

presenting:
The World Famous Wild Pony Roundup and Swim
of
Chincoteague Island Virginia
Last Wednesday of July, 2008





We line up with other kayakers on the Edge of Horse Marsh, Assateague Island, part of a floating Crayola box of color. Closer to Chincoteague, the power boats form two lines, leaving a clear lane between. Across this narrowest part of Assateague Channel, the ponies will swim, at slack tide, as they have for hundreds of years, since colonists first put them, and other livestock, on the islands, thus avoiding certain taxes and fencing laws. There was, in the past, a sheep roundup. Now, only the ponies remain, managed by the Chincoteague Fire Company. In the north (Maryland) end of Assateague, the ponies are part of the wildlife managed by the National Seashore and State Park (their numbers, and their impact on the fragile barrier island environment, are controlled with birth control drugs). On the Virginia end, the Fire Co. sells off most of the foals, leaving a few to replace old horses who died. Very young foals must be claimed later in the year, when they are old enough to be weaned.





The moment of slack tide is announced with the big red plume of a flare. The signal is sent. The saltwater cowboys have driven the ponies from the holding pen on Assateague to Horse Marsh. Low in our kayaks, we hear the crack and pop of the trademark bullwhips long before we see the out riders coming through the marsh grass. Considering the potential for disaster: untrained horses, 40,000 non-horseman tourists, kayaks, bikes, baby strollers, and the necessity of loading your cowpony onto a floating trailer (from the water)... this is well organized. The riders move like a living fence around the herd. The herd, while not exactly your well-trained backyard ponies, is used to handling, herding and swimming. Only the strong ponies swim, the very young or very old are trucked to Chincoteague and back.









This spot off Horse Marsh requires a short swim through deep water, then a shallow wade, then up over a shoal (a mud/sand/oyster shell bar), then into the wider stretch of channel to Chincoteague.







The bay horse in front is a Chincoteague Pony, he's a minimum white pinto: note the flash of white on his rump.







The saltwater cowboys don't swim their horses across the widest part of the channel: by then the pony herd is well on its way. The cowboys stop at the shoal, and load their horses onto the barge for the short trip across.









Not every loading goes as planned. One horse refused half a dozen attempts, finally going on nearly the last run, after the cowboys had tried every horseman's trick in the book..



