

Camping with Assateague Raccoons

By Stephen Rusiniak

It sounded like a paradise. We were going camping Memorial Day weekend to some place called Assateague Island. Karen told me how she'd grown up camping there; of leisurely days spent lounging on the beach; of crabbing, clamming and body surfing. She described

being lulled to sleep by the sounds of the surf, and then rising the following morning to the enticing aroma of breakfast bacon cooking over a smoky campfire. The sun, the surf, the beach, and oh yeah, she said there were wild ponies roaming the park too. She said I'd love it.

She was wrong.

Back then, the state park used a lottery system to assign camp sites. And even though it was a holiday weekend, one of the busiest of the year, this time, the crowds stayed away. The weather was horrible—cold, windy and raining. We too should have stayed home.

Too bad we didn't.

The tent wouldn't stay up, the fire wouldn't start and the gas stove refused to light. I was cold and hungry and instead of lulling me to sleep as promised, the sounds of the surf only served to remind me of how I wished I were back home, in bed, warm and dry. And while I never did see any of the alleged wild ponies, evidence of their existence was found beneath my sneakered foot as I stepped out from our tent the following morning. We quickly packed up for home and would have left immediately—if only the car would have started.

I vowed never to return.

But two years later, we did. I don't remember how she talked me into it, but somehow Karen persuaded me to give Assateague another try. This time, however, we'd be staying in our new pop up camper and with some friends of ours. We stayed for a week, but long before our vacation ended, I'd fallen for Assateague.

That was thirty-plus years ago. We've been back many times since, and twice I brought my former Boy Scout troop. And of course, they were thrilled with the ponies—although that's not what they called them. Instead, they became "Assateague raccoons," a tip of the hat to



Even "Assateague raccoons" enjoy an occasional swim in the ocean



those smaller ring-tailed masked thieves, who, just like their island pony counterparts, can often be found scavenging the sites for unattended edibles left lying about by careless campers.

We don't camp on the island any more. Instead, we purchased a home nearby. And as Karen had predicted, I do love Assateague, but don't tell her. Let's just keep that a secret between us, and maybe a couple of my beloved Assateague raccoons.

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the backstory:

I'd previously written a featured piece for the Daily Times—a newspaper serving the Delaware-Maryland-Virginia region (or as is more commonly known, Delmarva, and where we have a second home in West Ocean City, MD) entitled **A winter's walk on Assateague Island**. My work was included in the Sunday "Tides" section and was well received. The editor invited me to contribute additional submissions.

Unfortunately, I'd nothing more to say about Assateague, the ocean or anything else having to do with any Delmarva waterways—the central theme of the Tides section.

Or so I thought.

One afternoon Karen and I were talking with some friends about how we'd come to have a home in Maryland and about my first experience camping on nearby Assateague Island. That night, I began to write what would eventually become **Camping with Assateague Raccoons**.

Like my previous submission to the Daily Times, my raccoon piece became another Tides feature. A third would follow as well as some non-Tides contributions, but hey, that's another story—or stories. Never mind!

by the way:

After it was written, I needed a photo to include with my work—just as I'd done with my previous Tides piece. The problem was I couldn't decide on which "raccoon" photo to use—I'd several so I posted a few on Facebook and let the readers choose.

They did and the photo of the horses in the waves (yes, horses) that you saw at the beginning of this piece was the overwhelming choice and was ultimately used.

But for your viewing pleasure, or curiosity, as the case may be, a few of the runner-ups appear on the next page.

a few more family photos from our Assateague Island camping days:



After walking across her beach towel Tracy ordered the intruder to leave



Michael & Tracy creating yet another castle while a few of the island's inhabitants meander nearby



Lined up at water's edge for their tourist photo op



Assateague raccoons sharing the waves with a couple of campers

the original featured piece from the Sunday Daily Times:

TIDES

WATERWAYS



They might look majestic frolicking in the ocean waves, but make no mistake: Assateague ponies, or "Assateague raccoons," can often be found scavenging campsites for unattended edibles. STEPHEN RUSINIAK IMAGE

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— Stephen Rusiniak lives in Wayne, N.J., and West Ocean City.