

Where Wild Ponies Swim *and* Dreams Come True

The annual roundup and sale of wild Chincoteague ponies
brings out the kindness of strangers

Archer's Gambit (the horse closest to shore), known to locals as Puzzle, leads the herd of wild ponies to shore after their annual swim from Assateague Island to Chincoteague Island, Va., on July 24, 2024.



By Nanette Holt & Natasha Holt

Growing up on the island made famous by the “Misty of Chincoteague” book series and movie, Meagan Fulmer desperately wanted just one thing.

“From the time I could say ‘pony,’ I wanted a pony,” she said.

But not just any pony. She wanted to train a wild Chincoteague pony on her own, just like the children did in the stories that inspired her hometown’s annual end-of-July tradition.

Now in its 100th year, that tradition draws tens of thousands of fans to tiny Chincoteague, Virginia, each July. Visiting during “pony penning week” is the fulfillment of a lifelong wish born while reading the story in childhood, dozens of visitors told *American Essence*.

Wild ponies have lived on neighboring Assateague Island for about 400 years. They swam ashore from wrecked ships, according to

Pankey Nelson, a spokeswoman for the Museum of Chincoteague Island.

In 1924, the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Co. came up with the idea to corral the wild herd and sell some of the foals. The effort would solve two problems. It would ensure that the wild ponies would have enough food by reducing the number foraging on the small, otherwise uninhabited island, and the sale’s proceeds could be used to purchase badly needed firefighting equipment for the community.

Volunteer firefighters on horseback rounded up the herd and encouraged the ponies to swim from their wild home to sparsely populated Chincoteague. The foals were sorted and some were sold. Remaining wild ponies were later guided back across the channel to Assateague Island. The plan was such a success that the effort became an annual event. Volunteer firefighters



formed a band of “saltwater cowboys,” who committed to care for the wild herd year-round.

In the 1940s, the event caught the attention of a publisher, who sent author Marguerite Henry to investigate. She fell in love with the islands, the ponies, the people, and the tradition, according to Nelson.

Henry’s fictional portrayal made the community, its customs, and the pony she bought, Misty, internationally famous. When a movie was made based on her book, only five professional actors played in the film, Nelson said. Island residents filled all other roles.

‘Mane’ Fundraiser for Firefighters

In 1943, the federal government preserved the wild home of the ponies as a national wildlife refuge. In a rare agreement, the fire company was allowed to keep its herd, with up to 150 adult horses, in the preserve. So every year, most of the foals still must be sold so the island doesn’t become overpopulated.

Now officially known as the Chincoteague Pony Roundup, Swim, and Auction, festivities are planned each year for the week of the last Wednesday and Thursday in July. Visiting the island has become a pilgrimage of sorts for horse lovers.

Chincoteague covers about 37 square miles. About 28 are under water. Seafaring activity drove the economy in the early days. Now, most residents in the community of 3,300 make their living on tourism, Nelson said. But residents pay no tax to fund fire and ambulance services. The ponies provide for those: The 2024 summer pony auction brought in more than \$547,000 for needed equipment and training. A fall auction of four late-born foals brought in another \$22,000.

Unbridled Hope

From the time she was about 8, Meagan Fulmer listened for details about the world-famous pony roundup. She’d beg her grandparents to drive her to buy tickets for the annual raffle associated with the event.

Every year on the night before the pony auction, townspeople and visitors gather at the carnival grounds for the big announcement. With her heart pounding, Fulmer would clutch her ticket, hoping it would be the winner. She dreamed it would make her the proud owner of King or

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Queen Neptune, the honor bestowed on the first pony foal to reach the island during the annual swim earlier in the day. That pony was always the raffle prize.

A winning ticket was the young girl’s only hope of taking home and gentling her own wild, baby horse. She knew she couldn’t afford to bid in the annual auction the following day. But every year when the raffle winner was announced, her dream seemed to slip further out of reach.

When she was 15, she decided she didn’t want to attend the festivities anymore. She’d return, she vowed, when she could buy a pony and take care of it with her own money.

Wild ponies rest near spectators after swimming from their home on Assateague Island to Chincoteague Island.





Saltwater cowboys work together to bring in a herd of wild ponies in the annual “beach walk” on Assateague Island, Va., on July 22, 2024.



Eighteen years passed. But the dream remained.

When the time came in July 2024 for the Pony Penning festivities, Fulmer—now a 33-year-old bartender living about an hour north of Chincoteague—decided this was her year.

She prayed through the night and into the early hours of the morning. Then, shortly after sunrise, she crowded in with others eager to watch the excitement. She’d saved \$2,200 for her dream horse: a pinto filly, with a coat splotched with white and a reddish color known to horse lovers as “chestnut.”

When the auctioneer, who has directed the sale for 25 years, started the bidding on the first pony, Fulmer’s stomach tightened. When a filly was brought out and offered for sale, she jumped in, caught the eye of an auction helper, made her bid, then another, then another. But the pony’s price quickly went too high.

There were 88 ponies for sale. Seven had been chosen as “buybacks,” which would be purchased and donated back to the fire company’s herd. Fulmer’s heart quickened when each new pony was guided out by its handlers. Brown ponies, cream-colored ponies, black-and-white ponies. She would love any of them, she told herself.

The next ponies’ prices inched higher. Then a buyback filly, a descendant of Marguerite Henry’s

Misty, “sold” for a record-breaking \$50,500. The buyers would have the right to name her—and set her free on Assateague with the herd.

Unexpected Kindness

Fulmer’s hopes rose every time she jumped into the bidding fray. People around her in the crowd began to notice and cheered her on with every bid.

But the bidding always shot past her \$2,500 limit. With her saved money in hand, and \$300 borrowed from her grandmother, her limit was her limit.

After her ninth failed attempt, a man near the edge of the spectator area motioned for her to come closer.

He held out a hundred-dollar bill and grinned, urging, “Now go buy your pony!”

Stunned, Fulmer smiled gratefully. Maybe this stranger was the answer to her prayers.

She made her way back to her spot in the crowd that surrounded a small, grassy paddock. The young horses were brought in individually as bidding on them began.

Auction watchers craned their necks for a

glimpse of the next foal. But there was a delay. The most recent winning bidder needed to come settle up on payment, the auctioneer announced. And someone needed to move a truck.

Fulmer peered anxiously toward the nearby stable that housed the foals. Then the man who’d given her money beckoned to her again.

“Hey!” he called. “There are others here who want to give you some money!”

Suddenly, older ladies watching from lawn chairs pulled twenties from their purses and handed them to her. Other smiling strangers thrust fives, tens, fifties, and hundreds at Fulmer’s quaking hands. In moments, her pony budget climbed by another \$900.

Was this her miracle? she wondered.

Then, as if in a dream, two men guided out the most beautiful pinto filly she had ever seen. Her coat looked splashed with red and white paint. Impressed by the pony’s beauty, would-be buyers shouted bids. The price shot up. Fulmer made her bid.

“Going once! Going twice!” the auctioneer shouted, glancing in Fulmer’s direction. “Sold!”



The annual auction for wild ponies on Chincoteague Island, Va. The event raises funds for the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Company and helps reduce the wild horse numbers on nearby Assateague Island.



Meagan Fulmer with her Chincoteague pony foal, Gracie, in Temperanceville, Va.

The gavel fell, and Fulmer's shoulders bent forward, shaking as she sobbed. People around her cheered and clapped. Some dabbed at the corners of their eyes.

The red-and-white filly with a bonus marking—a heart-shaped mark on her forehead—was hers. She immediately named the pony Gracie.

'My Life's Dream Come True'

The Chincoteague Chamber of Commerce shared a video of Fulmer's reaction on its Facebook page.

"Coming together for the greater good is one of the things that makes Chincoteague Island so special," the chamber wrote in the post.

Months later, when Fulmer tells the story, she pauses and swallows hard, choking back tears. She has a new dream now: to save \$1,000 more to bring to the 2025 centennial celebration. She wants to pass that cash to someone else in need of help and hope.

"It was God. I'm telling you," she said as she stroked Gracie's velvety nose. "I prayed and prayed and said, 'Lord, if I'm meant to have her today, let me have her.'"

"So many people came to me, and they said, 'Do you notice what's on her forehead? She has a heart on her forehead! That little girl was meant for you. ... God set her aside for you."

"I just am beyond, beyond, grateful. She is literally my life's dream come true." ^{AP}

2024 Pony Tales

92

Ponies sold in 2024

7

Buybacks returned to the wild

\$1,600

Lowest winning bid

\$50,500

Highest price for a pony

\$569,700

Total revenue from 2024 pony sales

An estimated

50,000–80,000

Visitors to Chincoteague for the festivities

If You Go

The Chincoteague Pony Roundup, Swim, and Auction festivities are always planned for the week of the last Wednesday and Thursday in July. The 100th celebration will take place July 26–August 1, 2025.