

# Center for State of the Parks



## ASSATEAGUE ISLAND NATIONAL SEASHORE

### SNAPSHOT

Assateague Island, which is part of both Maryland and Virginia, is one of the few fully federally protected barrier islands on the East Coast. The critical role the island plays for waterfowl and other bird species was recognized in 1943 when most of the Virginia portion of the island was designated as Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge. Assateague State Park was established along a two-mile stretch of the island in 1964. The next year, the island (including the refuge and state park) and its surrounding waters were established as Assateague Island National Seashore.

About 3.2 million people visit the national seashore annually to boat, bird-watch, fish, hunt, crab, clam, camp, ride over-sand vehicles (OSVs), see wild horses, or just meditate.

### HISTORY

Assateague Island is in a state of constant flux under relentless buffeting from wind and water. Sand dunes alternately are built up and washed away, moved and restructured. Populations of vegetation emerge or die off with changes in geography and hydrology. Over time, the island is drifting west and south. Paradoxically, the very forces that make the island dynamic also help maintain the relative stability of its natural ecosystems.



The park manages feral horses to balance the animals' welfare with that of native ecosystems.

The difficulty of maintaining human structures on Assateague Island has resulted in limited development. However, the effects of that development persist to this day, and the island remains a "work in progress." For example, artificial dunes built during the 1950s and 1960s effectively curtailed storm overwash until powerful storms in the 1990s eliminated most of them from the Maryland portion of the island. In the absence of regular overwash, vegetation communities changed, habitat for rare beach-dwelling species disappeared, and the cross-island movement of sand critical to the island's persistence was halted. It will be many years before the effects of

historic dune building activities fully disappear.

In addition to human visitors, the national seashore hosts an abundance of migratory birds that depend upon Assateague's diverse habitats during seasonal passages. At least five federally listed threatened or endangered species breed on the island, while endangered whales and other protected marine animals regularly visit Assateague's offshore waters.

Several archaeological sites in the park speak to Assateague's human history. Throughout the last 400 years, Assateague's treacherous offshore waters, shoals, and inlets claimed many vessels ranging from Spanish warships to a presidential yacht. Several of these shipwrecks lie within park waters. Terrestrial sites include the remains of four 19th century U.S. Coast Guard lifesaving stations. The Assateague Beach Coast Guard Station, built in 1922, still stands intact, protected from the elements by the ongoing efforts of park staff.

### THREATS

- Assateague is unable to fill nine existing permanent staff positions and add several needed new positions because of a chronic lack of funds, which translates to difficulties providing adequate resource protection, maintenance, and visitor services. Nearly all facets of resource management, interpretation, and park operation are suffering as a result of staffing shortfalls.



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- Funding shortfalls are compromising the park's ability to care for federally protected species such as seabeach amaranth and piping plover.
- Feral horses severely affect native species and ecosystems on Assateague Island. They overgraze and trample sensitive vegetation, disturb soils, and displace native wildlife.
- Assateague provides important habitat for rare beach-dwelling plants and animals, including many federally and state-listed species. Increasing public use and demand for recreational access, including off-road vehicle use within the park's 16-mile over-sand vehicle route, is creating new conflicts and may threaten the future value of Assateague's beach habitats for many species.
- Assateague's estuarine habitats are crucial to regional biodiversity and ecosystem health. The park faces major challenges in protecting these resources as population growth and agricultural practices in the watershed alter water quality. Significant declines in aquatic grasses and a recent reversal of water quality trends from improving to deteriorating illustrate the severity of threats and the need for greater protection.
- Lacking any staff solely devoted to cultural resources management, Assateague is unable to adequately care for its historic structures, archaeological sites, and archives. The park needs at least two full-time cultural resources staff.
- Assateague's limited budget prevents the park from fully caring for its most significant historic structure, the Assateague Beach Coast Guard Station. To address this shortfall, the park is seeking a partner such as a university or nonprofit organization to use the building as a research or

education facility. Until an agreement is reached, however, the Park Service must continue to find funds to maintain the structure.

#### WHAT'S BEING DONE

- The Park Service collaborates with scientists, animal welfare groups, and volunteers from the local community on its feral horse management strategies. The Park Service has used an innovative contraceptive vaccine to reduce the population of feral horses inhabiting the national seashore from a high of 176 to its current size of 140. Other measures will be needed, however, to reduce the population to a size that balances the welfare of the horses against their ecological impacts. A recent assessment determined that a population of 80 to 100 horses may be an appropriate compromise.
- The Park Service has embraced the use of new technologies and manages several automated monitoring stations in support of cooperative efforts to protect estuarine water quality in the bays adjacent to Assateague. Stations document weather conditions, water quality, tides, and atmospheric deposition of nitrogen (a major source of excess nutrients to the estuary).
- The Assateague North End Restoration Project was initiated to counteract decades of sand starvation at the north end of the island that resulted from the construction of the Ocean City inlet and jetty system. A 25-year collaboration between the Park Service and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, phase one was completed in 2002 and involved a large-scale one-time deposit of sand mined from offshore shoals onto the island's north end. In 2004, phase two began a long-term program of biannual sand bypassing in which sand is

transported from areas of entrapment at the Ocean City Inlet to the nearshore waters adjacent to sand-starved northern Assateague.

#### ABOUT NPCA AND CENTER FOR STATE OF THE PARKS

Since 1919, the National Parks Conservation Association has been the leading voice of the American people in protecting and enhancing our National Park System. NPCA, its members, and partners work together to protect the park system and preserve our nation's natural, historical, and cultural heritage for generations to come.

NPCA initiated the State of the Parks® program in 2000 to assess the condition of natural and cultural resources in the parks. The goal is to provide information that will help policy-makers, the public, and the National Park Service improve resource conditions in national parks, celebrate successes as models for other parks, and ensure a lasting legacy for future generations.

#### CONTACT US

For a copy of NPCA's full report on Assateague Island National Seashore, to get copies of reports on other parks, or for more information about the Center for State of the Parks, visit [www.npca.org/stateoftheparks](http://www.npca.org/stateoftheparks) or contact Dr. James Nations, vice president for the Center for State of the Parks, at [jnations@npca.org](mailto:jnations@npca.org).

For more information on Assateague Island National Seashore, contact NPCA's Mid-Atlantic Regional Office at 202.454.3386, or visit the park online at [www.nps.gov/asis](http://www.nps.gov/asis). For media inquiries, please contact Shannon Andrea, NPCA media relations manager, at 202.454.3371 or [sandrea@npca.org](mailto:sandrea@npca.org). To learn more about what the public and our elected officials can do to help improve the health of this park, visit [www.npca.org/take\\_action](http://www.npca.org/take_action).