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[NC's wild horses maimed by isolation, corralled by controversy](#)

By *Sean Cockerham* as published at newsobserver.com

Only two foals have been born this year in the herd of 101 horses.



A wild horse on the beach near Corolla, N.C. (Sean Cockerham, McClatchy)

SEAN COCKERHAM — McClatchy

COROLLA, N.C. — Retired Washington, D.C., police Officer E.T. Smith patrolled the beach in his four-wheel-drive truck on a recent morning, keeping an eye out for wild mustangs and the drunks who like to harass them.

The horses have survived on this narrow barrier island for some 500 years, thought to be descendants of Colonial mounts that swam to shore when Spanish galleons ran aground on the shoals and sandbars of North Carolina's [Outer Banks](#). They've withstood centuries of hurricanes and nor'easters on this isolated spit of sand, marsh and woods, and became a huge draw for visitors.

But the horses now face serious threats, say those who manage the herd: a boom in McMansion-style vacation homes on this once-pristine stretch of coast and federal policies that are leaving the mustangs severely inbred and starting to suffer from genetic deformities.

“Mass interaction with people is a killer,” said Smith, after stopping to pick up a “Happy Birthday” balloon that a tourist had left behind on the beach.

The government has described the herd, some of the last remaining wild horses in the Eastern United States, as pests that compete for resources with federally protected birds. The battle over the herd on this island comes as horse advocates and the Interior Department clash nationwide. On the other side of the country, the government is rounding up wild horses in the West and confining them at the urging of cattle ranchers who say the animals deplete the range. In North Carolina, the mustangs are left dodging tourists, developers and birth defects. Gus Cothran, an expert in equine genetics at [Texas A&M University](#), published a DNA analysis in 2012 warning that the Corolla herd was becoming dangerously inbred.

Two of eight foals born last year had birth defects, according to the Corolla Wild Horse Fund, which manages the herd through agreement with the local and federal governments. One, with multiple fractures in its legs and fetlocks, was so severely crippled it had to be euthanized.

Two foals have been born this year in the herd of 101 horses. One had a genetic defect of severely contracted tendons that forced him to walk on the tips of his hoofs.

Medical treatment saved that horse _ which the herd managers named Vivo, a gangly dark colt with a star on his forehead whose name is Spanish for “alive” _ from being crippled and euthanized. Vivo, though, can no longer live free.

Once a wild horse is removed from the beach and exposed to domestic horses as part of veterinary treatment and recovery, there’s a risk of bringing back disease to the herd. So Vivo and his mother are confined to a facility on the mainland, near Grandy, N.C., poking their heads through a fence as visitors approach.

Nuisance or icon?

“We have one of the highest levels of inbreeding and lowest levels of genetic diversity of any wild herd anywhere. We are down to one maternal line, which is very dangerous,” said Karen McCalpin, the executive director of the Corolla Wild Horse Fund.

Rep. Walter Jones, R-N.C., has taken up the cause. The U.S. House of Representatives unanimously passed his bill in 2012 and 2013 to allow the herd to grow to 130 horses and to let the Corolla Wild Horse Fund bring a few horses from the [Shackleford Banks](#), on another island at the far southern tip of the Outer Banks, in order to infuse some fresh genes into the herd.

But the bill has been opposed by the [U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service](#), and it goes nowhere in the Senate.

The issue is that at least some horses cross into the island’s [Currituck National Wildlife Refuge](#), although the most sensitive parts are fenced off. Flocks of endangered migratory waterfowl and nesting sea turtles use the refuge, and the government calls the horses a “nuisance.”

The Fish and Wildlife Service “considers the horses to be non-native, feral animals and not a natural component of the barrier island ecosystem,” the Currituck National Wildlife Refuge website reads. “These animals compete with native wildlife species for food and fresh water. Their activities degrade and destroy habitat, which negatively impacts native species.”

Pressure is growing for a solution, and the Southeast regional refuge manager for the Fish and Wildlife Service, David Viker, struck a conciliatory tone in a recent interview. Viker said the agency was going to work with equine geneticist Cothran on a new study to look at the potential for bringing fresh genes into the Corolla herd and how many horses the habitat could support.

He said the Fish and Wildlife Service hadn’t wanted to make horses a focus of the refuge at the expense of caring for other animals. But the agency will look for answers because the Corolla herd is “such an important icon in that part of the world,” he said...

'Don't Tread on Me'

Nowhere else can someone rent a vacation home, have a cup of coffee on the porch and watch wild mustangs frolic in the surf. Figuring out how the horses can coexist with the intense Outer Banks development could end up even tougher than the genetics problem, though.

There was once estimated to be as many as 6,000 wild horses roaming along the lengths of the Outer Banks. As the barrier islands were developed in the past century, those numbers dwindled to a few hundred, with two main herds remaining in the wild.

One is at Shackleford Banks, on federal parkland at the far southern edge of the islands. The other is the Corolla herd, on 7,500 acres near the Virginia border, a tourist draw featured on billboards and supporting nine tour companies that bring visitors to the beach on Jeeps or Hummers.

"For as long as people have been coming down here to the Outer Banks the horses have been a big attraction," said Mike Clasing, a guide who leads tours of the wild horses and supports their protection. "It is one of the few places you can see anything like this."

The herd's habitat includes over 700 houses and thousands of people. The beach is considered a public road and rows of four-wheel-drive vehicles jam the shore. Huge vacation homes line the dunes. One of them, named "Wild Horse," boasts 23 bedrooms and 20 full bathrooms. Construction sites abound, with some homes standing three-quarters finished as a developer races to start the next one.

Vacationers set up lawn chairs on the beach, drink beer and soak in the sun as they watch the waves come in. They don't always respect the local ordinance

that tells them to stay 50 feet from the horses, which the Livestock Conservancy considers critically endangered.

Corolla Wild Horse Fund director McCalpin said it had become almost impossible to recruit volunteers to patrol and make sure the horses have their space.

“People have gotten so ugly. The volunteers don’t want someone getting in their face saying, ‘I paid \$5,000 to rent this house and I am going to take a picture of the horses,’ ” she said.

Retired Washington cop Smith isn’t easily intimidated, and he volunteers to patrol the beach for the organization. He hands out fliers describing the rules, talks to vacationers about the horses and occasionally totes a rifle with contraceptive darts to control the growth of the herd.

He once found a horse tangled in fiber optic cable. Last month a Great Dane and an Irish wolfhound chased down a foal, separating it from its mother, as the dogs’ owner stood and watched the entertainment, then screamed obscenities at Smith when he told him to control the dogs.

Patrols have come across vacationing college students who were bouncing beach balls off the horses. A 3-year-old mare, Charlotte, had to be euthanized this summer after a roofing nail lodged deeply in her foot. A colt died of intestinal blockage after tourists fed him watermelon rinds a couple of years ago.

For Smith, it’s personal.

His wife deeply loved the horses. They planned to retire on the Outer Banks, and they bought a house where the paved road ends and the beach begins. It all imploded when his wife died last year after 46 years of marriage, leaving the former cop and Vietnam veteran adrift and in search of meaning. His daily patrols to protect the horses have become his refuge, although too often they lead to confrontation.

Smith said there had been an increase in what he called the “Don’t Tread on Me” crowd coming to the beach, people who don’t care much for rules or horses.

“I tell them to put their pet on a leash and their response is, “Who the hell are you?’ ” Smith said.

Still, he continues. The horses offer a needed sense of the wild in a country that’s increasingly giving way to development, he said.

“People are being crowded into corners,” Smith said as he drove, occasionally spotting a horse eating grass in the shadow of a giant vacation home.

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Read more here: http://www.newsobserver.com/2014/08/12/4066604_wild-horses-maimed-by-isolation.html?rh=1#storylink=cpy