



It's Official: Virginia is for Pony Lovers

Joseph P. Moriarty

Virginia recently designated into law the Commonwealth's 38th official symbol – the Chincoteague ponies.

On March 27, 2023, Virginia Governor Glenn Youngkin signed a law naming the Chincoteague ponies the official Virginia state pony. The bipartisan bills were introduced in the General Assembly by Eastern Shore delegation, Delegate Robert Bloxom, and Senator Lynwood Lewis. Del. Bloxom urged, “[i]t is time the Commonwealth pony up and give Chincoteague heritage the recognition it deserves.” In the end, the votes in favor of the beloved Chincoteague ponies far outweighed the neighs.

Chincoteague Island Pony Swim

Owned and managed by the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Company since 1925, Chincoteague ponies—also known as Assateague wild ponies—have become well-known for the annual pony swim. The ponies have inhabited Assateague Island, which is an undeveloped National Wildlife Refuge, for hundreds of years, but they get their name from the closest populated town of Chincoteague. The Pony Penning refers to the weeklong celebration in July that includes the pony roundup, a swim to the Chincoteague shore, a pony auction, and a swim back to Assateague Island, among other events. The pony swim was made famous by the book “Misty of Chincoteague,” written by Marguerite Henry, in 1947, and turned into a movie in 1961.



The Pony Penning is held on the last consecutive Wednesday and Thursday in July. The event draws over 50,000 people. The auction helps control the herd size—maintaining approximately 150 adult ponies on Assateague Island. Each year a few select ponies are designated as “buybacks” and returned to Assateague Island to live in the wild. The buyback ponies are auctioned with the rest of the foals, but instead of keeping the horse, the winner gets to name it. Naming a buyback pony is a coveted honor; for example, the highest bid for a buyback



(Photo credit: <https://www.chincoteague.com/ponies.html>)

pony in 2022 was \$32,000. The auction also serves as a fundraiser for the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Company, along with other notable charities. The 2022 auction raised a record \$450,200.

The 97th year of Chincoteague’s annual pony swim will take place on Wednesday, July 26, 2023.



(Photo credit: <https://www.chincoteague.com/ponies.html>)

Now that it is official, Virginia Tourism Corporation has recently approved the “Virginia is for Pony Lovers” sub-brand. T-shirts are now available in the Chincoteague Chamber of Commerce office.



How does something receive official recognition etched into law?

By lawmakers, of course. In some cases, the designations seem frivolous and even ridiculous, but many are a source of pride and are used to draw attention to a good cause.

The idea for an official pony originated from Sophia Gallivan, a 17-year-old student at Broadwater Academy on the Eastern Shore, and an active member in a 4-H club, “Hoof Beats by the Beach.” She researched state horses and realized that the Chincoteague pony was not recognized in Virginia. She then worked with local representatives to pass the bills making the Chincoteague pony the official pony of the Commonwealth. (Mary Hardbarger, *4-H'er Inspires Bill to Officially Recognize the Chincoteague Pony*, [Virginia Tech Exponentially More Stories](https://vtx.vt.edu/articles/2023/02/4H_Chincoteague_pony_bill.html) (Feb. 22, 2023), https://vtx.vt.edu/articles/2023/02/4H_Chincoteague_pony_bill.html). Gallivan was recognized for her efforts at the Virginia 4-H Day at the Capitol in January 2023 by First Lady Suzanne Youngkin, who is also a horse enthusiast.

In addition, according to the Chesapeake Bay Magazine, a sophomore in college, Hunter Leonard, Public Relations officer for the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Company, learned of North Carolina’s Corolla beach horses, another genetically distinct breed of wild horse recognized as the State Horse of North Carolina. (*New Bill Would Make Chincoteague Ponies Official Va. State Pony*, [Chesapeake Bay Magazine](https://chesapeakebaymagazine.com/new-bill-would-make-chincoteague-ponies-official-va-state-pony/) (Feb. 3, 2023), <https://chesapeakebaymagazine.com/new-bill-would-make-chincoteague-ponies-official-va-state-pony/>.) Seeing the success that accolade brought these horses, he wished to bring the same recognition to his hometown herd. Last fall, Leonard mentioned this to Sen. Lewis at a Town Hall meeting, and the rest is history.

Here are a few other notable designations in Virginia:

- In 2005, the Virginia big-eared bat was recognized as the official bat based on its name and status as a federally endangered species.
- In 1982, milk was recognized as the official beverage. Milk is the official state beverage for 22 states, starting with Ohio in 1965, based in large part to dairy lobbyist – “Got Milk?”
- In 1966, the American Foxhound was recognized as the official dog because George Washington, one of Virginia’s most illustrious citizens, imported the fox hounds into the Commonwealth for hunting purposes, and all fox hounds are decedents of these dogs.

You can click [here](#) to see other official emblems and designations in Virginia.

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