child with a bright purple hoof-mark centered on her abdomen. She was very lucky. A random kick can dislodge teeth, blind an eye, rupture a spleen, crush a spine or chest, or cause brain injury or death.

Offering treats can result in broken fingers when the pony bites the hand that feeds it. Some visitors offer treats from their cars and, in effect, train them to stand in the road waiting for handouts. Drivers who did not expect to see horses on the pavement hit them at speed. One such incident claimed the life of a healthy 10-year-old mare. She was standing in
How accidents happen. Five drivers stopped on a narrow causeway to see the ponies and attracted them onto the road. Because other visitors have offered them treats through their windows, the horses often deliberately stop traffic and thrust their huge heads into cars looking for handouts. This horse is in an excellent position to inflict a serious bite. Note the car on the bridge, which was traveling at least 40 mph/64 kph. Its driver would not have had enough time to brake for ponies, people, or vehicles in the road.

the middle of the road hoping to stop traffic for a snack when she was stuck by a car. Her leg was shattered, she suffered internal injuries, and the car was badly damaged. Touchingly, her mate stood over her and would not leave. Park rangers humanely euthanized her.

Ticks, as tiny as pepper flecks, infest the ponies. Some of these harbor Lyme disease. Unseen, these ticks jump from pony to petter and can transmit a chronic disease that can cause debilitating fatigue, neurological damage, and muscular weakness. (The author contracted Lyme disease while following pony bands through the brush at a distance to obtain photographs for this book!) Many deer and white-footed mice on Assateague carry Lyme disease, but it is unknown how many ponies are infected. Mosquitoes can transmit encephalitis from horse to human, but only over short distances (Kirkpatrick, 1994).

The Park Service prohibits visitors from approaching within 10 feet of the ponies, but a bus length is a safer distance. A horse lashing out at another will often barge right over a person standing between them, causing bruises or broken bones. Even docile domestic horses that have been trained to inhibit aggressive impulses around people can show their irritability with teeth and hooves. Wild horses are all the more unpredictable and uninhibited.

Some visitors are downright foolhardy. One Park Service ranger told of a woman from New York who tried to ride one of the ponies. Thrown violently to the ground, she got up and remounted, only to be thrown again. When the rangers attempted to stop her, she insisted that it was okay for her to ride them because she knew what she was doing—she had horses of her own. As it turned out, she was a lawyer who should have known a thing or two about following regulations and about liability. A report in the Ocean City Dispatch described an incident in which two intoxicated men, one of them naked, were arrested for trying to ride the ponies and tackle sika deer (“Naked Rodeo on Assateague,” 2007).

Horses will open containers and tear apart tents to find meals. Foals learn these techniques from their herdmates at a young age. Finding caches of human food reinforces
Busted! The horses know the Park Service vehicles and scatter when one appears on the scene. Like naughty children caught in the act, the ponies assume an air of exaggerated nonchalance: "It wasn’t me—I didn’t do it!" Although the tangle of vehicles dispersed when the ranger arrived, fraternizing with wildlife cost this visitor a $175 fine.

Visitors who feed horses from their vehicles are in effect training them to stand in the road waiting for handouts. This increases the odds that cars will hit them. A car striking a horse usually hits its legs, hurling its body over the hood and through the windshield, often causing serious injury to the occupants. The car is totaled, and the horse usually suffers a terrifying and painful death. Note the bridge in the background. This automobile struck its victim directly across the road from the spot where the car was feeding ponies in the preceding image. Photograph courtesy of the National Park Service.
marauding behavior. Because horses knocked over trash cans and consumed everything from greasy paper towels to hot dogs, now the Park Service collects trash in horse-proof dumpsters. Rangers making the rounds of campsites will remove food left out where horses might try to get to it. Human food disrupts the balance of ponies’ intestinal flora and is likely to cause colic in animals engineered as grass-eating machines. There is also little nutrition obtained from raids on human comestibles.

In the 1980s, the Park Service considered a pony a problem if it was involved in three or more documented incidents in one year that resulted in property damage or caused injury to a visitor. Before 1995, the Park Service removed a total of 39 horses from the national seashore when they became adept at raiding campsites or begging at the roadside. All those horses were moved south to the Chincoteague NWR. “Our strategy now is to place heavy emphasis on visitor education and viewing horses safely,” says Allison Turner, a biological science technician at Assateague Island NS for over two decades (personal communication, February 17, 2011). “By eliminating inappropriate visitor behavior around horses, ‘problem horses’ should no longer be created.”

In August 2011, however, the Park removed an 18-year-old stallion named Fabio from the island when his bold raids on campsites put visitors at risk. While most horses can be shooed away, Fabio believed that he was dominant over not only the members of his own band, but also the campers. When people tried to make him leave before he was ready, he asserted his dominance by kicking, biting, and charging, posing a significant risk to their safety. The Humane Society of the United States trailered him to the Doris Day Horse Rescue and Adoption Center in Texas, where he was to be trained and offered for adoption.

Sometimes ponies deliberately gather in the areas where people spend their time. For about a week during the summer of 2000, up to 75 ponies (which was then about half the Maryland herd) congregated in the state park day-use area, occupying a quarter-mile (400-m) stretch of beach alongside hundreds of bikini-clad bathers and screaming toddlers.
When asked why they took to the beach in such numbers, Maryland Park Ranger Rick Ward said,

They’re wild animals. They have minds of their own. Some think they go to the water to cool off and get away from the flies, and the day-use area is just the best source of food out there. . . . they’re particularly fond of potato chips. They aren’t dumb—they have even learned how to open coolers! (Personal communication, 1998)

The animals knocked over belongings, urinated on beach towels, and rolled in the sand beside sunbathers, but aside from begging food, were generally docile. The rangers concentrated on educating the visitors to avoid contact with the ponies and to keep food away from them. “Most of the time, the ponies and the visitors coexist peacefully. Very few people are a problem,” Ward explained.

But he tells of one man who set out his family’s lunch in a way that must have looked like a banquet to the ponies. The lifeguard warned him to put the food away, but he ignored her. One persistent pony would not take no for an answer. The man pushed and shoved at the hungry animal, then began to hit him with a shovel! After arguing with the lifeguard and lying to the ranger, the man and his family were evicted from the park.

Ward went on to relate other incidents involving clashes between park visitors and ponies:

A drunk kid jumped on the back of one on a five dollar bet and was thrown into a bush. His friends took off and left him there. Then there were the two ladies trampled...
Saltmarsh cordgrass is the preferred food of Assateague horses, but they will consume a diverse menu of herbage in small amounts even in the presence of abundant grass, presumably to gain trace nutrients or entertain the palate. This mare forced her way into rigid, unyielding undergrowth to nibble briefly.

by the ponies at the National Park. They were just in the way, I guess, lying on the beach. They required hospitalization. (Personal communication, 1998)

He also told of a couple who enthusiastically photographed their toddler walking underneath a stallion, unaware that if he had moved suddenly, the little girl could have been killed.

The Park Service is responsible for the feral horses, whether they are on state or federal property, and maintains them as a “desirable feral species” (Assateague Island NS, 2006). This arrangement necessitates balancing their needs with the park’s other natural resources, and keeping ponies and people safe. The park’s “pony patrol” is a group of volunteers that contributes more than 1,200 hours a year educating visitors and cautioning them to stay 10 ft/3 m away (Hayward, 2007).

The majority of visitors do not venture beyond the developed areas of the park. Their reluctance to hike into the isolated areas helps to preserve most of Assateague in its natural state. But the emphasis was not always on keeping Assateague wild.

In the 1950s, Leon Ackerman and a group of investors bought, surveyed and platted 15 miles of Assateague oceanfront property north of the Virginia line for residential and commercial lots. He advertised heavily in urban newspapers, tempting buyers to invest in his Ocean Beach development (Mackintosh, 1982/2003) with fantasies of idyllic vacation retreats and speculative profits from resale. By the early 1960s, about 3,200 investors had purchased 5,850 lots at Ocean Beach, and several dozen houses formed the nucleus of the community. Ackerman paved a road, Baltimore Boulevard, which ran to the Virginia line, and dug channels in the marshes for mosquito control. In 1957, Atlantic Ocean Estates, Inc., followed suit by subdividing the northern end of Assateague into 1,740 platted lots. The properties were promoted through radio advertisements that offered listeners “down
payments’ of up to $1,000 if they could identify familiar ‘mystery tunes’ like ‘You Are My Sunshine’ and “The Missouri Waltz” (Mackintosh, 1982/2003, p. 14). Sales were brisk, even though there was no legal access to the property, and no streets, utilities, buildings, or other improvements ever existed. Moreover, the land in question was rapidly migrating westward—with every storm the ocean overwashed, eroding the beach and sweeping across the island to the bay. Ironically, many of the shorefront lots became quite literally Atlantic Ocean Estates as the sea claimed them (Mackintosh, 1982/2003). John T. Moton, the developer, was imprisoned in 1962 in an unrelated scandal (Associated Press, 1962).

Assateague seemed well on its way to becoming another Ocean City. In the 1930s, Assateague was surveyed as a potential site for a national seashore, but the plan never coalesced. By the early 1950s, the Park Service judged Assateague Island too developed for further consideration.

The only access to the island was by ferry, and many prospective property owners balked at buying homes in such an inaccessible location. Developers reasoned that a bridge across Sinepuxent Bay would boost sales and raise the value of the island homes, so they began construction near the ferry dock. Dredging up material from the marshes, they fashioned a causeway stub, but lack of funding forced them to discontinue the project.

Undaunted, the developers changed strategies. The state of Maryland had coveted Assateague as a potential state park, but neither its 1940 nor its 1952 proposal to acquire land there had borne fruit. In 1956, Leon Ackerman’s North Ocean Beach, Inc., presented the state of Maryland with 540 prime Assateague acres (219 ha) to establish the park, fully expecting that the state would build a bridge to allow visitors and landowners easy access. The Maryland General Assembly quickly appropriated $750,000 to buy additional land for the park and authorized work on a bridge that ultimately cost the state nearly $2 million (Mackintosh, 1982/2003). Assateague appeared destined to become another bustling resort city—until the Ash Wednesday Storm (the Five-High Storm) of March 1962.

Although nor’easters, many of them severe, pound Assateague regularly, the Ash Wednesday Storm was powerful beyond anything in the memories of even the oldest coastal residents. This tempest wantonly destroyed almost every structure on Assateague. Sheets of seawater literally picked up houses and tossed them into the marsh. When the storm passed, the remains of 11 long-forgotten shipwrecks lay uncovered on the shore. Two new inlets sliced across the island. Twenty-two feral horses on the Virginia end of Assateague drowned in the storm. Baltimore Boulevard was severely damaged, and to this day visitors can observe large broken chunks of the roadway along the Life of the Dunes nature trail in the national seashore.

Other reminders of the storm persist. A freshwater pond stands on the Life of the Forest Trail, providing hydration for Assateague’s fauna and a rich habitat for many species. The Ash Wednesday Storm created the pond when it demolished a house and whirled floodwaters around its foundation, scouring a depression in the sand to the level of the water table, where a lens of freshwater collects. The pond endures, and deep within it one can still find the remnants of the house.

After this reality check, developers and homeowners alike wondered whether the barrier island was too unstable to support a resort community. Two studies showed that for Assateague to support communities of any size, developers would need to construct a long line of large protective dunes, install an expensive sewer system, and raise the island to the
minimum level recommended for permanent construction with 17 million cubic yards (13 million m³) of fill dredged from the floor of the bay (Mackintosh, 1982/2003). This is an astonishing amount of material. It is more than the volume of rock and soil moved to make the original 363-mile Erie Canal (roughly 10 million cubic yards/7.65 million m³) and more than the 16.5 million cubic yards/12.6 million m³ of asphalt used to pave 1,836 mi/2,955 km of Interstate 95 from Maine to Florida. Private and commercial development of the island was possible, but it would be an expensive and chancy undertaking.

Ackerman himself, having grossed about $4.5 million from Assateague real estate sales, declared Assateague unsuitable for private development. Profoundly depressed over the Ocean Beach fiasco and throttled by financial and legal problems related to other ventures, he committed suicide in April 1964 (Mackintosh, 1982/2003).

On the other hand, as the largest undeveloped beach between Cape Cod and Cape Hatteras, Assateague reemerged as an attractive candidate for a national seashore. With abundant evidence that Assateague was too unstable for permanent development, one would expect lot owners to welcome federal acquisition of their property. Many, however, clung to their investments with fantasies of beach homes and profits. U.S. Representative Rogers C.B. Morton (MD 1) advocated continued residential development of Assateague. The “Morton Plan,” advertised as “Assateague’s reach for greatness,” proposed three private villages about 10 miles apart, including a center for the fine and performing arts, sports facilities, a wildlife museum, and an auditorium (Mackintosh, 1982/2003). People who already owned lots on the island could trade their property for land in the new communities. When this plan drew insufficient support, Morton proposed another in 1964—a 600-acre/243-ha complex for commercial concessions and lodging. Even the Park Service
initially contemplated building two 100-room motels with restaurants, numerous concessions, hard-surface parking for 14,000 cars, and a 32-foot-wide (9.6-m) paved highway to extend from bridge to bridge through the refuge (Mackintosh, 1982/2003).

A report from the U.S. Department of the Interior issued in April 1963 recommended that the federal government acquire Assateague Island as a national seashore under the Park Service while letting Assateague SP and Chincoteague NWR retain their individual identities (Mackintosh, 1982/2003).

The three agencies administering the island often clashed. When the seashore was authorized, the Park Service tried to assimilate the state park, which clutched its holdings tenaciously. The Park Service considered plans to increase visitation, which the refuge opposed because its primary purpose is to provide habitat for birds and other wildlife.

In 1965, the areas of the Maryland end of Assateague not owned by the state park were designated a national seashore. The three agencies agreed to minimally develop parts of the
About the Author

Bonnie Urquhart Gruenberg is a multifaceted person who wishes that sleep were optional. She is the author of the award-winning book The Wild Horse Dilemma: Conflicts and Controversies of the Atlantic Coast Herds. Horses have been her passion from infancy. For nearly two decades, she has spent countless hours researching and photographing the private lives of wild horses in both Western and Eastern habitats. She has been riding, training, teaching, and learning since her early teens, from rehabilitating hard-luck horses to wrangling trail rides in Vermont and Connecticut.

By profession, she is a Certified Nurse-Midwife and Women’s Health Nurse Practitioner who welcomes babies into the world at a freestanding birth center in Lancaster County, Pa. She obtained her MSN from the University of Pennsylvania after completing her BSN at Southern Vermont College, and she spent 10 years attending births in tertiary-care hospitals before returning to out-of-hospital practice. Prior to her career in obstetrics, she worked as an urban paramedic in Connecticut. She is the author of the award-winning textbook Birth Emergency Skills Training (Birth Guru/Birth Muse, 2008); Essentials of Prehospital Maternity Care (Prentice Hall, 2005); and Hoofprints in the Sand: Wild Horses of the Atlantic Coast (as Bonnie S. Urquhart; Eclipse, 2002), as well as articles in publications as dissimilar as Equus and the American Journal of Nursing. She is an artist and photographer and has illustrated all her own books. In her vanishing spare time, she explores the hills and hollows of Lancaster County, PA, astride her horses Andante and Sonata. More information can be found at her Web site, www.BonnieGruenberg.com, and a collection of her photographs and artwork at BonnieGPhoto.com. Additional information about the Atlantic Coast horse herds is on the Web at www.Wild-HorseIslands.com.