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Observing Wild Horse Behavior

by Dr. Sue Stuska, Wildlife Biologist - Horses, Cape Lookout National Seashore

The wild horses in the park are managed as wild animals.

This means that they show us wild behaviors and interactions which are fascinating to watch. The draw for visitors and locals alike is that these magnificent animals can be watched from a distance without our interfering in their wild lives and, so, they show us how wild horses act when not influenced by people.

What can we learn from wild horses?

Horses thrive in the wild, and have evolved through the years to adapt to many different climates and ecosystems. Here, they've adapted to life on a barrier island. Studying their behavior - including the way they eat and socialize - can help us understand our own domestic horses. It can also give us insights into how wild populations survive in nature. For the park and the Foundation for Shackleford Horses, Inc, co-managers of the herd, understanding how they live in the wild can help us manage them most naturally. We consistently monitor the horses, and almost all of the management is "hands-off".

What appears to be a random order actually has its base in the harem hierarchy. The alpha mare is leading and the stallion is last, on the far side.

Horses are social animals.

The wild herd of 110 - 130 horses divides itself into about 25 smaller herds or harems which are composed of the alpha stallion, sometimes a beta stallion, the mares, and their youngsters. Youngsters stay with the harem through 1 1/2 to 2 1/2 years of age. When they leave, the young mares move to another harem. The young stallions form loosely organized bachelor bands. The only horses that spend time alone are older males that can't keep a harem, but they are often within sight of one harem or another and have interactions with other stallions (and mares, if they have the chance).

Wild social behavior is fascinating. Wild horse watching is so informative because the whole horse society is there; they have all grown up learning the behavioral "rules"; and they have a large area in which to interact. Most notably, a number of stallions are present, the whole social "order" is in place, and there are no artificial boundaries - only natural ones.

Instead of leading, stallions most often follow the mares as they move from place to place. As long as the mares are far enough away from other threatening stallions and within the area the stallion wants to occupy, he is content to follow along. When the harem gets to a potentially dangerous area (like a water hole where others may be present) the stallion will pass the mares and go ahead to check it out. If another, more dominant, stallion is there, he may prevent the mares from going in, or move them somewhere else until the area is clear.

The more dominant the stallion (the higher on the hierarchy he is) the less he has to herd his mares to keep them safe from other stallions.

Stallion herding posture involves a straight head-neck line, lowered nose, and pinned ears. To the mare, this means "move!"

What about horses meeting? How do they interact?

Each time horses meet there is some kind of interaction. It can be very subtle - sometimes it's on a level we don't even detect. In the wild, each interaction answers one segment of the question "who's dominant?" Generally speaking, the horse that wins more conflicts is more dominant. The most dominant horse gets his/her choice of feed, first chance for water and the opportunity to pass on his genes.

Stallion interactions can get quite violent, though they don't always. Interactions follow a predictable escalation pattern - there's everything from just looking at each other to standing on their hind legs and biting at each other's jugular veins. It's a very civilized system: the level escalates only as high as the importance of the issue. For example, a dispute over personal space likely wouldn't escalate past the visual. Disputes also occur over a grazing area, a water hole, or mares. The highest escalations can be expected to occur over mares in estrus (breeding readiness).

The result of any interaction is usually a clear winner and loser. If a youngster is involved, he may show his teeth in a clapping gesture to display his submissiveness and thus avoid being the target of aggression.

When a stallion loses he doesn't necessarily run away. You may see him suddenly be interested in grazing, or he may walk to his mares and move them away to protect them. Regardless, the hierarchy is a natural part of horse life.

Enjoy wild horse watching in your National Seashore. Bring binoculars. Choose a good vantage point where you can see all the horses at a glance (this keeps you from accidentally getting in the way or getting hurt). Relax and enjoy horse watching at its best.

This dispute has escalated to a moderately high level; it's over mares but they're not in estrus. This harem has two stallions: the alpha, right, is putting the beta in his place.