

Rachelle Daigneault - National Park Ranger

By Admin | February 2, 2008

Rachelle Daigneault is a National Park Ranger at the Assateague Island National Seashore. She gives us her thoughts on being a park ranger and the island's famous wild horses.

Where are you from?

Interestingly enough, that is a difficult question for me. I was born at the Quantico Marine Base in Quantico, Virginia. That said, I spent most of my youth in Canada, Hawaii, and all around the United States. The last 20 years I've lived in Maryland. I have a tendency to see myself as a Marylander.

Where did you go to college and what was your academic major?

I went to Towson University and majored in a combination of biology and geography.

What was your career path from college to National Park Ranger at Assateague Island National Seashore?

Actually, my career with the park service started well after my first attempt at college. I always wanted to be a park ranger but in my day women were not encouraged to find these types of careers.

After a variety of different job opportunities that ranged from long distance telephone operator to conference coordinator for a cancer research facility, I finally went back to school and like many before me, took a park internship.

I have enjoyed spending my entire career in the park service at Assateague Island National Seashore and have had the unique opportunity to rise from a volunteer intern position to division chief.

What are your duties at Assateague?

As the Chief of Interpretation and Education at Assateague Island National Seashore, it is my job to oversee all aspects of media, exhibits, outreach, public and educational programs, and 2 visitor centers in 2 states (Maryland and Virginia).

I also work with volunteers, budgets, training, supervision, and generally attempt to provide satisfying, educational, and inspiring opportunities for visitors to enjoy while on the island.

Presently the interpretive staff is planning exhibits for a new visitor center. Working at Assateague has been all I could have imagined it to be and more. Being a park ranger here is the job of a lifetime. I'm pretty sure my blood runs green and gray.

How many ponies are on Assateague Island?

There are actually no ponies on Assateague. It has been a local tradition to refer to these wonderful animals as ponies but they are, in fact, horses, albeit small horses. Due to the tradition, however, even park personnel refer to them as ponies from time to time.

In an effort to provide accurate information all our literature and media refer to these iconic creatures as horses. On the Maryland end of the island there are presently 134 horses.

The Virginia herd is not managed by the park service and numbers are a bit less precise at any given time but I can say that there are more than 150. I would recommend that folks interested in information about our wild horses visit www.nps.gov/asis.

Can you describe the pony roundup – who runs it, how many ponies are rounded up, who buys them, does the National Park Service get involved in it, when does it occur?

The National Park Service has only a very peripheral involvement with the “pony penning” in Virginia. The Virginia herd is owned by the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Department and managed differently from the Maryland herd owned and managed by the National Park Service.

Penning takes place within the confines of the Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge and usually begins on the last Wednesday of July when all the horses on the Virginia end of Assateague (around 200) are rounded up. They swim from Assateague Island to nearby Chincoteague Island.

On the following day most of the young foals are auctioned off to people who have come from all over the country to participate in this unique opportunity. Proceeds from the sale benefit the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Department which is responsible for the care and management of the Virginia herd.

Virginia's privately owned horses are kept separated from Maryland's wild horses by a fence that runs across the Maryland/Virginia state line.

How many people each year visit the island?

Two million people come to Assateague Island each year.

What is the biggest challenge that Assateague Island faces ecologically?

I would say that the biggest challenge Assateague faces is the very thing that makes it unique. Assateague was not protected because of the famous horses; it was protected because it was one of the last remaining undeveloped barrier islands.

As such, it is constantly changing, being shaped and reshaped by wind and water every minute of every day. Storms move our roads, destroy man made structures, and alter habitat. That constant change is entirely normal, expected and even appreciated by those who understand that a barrier island must change to thrive.

We protect not just the plants and animals of the island but the processes which make a barrier island what it is. The National Park Service also provides outstanding recreational opportunities like fishing, hunting, kayaking, hiking, backpacking, wildlife viewing, swimming and more.

Providing these opportunities while protecting the island processes, flora and fauna for future generations is certainly one of our greatest challenges.

Are the ponies truly wild? Does a vet treat them or vaccinate them?

Though local folklore describes Assateague's horses as survivors of a shipwreck off the Virginia coast it is more likely that these animals were released on the island by colonists in the 17th century who were attempting to escape taxing and fencing laws.

The descendents of those animals reverted to the behaviors and band relationships experts associate with wild horses. The Maryland herd is free roaming and may be seen napping on the beach, feeding in the marsh, drinking from a pond or roaming through campgrounds.

The horses find their own food and water. They form bands of 2-20 mares, their offspring, and a stallion. They live the lives of wild creatures unhampered by bit and saddle. The Maryland horses are not rounded up.

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 healthy population.

As the horses are not native to the island and there are no natural predators, overpopulation and resulting habitat destruction must be considered. Researchers and the National Park Service have developed a non-hormonal, non-invasive vaccine to prevent pregnancy.

The vaccine is delivered by a dart to the hindquarters of selected mares each spring. Using this contraceptive method, the Maryland population is controlled, and their natural behaviors in the wild are preserved.

Do you have a lot of Lyme disease on the island?

The ticks that carry Lyme disease are found throughout the Northeast. So yes, they can be found on Assateague.

Preventative measures like using repellent and doing a tick check when in a location where they may be found are essential. Visit the Center for Disease Control website for accurate information about Lyme disease and its prevention. <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvbid/lyme/>

When is the best time of year to visit the island weather-wise?

September and October are the best times to visit. The weather is still very nice. There are smaller crowds. It is by far my favorite time of year. It is great time to walk pristine beaches, paddle the bay, look for migrating monarch butterflies, watch horses saunter through the marsh, and create lasting memories.

How much crime occurs on the island?

Assateague Island is a fairly quiet place. It is a place to camp, walk the beach, and enjoy programs and recreational activities. There are no residences, hotels, restaurants or bars on the island.

Crime is low and tends to be opportunistic. Don't leave valuables at your campsite, or on your beach towel. Speeding and substance abuse will be addressed by our law enforcement rangers.

And, of course, don't pet or feed the wildlife, including the horses. Help us keep the wild in wildlife.

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