

# HORSES

## On Cumberland Island

Europeans brought horses, native to the great open plains of Southeast Europe and Asia, along with other livestock to North America on their early exploring expeditions. The stock from which the island horses descended arrived in the 1920s, when island residents released a train-car load of feral horses from Arizona. Horses are adapted to open grasslands, not to the challenges and hazards of marshlands and forest environments.



MARE WITH FOAL

### No paradise for horses

We imagine that animals confined in a pasture would be happier running free, but this assumes that those animals can thrive in a totally new environment to which they are *not* adapted. The notion that freedom equals Utopia is a romanticized version of reality. It is the opposite of the hardships experienced by the feral horses on this island terrain so alien to them.



SECURELY HELD BY GRAPEVINE

Thick draping manes and tails are an advantage in open grasslands, but become a liability in a tight forest environment. They easily snag on vines and briars, and many times hold fast, condemning the animal to starvation, heatstroke or dehydration.



CAUGHT BETWEEN TREES

With little nourishing grass available, the open, plains-like appearance of the salt marsh is inviting and lures horses. But to reach the grass, they must go ever deeper into the dangerous mud. When they suddenly sink so deep they are unable to extricate themselves, the incoming tide drowns them. Buried logs threaten to snap their long slender legs.



EATING MARSH GRASS



A TREACHEROUS PASTURE

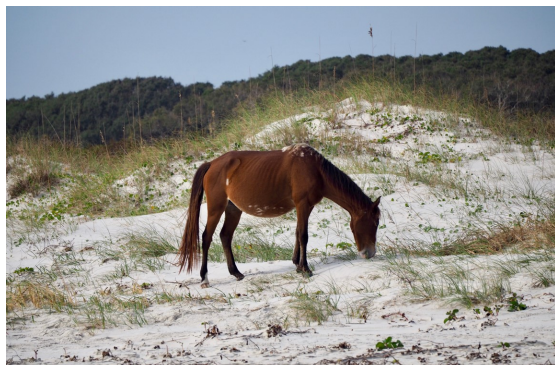
Their food supply is sparse. A close look at any open field or "lawn" reveals small amounts of actual grass. Alligators, venomous snakes and encephalitis-bearing mosquitoes all add to the daily hazards faced by island horses.



SALT MARSH PASTURE, OYSTERS IN FOREGROUND

## How do feral horses affect the island?

Exotic species impose new stresses on established ecosystems. Horses affect geological processes on the beach by grazing dune-stabilizing plants, such as sea oats. Sea oats help hold the sand dunes in place with their deep network of roots and ability to continue growing if buried. Grazing compromises this natural protection of the shoreline and also violates the state Shoreline Protection Act.



EATING DUNE VEGETATION

Foraging horses have a serious impact on freshwater wetlands and also salt marshes.



HOOVES TURN SALT MARSH INTO A QUAGMIRE

Sharp hooves quickly churn salt marsh areas into quagmires, encouraging erosion and compromising water quality, which is further degraded by large amounts of excrement, sometimes causing the closing of public shellfish harvest on the island. The state Marshland Protection Act prohibits alteration of the marsh ecosystem, requiring a permit from the state for proposed actions. Feral horses have a vast negative impact on the salt marsh.

Native island animals must compete with horses for food and space. All ground-nesting birds, especially shorebirds, are threatened by foraging horses.



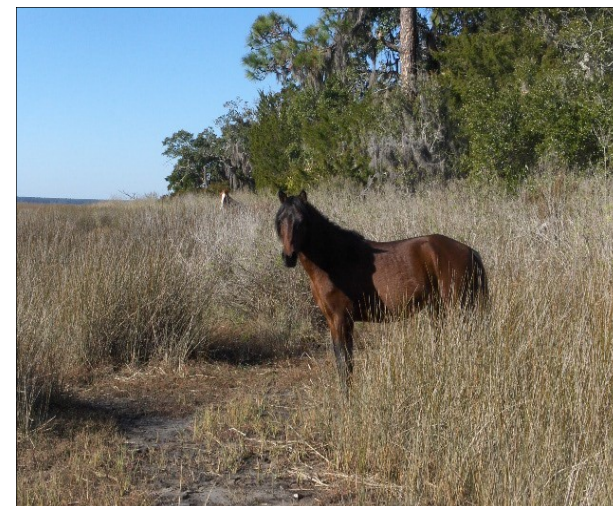
FEEDING IN A FRESHWATER WETLAND

The legislated mandate of the National Park Service directs “...the seashore shall be permanently preserved in its primitive state....” Wilderness designation adds more protection: “an area untrammelled (unobstructed, unimpeded, unencumbered) by man ... retaining its primeval character ... protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions....” NPS management policies do not allow exotic species, such as these horses, to interfere with natural processes or native species.

For more information please visit our website: [cimuseum.org](http://cimuseum.org)  
Information also at [WildCumberland.org](http://WildCumberland.org).

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## ON CUMBERLAND ISLAND GEORGIA



All the horses on Cumberland Island are feral, none are tame. Please keep a safe distance away and only observe them. They are not accustomed to physical human contact, and may kick or bite.

**Cumberland Island Museum**  
**P.O. Box 7080**  
**St. Mary's, Georgia 31558**