Assateague Island

Assateague Island National Seashore
Maryland and Virginia

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Chincoteague

Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge
Virginia

Fish and Wildlife Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Snow geese

The National Seashore

Assateague Island is a barrier island built by sand that persistent waves have raised from the ocean's gently sloping floor. Constant reshaping mirrors a restless origin, as steady winds continue moving trillions of sand grains, each a bit of eroded ancient Appalachian Mountains. Occasional storms drive waves and sands so forcefully that beach and shoreline change dramatically. But Assateague's summer mostly means the lure of beaches and mild surf where shorebirds trace the lapping waves back down the beach. Behind the dunes, the island's forests and bayside marshes invite exploration. Now and then a wild pony wanders into view. Assateague Island consists of three major public areas (see the map): Assateague Island National Seashore, managed by the National Park Service; Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge, managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; and Assateague State Park, managed by Maryland's Department of Natural Resources. Assateague Island National Seashore is administered to provide for recreational use and enjoyment consistent with the maintenance and perpetuation of the seashore's natural communities. Together, these agencies hold in trust a priceless seashore heritage of wildlands, wildlife, and outdoor recreation. The National Park Service operates visitor centers serving both the Maryland and Virginia ends of the island. Visitor centers are the places to find out about naturalist activities, among other things. The **Barrier Island Visitor Center** at the Maryland end (see map) features exhibits, an aquarium, and maps and other publications. A naturalist will answer your questions. **For information** about seashore camping or other recreation and fees, write: Assateague Island National Seashore, 7206 National Seashore Lane, Berlin, MD 21811-9742; or call 410-641-3030 or 641-1441.

Assateague State Park. The State of Maryland owns 680 acres of Assateague Island that it operates as a state park. Its beach offers separate swimming, surf fishing, and surf boarding areas. Ask about these at the state park entrance. Bathhouses, a bait and a tackle shop, and food service facilities are open in summer, when lifeguards protect the beach. See Camping for information about the state park campground. **For information** about the state park, write: Assateague State Park, 7307 Stephen Decatur Highway, Berlin, MD 21811; or call 410-641-2120.

The Wildlife Refuge

The once-enormous waterfowl populations that migrated to the Delmarva region were dwindling at an alarming rate during the early 1900s. Wholesale conversion of wetlands to agriculture and private development, coupled with outlaw market gunning for food and plumage, threatened many bird species. The Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1943 to provide habitat and protection for migrating birds. The refuge, located on the Virginia end of Assateague Island, was purchased with Duck Stamp revenues. The Chincoteague refuge's prime Atlantic flyway habitat is essential to the survival of birds whose hereditary migrational instincts take them annually north and south on sometimes incredible seasonal journeys. Refuge management programs actively enhance this coastal habitat for the benefit of migratory and nesting birds and indigenous wildlife. The primary function of the refuge is to protect native and migratory species of wildlife and their habitat. The refuge is open to recreational uses centered around wildlife and wildland activities that are in harmony with this primary objective. Birdwatchers know the Chincoteague refuge as one of the East's finest places to add sightings to their life lists. Whitetail deer and the small Sika deer, an Asian elk released on the north end of Assateague Island in 1923, also inhabit its pine forests and freshwater marshes. The **Chincoteague Refuge Visitor Center** at the Virginia end (see map) provides information, descriptive leaflets, and schedules for interpretive activities, including guided walks and auditorium programs. A concessioner operates a wildlife tour bus. You may make reservations for the tour at the visitor center. The access road off Beach Road is also the entrance to the Wildlife Loop (see map). **For information** about the refuge and visitor center seasons, hours, and fees, write: Refuge Manager, Chincoteague National Refuge, P.O. Box 62, Chincoteague, VA 23336; or call 804-336-6122. The National Park Service assists the Fish and Wildlife Service in providing services and managing recreational use in the Toms Cove area of Assateague Island's Virginia end. The **Toms Cove Visitor Center** offers exhibits, maps, and publications. For information about National Park Service naturalist or beach recreation activities there, call 804-336-6577.

Treasures at the Atlantic's Edge

Birding

Although birds abound throughout Assateague, birders usually find more opportunities in the Virginia portion of the island. In summer, the refuge's freshwater impoundments combine with marshes all along Assateague to host a variety of herons, egrets, and other wading birds. Terns dive for fish and gulls and sandpipers work the beaches and mudflats. Warblers and other passerine species are found in shrub thickets and pine forests. Late summer brings migrating shorebirds and peregrine falcons to the island. Thousands of waterfowl winter here, especially snow geese, black ducks, mallards, and pintails. Scoters, oldsquaws, and other sea ducks are sometimes seen in Toms Cove or Assateague Channel. Obtain a bird checklist from any of the island's visitor centers. **The piping plover, a threatened species, nests at Assateague. Special nesting area restrictions may apply—ask at any visitor center.**

Great blue heron

Snowy egret

Dunlins

American widgeon

Black-crowned night heron

William S. Seegar

Peregrine falcon

Backcountry Camping

There are several backpack and canoe-access campsites on the island's Maryland end; each has a chemical toilet and picnic table but no drinking water. There is no fee. The two ocean side sites are available to hikers. The four bay side camps, closed only during firearms deer season, may be used by hikers or canoeists. Ocean sites are open inner-dunes; bay sites sit among pine trees. Reservations are not necessary, but parking and backcountry-use permits are required and must be obtained by mid-afternoon. The nearest ocean side camp is 4 miles from parking. Write for free "Assateague Backcountry Camping" information at the national seashore address.

Naturalist Activities

Programs to enhance your enjoyment of the island's environment and unique recreation opportunities are offered at both the national seashore and the wildlife refuge. The **National Park Service** offers guided walks, talks, children's programs, and seashore recreation demonstrations daily in summer and on weekends in fall and spring. Guided walks include explorations of Assateague's birdlife, the beach, salt marshes, the bay, and dunes. Demonstrations include surf rescue and surf fishing. Clamming, crabbing, and canoe trips are available in Maryland. Check at the Barrier Island and Toms Cove Visitor Centers about programs at the island's Maryland and Virginia ends. The **Fish and Wildlife Service** offers wildlife-oriented interpretive walks and audiovisual programs for visitors of all ages. Some require free advance registration at the Chincoteague Refuge Visitor Center. Also in the visitor center is information on a narrated bus tour conducted by a refuge concessioner. On summer and fall weekends, holidays, and during Pony Penning week, local wildlife artists exhibit their works in the Lighthouse Oil Shed, reached by a short walk on the Lighthouse Trail. In November the refuge sponsors Waterfowl Week so that visitors may observe and learn about wintering waterfowl.

Contact the refuge or stop at the visitor center for information on activities and programs.

The Official National Park Handbook, *Assateague Island,* tells about this barrier island's natural history of ponies, pirates, and shipwrecks. It walks you through the beach, dune, salt marsh, and bay environments with the author, world-renowned marine biologist William H. Amos. The handbook may be purchased at visitor centers or through the mail by contacting the national seashore.

Camping

Seashore camping can be a memory to treasure—or a bad experience for the unprepared. There is no shade and mosquitoes can be abundant from mid-May to October. High winds can pull short tent pegs out of sand. Campgrounds at the Maryland end can be full in summer and waiting lists are used. For detailed information, write to the national seashore for free "Assateague Island Camping" literature.

In Virginia. Camping is not allowed on the wildlife refuge. However, commercial campgrounds are available on nearby Chincoteague Island. Call its Chamber of Commerce, 804-336-6161, for information.

In Maryland. The National Park Service offers two campgrounds, Oceanside and Bayside, with some sites available year-round. Primitive outdoor facilities include chemical toilets, drinking water, and cold, rinse-off showers. Any size camping unit can be accommodated (dump station only; no hookups). Some oceanside "walk-in" sites are for tents only. A campsite reservation system is available from May 15 to October 31; call 410-641-3030.

Assateague State Park offers a campground featuring bathhouses with hot showers and flush toilets. Any size camping unit can be accommodated (dump station only; no hookups). During winter, campgrounds may be closed. A small camp store and restaurant are open in summer. (National seashore campers must pay the state park day-use fee to enter the park and use these facilities.) Summer reservations are available for a stay of a full week only—call 410-641-2120.

Maryland's Pocomoke River State Park, a 45-minute drive from either end of the island, offers inland camping—call 410-632-2566

Wild Horses

Two herds of wild horses known as "ponies" by an adoring public make their homes on Assateague Island. The herds are separated by a fence at the boundary between Maryland and Virginia. In Maryland, horses are often seen around roads and campgrounds. In Virginia, look for them in Black Duck Marsh from observation platforms along Beach Road and Woodland Trail. The Maryland herd is managed by the National Park Service. The Virginia herd is owned by the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Company and allowed by permit to graze on Chincoteague refuge. Each year horses from the Virginia herd are rounded up and many of the foals are sold at the Pony Penning and auction, held on the last Wednesday and Thursday of July. Proceeds from the auction help support the fire company. Today's wild horses on Assateague Island are descended from domesticated stock that was grazed on the island as early as the 17th century by Eastern Shore planters. The planters grazed their horses here to avoid mainland taxes and fencing requirements. Only slightly smaller than many other horses, these shaggy, sturdy animals are well adapted to their harsh seashore environment. Marsh and dune grasses supply the bulk of their food; they obtain water from freshwater impoundments or natural ponds. Their social organization, behavior, and communication habits are explained in publications available at visitor centers. Although domestic in their distant origins, these horses are wild today. Respect them as such and view them only from a safe distance. **While usually appearing docile, they are prone to unpredictable behavior and can inflict serious wounds both by kicking and by biting. Do not feed or pet the horses.**

☆GPO:1995—387-038/00141 Reprint 1995

Map and Guide

Lifeguards and Swimming Safety

National Park Service Lifeguards supervise the North Beach and Toms Cove area beaches nearest the bathhouses in summer only. The state park also has summer lifeguard operations. Mats and floats, except U.S.C.G.-approved personal flotation devices, are prohibited at lifeguarded beaches. Elsewhere they should be used only by expert swimmers. Mats and floats provide a false sense of security to the poor swimmer, and seashore drownings have been related to these devices. They can deflate, or the occupant can be knocked off by a wave. See the bathhouse exhibits for important information on the purpose of the lifeguard flags and the dangers of stinging marine organisms, heavy surf, or seaward currents.

Facilities at Lifeguarded Beaches

Maryland end/Sinepuxent area. Next to the day-use parking lot is a bathhouse with rinse-off showers, changing stalls, toilet facilities, and drinking water. The boardwalk from the parking lot to a dune overlooking the beach is traversable by wheelchair. The state park also has a picnic area and bathhouse facilities. During the summer, a state park concessioner sells food and drink. **Virginia end/Toms Cove area.** Near main parking lots are bathhouses with rinse-off showers, changing stalls, toilet facilities, and drinking water. No food or drink is sold at this end of the island.

The 50-mile distance between the north and south ends of the island takes about 1¼ hours to drive. We recommend the route shown in blue on the map.

Recommended travel route
Oversand vehicle route (permit required)
Hiking trail
Hiker/Biker trail
Public campground
Campsite: backpack in only
Campsite: backpack or canoe in
Picnic area
Boat launch
Lifeguarded beach
Canoe access

Enjoying the Seashore World

Surf Fishing

Ask at a visitor center for fishing information and regulations. Naturalists present surf fishing demonstrations in summer for anglers new to ocean fishing. No saltwater license is required for surf fishing along this coast. Fishing is prohibited on lifeguarded beaches or in designated surfing zones. On the island's Virginia end an after hours fishing permit is required: ask at the Toms Cove or Chincoteague Refuge visitor centers.

Oversand Vehicle Use

Off-road vehicle (ORV) zones are posted and maps are available at national seashore and refuge headquarters. ORVs must stay on marked oversand vehicle routes. **All sand dunes and vegetated areas are closed, even those within a designated ORV zone.** Vehicles in ORV zones must properly display a valid permit. ORV permits are issued at the national seashore or refuge during normal business hours. Permits may also be obtained by mail. A fee is charged for all permits. Vehicle specification and equipment requirements for ORVs are strictly enforced. Limits are placed on the number of vehicles allowed on the beach at any one time. Write to the national seashore or wildlife refuge for information and requirements before bringing an ORV here for use.

Clamming, Crabbing, and Shell Collecting

Clamming is best at the island's Maryland end. The favored method here is raking while wading in the generally shallow bay, but use caution for deep water. Crabbers in Maryland or Virginia commonly use a crab net and baited line. Crabs must measure 5 inches from point to point in Maryland. As a conservation measure we recommend the same size in Virginia. Few wild oysters are found around Assateague, and you may not trespass on leased oyster beds. Ask at

visitor centers for information on shellfishing and best locations. Assateague is not generally known for good shell collecting. The most productive beaches are on the southern tip of Toms Cove Hook in Virginia, or at the extreme northern end in Maryland. Shells may not be sold or otherwise used for commercial purposes. Limit collections to those unoccupied shells you can carry in a one-gallon container on any one visit.

Canoeing and Boating

Chincoteague Bay waters are ideal for canoeing at the Maryland end. Four canoe-in campsites are located there (see Backcountry Camping). Use the canoe launch at the end of Ferry Landing Road. Be aware of wind forecasts and get off the water during thunderstorms. Each occupant must have a personal flotation device. Canoe rentals are several miles away and you must haul them to launch sites. Rent boats with motors in Chincoteague or Ocean City. Chincoteague Island has a boat ramp for public use. Large boats at the island's Maryland end should use West Ocean City or state park launch facilities on the mainland. The bay is generally shallow; boat operators should watch for sandbars. **Wildlife refuge regulations prohibit landing a boat anywhere on the island's Virginia end** other than at Fishing Point. Boats and flotation devices of any kind are prohibited in pools on the wildlife refuge.

Hiking and Bicycling

Hiking. At the island's **Maryland end,** short self-guiding walks are available on the Life of the Marsh, Life of the Forest, and Life of the Dunes nature trails. You can take longer hikes north to Ocean City Inlet or south on the ORV inner-dune road. At the **Virginia end,** 15 miles of trails wind through refuge marshes and forests and include a path to the Assateague Lighthouse. The Woodland Trail leads to an overlook where you can sometimes see ponies. The Wildlife Loop is reserved for hikers and bikers until 3 p.m. each day. Hikers can also enjoy miles of undisturbed beach north of the Toms Cove Visitor Center.

Bicycling. In Virginia, approximately half of the refuge trails are paved for bicyclists, including the Wildlife Loop and Woodland Trail. A bike path leads from the town of Chincoteague to the refuge, with routes to the Chincoteague Refuge and Toms Cove visitor centers. Bicycling on the refuge is a good way to avoid and alleviate parking problems, especially during busy summer weekends. **In Maryland,** cyclists can use 3 miles of bike path along Bayberry Drive and Oceanside Campground. Caution should be used on the two-lane Verrazano Bridge, Bayside Drive, and Old Ferry Landing Road.

Safety, Regulations, Pets, and Hunting

Water Safety and Seashore Hazards. Use the lifeguarded beaches (see Lifeguards and Swimming Safety). Mats and tubes are prohibited on lifeguarded beaches and discouraged elsewhere. Treat breaking surf waves with respect; dislocated shoulders and sand abrasions are not uncommon. **Even broken necks and paralysis have resulted from riding the waves in some fashion and being thrown into the sand head first.** Get off the beach during lightning storms. Overexposure to sun causes heat exhaustion and/or severe sunburn. Bare feet can be hurt by shells, glass, or hot coals left in the sand. Do not approach ponies closely. They can bite and kick, inflicting severe injuries.

Driving and Parking. Drive cautiously and obey posted speed limits. Take extra care around parking lots, campgrounds, and popular shellfishing areas that may be crowded with vehicles, bicycles, and children. Do not stop suddenly or block traffic to watch ponies or other wildlife. Avoid road-shoulder stopping and use designated parking. In Virginia, demand can exceed available parking space, especially on summer weekends.

Hours of Operation. The wildlife refuge, located in Virginia, is open year-round although opening and closing times vary seasonally. After hours surf fishing is allowed by special permit (see Surf Fishing). There is no closing time in Maryland, but overnight stays are permitted only by campers in designated campgrounds or backcountry campsites or by surf fishermen. No permit is required for overnight surf fishing in Maryland.

Pets. Please leave pets at home. They are prohibited in Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge, in Assateague State Park, in the primitive area north of the state park, and in all backcountry campsites. Pets are permitted elsewhere on the Maryland end of the island, but they must be on leashes no more than 6 feet long. This regulation is enforced because dogs can disturb other people, ponies, and shorebirds that nest in the sand or in marsh grasses. Blowing sand and salt spray are hard on the eyes and feet of dogs, and insects can further endanger their health here (heartworms). Really, it's better to leave your pets at home.

Wildlife and You. It is illegal to feed the ponies, deer, or other wildlife. Feeding encourages wild animals to become less afraid of, more dependent on, and, therefore, potentially more dangerous to people. It is also unhealthy for the animals and encourages them to stay along the roads where many are hit by cars each year. Keep the wild in the wildlife. Please don't feed.

Hunting. In Virginia, annual deer hunts are managed by permit for archery and firearm hunters, including those in wheelchairs. Waterfowl hunting is allowed on Wildcat Marsh and Morris Island. Contact the wildlife refuge for details. In Maryland, certain waterfowl and game species may be taken under state and federal regulations. Contact national seashore headquarters during September for information about hunting and for maps.

Poison Ivy, Mosquitos, and Ticks. Guard against poison ivy, mosquitos, and ticks—all abundant on Assateague from spring through autumn. While very rare along the Eastern Seaboard (an annual national average of 5-10 human cases), the potential for mosquito-transmitted encephalitis always exists since the virus can be present in wild birds. Three different species of ticks are found on the island: dog, lone star, northern deer (left to right). A tick bite may transmit various ailments. The northern deer tick is known to carry Lyme disease. To avoid getting bitten, stay on the trails, use repellents, and inspect yourself carefully if you walk through grass or brush. Ask at the visitor centers or campground office for a brochure.