

The Wild Horses of Currituck

By Karen McCalpin *

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The wild horses of North Carolina's Currituck Outer Banks have survived more than four centuries of hurricanes, fierce winter nor'easters, and swarms of biting insects. Graced with a strong, inner sense of self-preservation, the horses enjoy a rich and distinguished history.

The Outer Banks consist of a series of barrier islands made entirely of sand. They stretch 175 miles south from the Virginia border to Cape Lookout National Seashore. Once a hideout for pirates, the area now attracts hundreds of thousands of tourists. What has been good for the economy has taken a toll on the wild horses. Expensive vacation homes have replaced secondary dunes once covered by sea oats. Vast stretches of open land from the town of Duck to Corolla have disappeared. According to *National Geographic*, five to six thousand wild horses lived up and down the state's coast as recently as 1926. Now, only about 220 remain. A herd of one hundred wild horses lives on the north beaches of Corolla, in Currituck County. The others live on Shackleford Banks—part of the Cape Lookout National Seashore—in Carteret County.

These horses descended from the fine horses of Spanish conquistadors—Colonial Spanish Mustangs brought to the New World from Spain, as well as from breeding farms in the West Indies and South America. Because Spanish exploration was approved and funded by the country's king and queen, only the finest stallions and mares went along on those journeys. By 1500 large breeding ranches had been established to produce the best horses of that time—the horses of rulers and nobility—with a mixture of Spanish Barb, Arabian, and Andalusian blood.

How did these particular horses end up on the Outer Banks of North Carolina? Three main theories exist.

The Atlantic Ocean coast of the Outer Banks is nicknamed the "Graveyard of the Atlantic." A treacherous stretch of ocean called Diamond Shoals extends fourteen miles off the shoreline of Cape Hatteras. Since 1526, more than two thousand ships have sunk off this coastline, where the cold Labrador Current meets the warm waters of the Gulf Stream. Seafarers risked the danger to take advantage of the swift-flowing currents. Powerful winds blew ships too close to shore, and the strong currents and hidden shoals tore them apart. A few of the strongest and luckiest horses may have made it to land.

Imagine it is 1520. The sleeping stallion startles to attention as the ship's dark hold begins to pitch wildly from side to side. He loses his footing, crashing sideways into the wooden slats of his stall. He scrambles to his feet as the hot, humid air fills with the

frightened cries of nineteen other Iberian stallions and mares bound for the New World, from the West Indies. Suddenly the horse hears a thunderous explosion, and cold sea water begins to rush in. Disoriented, he thrashes madly as he tastes bitter, salty water. Instinctively, he begins to swim. Using every ounce of strength, he bursts through to the surface of the ocean. Mercifully, waves carry him forward to the shore. Weak and exhausted, the stallion collapses in the sand and sleeps. . . .

Another explanation for the presence of wild horses on the Outer Banks also relates to the dangerous sandbars. When a ship ran aground and could not move, no matter how strong the winds, its crew and cargo were doomed, unless the sailors could lighten the load and refloat the ship.

Imagine it is 1585. The crew of the English flagship Tyger has sailed from Puerto Rico and traded with the Spanish. There are cattle, hogs, sugarcane, fruit, and horses to take to the colony at Roanoke. They sail north along the coast, acquiring even more Spanish horses. On June 24 the ship begins to enter the harbor of what is believed to be present-day Beaufort. The Tyger hits a sandbar and runs aground. Waves batter the helpless ship. Fearing that the ship may soon break apart, Commander Ralph Lane orders the crew to push half the cattle and horses overboard, to make the Tyger lighter. Forty horses go over the side. Swimming and wading in the shallow water, they make their way to shore. Once the ship is refloated, it sets sail, leaving bewildered animals behind. . . .

Finally, we know that settlers left behind animals when abandoning a colony (often fleeing from disputes with American Indians or devastating illnesses).

Imagine it is 1589. Rebecca hastily packs her most precious belongings. Her husband says that she must be ready to leave by daybreak. Conflicts between colonists and American Indians have gotten worse, and it is not safe to stay. She can only fill a small cloth sack, as the family will take just enough horses to make the journey to the nearest settlement. Rebecca carefully wraps clothing around her mother's teacup, placing it in the sack along with her Bible, a doll for her baby, bread, tea, sugar, flour, jerky, and a few coins. As she finishes, her husband hurries her onto a horse. He opens the gate, allowing most of their livestock to go free. The family joins other colonists and rides north. . . .

Regardless of *how* the wild horses of the Outer Banks arrived, they are a true American icon and part of both North Carolina's and America's heritage. The Shackleford and Corolla herds are registered Colonial Spanish Mustangs. Their small numbers have placed them on the critical breed list of the American Livestock Breed Conservancy and the Equus Survival Trust. Both national groups work to save endangered breeds of livestock. The next category is extinction.

The Shackleford horses enjoy federal protection from the Shackleford Act written in 1997 by U.S. congressman Walter B. Jones. The herd must be maintained at a size of no less than 120 to 130 horses to keep it genetically healthy. The Corolla Wild Horse Fund is working to find the same protection for the Corolla herd. If you would like to learn

more about helping, access www.corollawildhorses.com.

**Karen McCalpin is the executive director of the Corolla Wild Horse Fund Inc.*

GLOSSARY

Andalusian: Known for centuries as the Spanish horse, one of the oldest breeds and native to the Iberian Peninsula.

Conquistadors: Spanish adventurers or conquerors from the 1500s.

Extinction: The gradual process by which a group of related living things dies out.

Iberian Peninsula (or Iberia): Located in the extreme southwest of Europe, this peninsula includes modern-day Spain, Portugal, Andorra, Gibraltar, and a very small part of France.

Icon: Symbol.

Shoal: Underwater sandbank or sandbar.

West Indies: A group of islands that extends in an arc from near southern Florida to the coast of Venezuela.

Web sites of interest

www.corollawildhorses.com

www.shacklefordhorses.org

www.horseoftheamericas.com