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Preserve & Protect

FREE
Cape Lookout National Seashore
2010–2011 Edition

Wild Horse Watching Provides Great Photo Opportunities

There are four aspects to getting a good photograph of a wild horse: finding horses, setting up the shots, choosing and knowing your equipment, and being in the right place at the right time.

Finding horses

Sometimes we look and walk and look some more but horses don't seem to be present. Other times, the horses are easy to spot. Walking and looking is the best way to locate horses, but here are some tips for finding them.

There are between 110 and 130 wild horses on Shackleford Banks. The herd has divided itself into smaller groups called harems or bands (2 to 13 horses) and these groups have their own home ranges along the length of the island.

A telephoto lens allows you to make a distant object appear closer and to balance its size with the foreground subjects. Knowing, additionally, that the stallion (second from left) has just acquired another stallion's mares (far left, third from left, and far right) makes this even more interesting.
© Jim Strickland www.jimstricklandphoto.com

Each quadrant of the island has horses living there. So it should be possible to find horses in any part of the island. It's easier to spot bigger groups because it's more likely that one will be visible outside the shrubs or on top of a dune.

Consider the weather conditions and where you would choose to be if you were a horse. If there's a cold north wind, you're more likely to find horses south of the shrubs where the shrubs block the wind, or in the low areas between the dunes where the dunes block the wind.

In the heat of the summer, horses may be in the partial shade of a myrtle thicket if the bugs aren't too troublesome.

If it's very hot and the bugs are bothersome, the horses are more likely to be in breezy places that are also moist, like exposed marshes on the sound side of the island.

On summer afternoons when there's a southwest wind, horses are likely to be on the dunes where the wind both cools them and keeps the flies away.

When it's hot during the summer, the horses will visit the water holes frequently. There's fresh drinking water on the west end at the Mullet Pond, mid island near Whale Creek Bay, and on the far eastern end of the island in the shrub thickets. However, you don't need to know exactly where the water is. Look for very well used paths (they lead to and from water) and station yourself on a nearby high spot.

If you station yourself at a water hole, you may cause the horses to avoid the spot or to come and go in haste. You also might end up dangerously in the middle of a fight. If, instead, you watch from a nearby high spot where you can see them coming and going, you're more likely to see more horses and to be able to safely capture the action.

After heavy rains, the horses don't have to visit the water holes as often because they can drink from rainwater puddles. You may find them farther from the waterholes and not making so many trips to drink.

Anticipating action and being ready with the sun at your back are keys to capturing conflicts. The color and composition, along with the action, make this a beautiful photo of three bachelor stallions.
© Jim Strickland www.jimstricklandphoto.com

Setting up shots

Once you've found horses, approach slowly. Don't act like you are sneaking up on them because this will alert their escape instincts. Instead, walk casually closer while watching the horses. When they watch you back, stop and wait. If they don't return to grazing immediately, stop there. If they go back to grazing immediately, you may be able to get closer. Choose a position far enough away to avoid influencing the horses so you can see their fascinating behaviors. If you get too close, they will leave. Fifty feet is generally a good distance. Stay back far enough that you can see all the horses in one glance. This ensures that you don't accidentally end up in between a mare and her foal. It also helps you avoid getting run over during a conflict between two stallions. This distance should allow you to capture the entire sequence of various behaviors.

If the horses move while you are filming, you may need to move also. Be prepared to back up and plan your escape route early if they come toward you.

To set up your shots, you can move around the harem if you keep out of the space the harem is occupying and move slowly. If you have someone with you, stay together so the horses don't get the idea you are trying to surround them. If you are using your friend or family member as foreground, don't let them back up into the harem. Horses who have been aggravated have been seen making short charges toward intruders who get too near the harem.

Remember that it's the horses' perception of your actions, not yours, that matter. If a horse feels you are in its space, it will object or leave, regardless of whether you feel you are too close or not.

Put the sun at your back; shooting into the sun rarely gives satisfactory results. A fill flash usually is not helpful in wildlife situations because the distance is too great.

Wait patiently. Sometimes the horses will move by you on their way to drinking or grazing. They are likely to turn around and face you as they graze along if you wait long enough; this gives you more attractive head shots.

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Choosing and knowing your equipment

Because you're photographing animals in the wild, you need a telephoto or zoom lens to bring your subjects closer. A zoom is also helpful for composing your photo. You can choose to concentrate on one horse or on two who are interacting. This will be more interesting than a photo of, say, five horses grazing in the distance. The zoom also puts objects more into the perspective we get with our eyes – otherwise whatever is closest to the camera will appear disproportionately big. Jim's photo of the harem in front of the lighthouse balances the two rather than showing large horses and a tiny lighthouse.

Black and white photography can draw attention to the action of these two bachelor stallions sparring.
© Jim Strickland www.jimstricklandphoto.com

Being in the right place a the right time

Patience and time are valuable tools. If you watch the horses' behaviors, you can sometime predict that a foal is going to nurse (young ones often do this after rising from a nap) or two stallions fighting (they will observe each other, and one will start in the direction of the other). Generally, the more time you are willing to stay, and the more photos you take, the more chances you have of getting a superb shot. While you may get lucky, generally you have to wait patiently for the juxtaposition of horse and background or the interaction that makes a great shot.

Please Remember to:

- Respect wildlife closures
- Keep pets on leash

Wild Horse Watching Tips, Shackleford Banks

Shackleford's 110-130 horses live in about 30 groups called "harems" (stallions, mares and foals) and "bachelor bands" (only stallions). They may be seen in all parts of the island but you may need to hunt around a bit to find them.

Remember that the horses are wild – they must find their own food and water and protect themselves from danger. Wild horses see humans and dogs as something dangerous. If you get too close to the horses they may defend themselves by charging, kicking or biting. For you and your pet's safety:

- Watch the horses from a safe distance. If the horse stops what it's doing to stare directly at you, stop there. If it starts to move away, you are already too close.
- Bring binoculars and use a telephoto lens so you won't disturb the horses or endanger yourself.
- Keep your dog on a leash for its and the horses' safety (and it's the law!).
- Always carry fresh water for yourself and your pet. During the warm months, bug repellent is recommended.

Sharing the beach

The beach is more than a place to come enjoy a warm, summer's day. For sea turtles and many shore birds the beach is a nursery for their young. The National Park Service must balance the needs of those who use the beach for recreation with the needs of those who use the beach for survival. For this reason, the park's resource management staff spends most of the spring and summer monitoring and marking the areas needed by nesting shore birds and sea turtles. These areas will be closed to all other uses for the time that they are needed. Fortunately, most of the desired nesting areas cover only a small area and do not prevent our enjoying the beach too. But sometimes the best nursery area is also wanted for recreation. When this happens, the needs of the nursery must be met first – it is a matter of survival. Sharing the beach is not always easy, but every effort is made to allow both uses to occur side-by-side.

Common Tern chicks.

Beach Babies

Summer is the nesting season for sea turtles and shorebirds like plovers, terns, gulls, oystercatchers and skimmers. Most of the bird nesting occurs near inlets in open sandy areas like Cape Lookout's point, Drum Inlet and the Portsmouth Flats. Here adult birds come together in colonies to scrape a shallow nest in the sand, lay their eggs and raise their young. These nesting areas also allow us a chance to watch not only the adults, but the chicks as well. Bring a pair of binoculars and stay on the outside of the signed nesting area. Look carefully as the eggs and chicks blend in with sand.

Sea turtles nest individually near the dune line. Their nest is dug out of the sand and the eggs are buried. The nest is then left to hatch on its own with the hatchling turtles immediately crawling to the ocean and swimming out to sea. Because the nesting process takes place at night, tracks in the sand is about all we get to see of the adult or young turtles.

Nesting begins:
birds – April through June
turtles – June through September.

Eggs hatch:
birds – June through August
turtles – July through October.

Chicks begin to fly:
July through August

Beyond this sign there are mother and baby birds
Signs like this are used to mark nesting areas on the beach from April 1 until August 31. Within the signed area mother birds lay their eggs in the sand, hatch their young and raise their chicks until they can fly. You can help the mother birds with their chicks by not going into the closed area within the signs.