

The Marsh Tacky:

SOUTH CAROLINA'S STATE HORSE STAGES A COMEBACK

Centuries after helping the Continental Army win the American Revolution and decades after facing extinction, the breed's numbers are on the upswing on Daufuskie Island.

By **Stacey McKenna**
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On Jan. 24, 1781, General Francis “Swamp Fox” Marion raided a British fort in Georgetown, South Carolina. The militiamen, mounted on their personal equines—Marsh Tackies descended from steeds brought by Spanish settlers in the 1500s and adapted to the local marshlands for two centuries—attacked unanticipated before disappearing back into the wooded wetlands. The small horses had no trouble moving through the mud and muck

of the dense forests. On the other hand, the British soldiers’ relatively large but delicate mounts struggled to navigate the wetlands, so they couldn’t follow the patriots to retaliate.

Marsh Tacky horses were the key to Marion’s guerilla tactics and his many successes throughout the Revolutionary War. In the years that followed, people harnessed the horses’ work ethics, quiet minds and diverse athleticism for all kinds of jobs, from plowing fields to toting children to school, and the little horses quickly spread along the Eastern Seaboard. However, by the 1990s, the



To find Marsh Tacky horses on Daufuskie Island, just follow the colorful signs on the unpaved roads.



Though the Marsh Tacky Society proponents hope to build an information center and host informational tours eventually, right now the property is home to just a barn and several Marsh Tacky horses.

Lowther's Lucero stands at the Marsh Tacky Society, and he recently sired the first two foals born on Daufuskie Island in at least 40 years.



breed was in serious danger: Only about 100 true Marsh Tackies remained. Fortunately, the past decade has brought renewed appreciation of South Carolina's state horse. And a little island off the southern tip of Hilton Head may just be the perfect place to witness those efforts first-hand.

A HISTORY: SEA ISLAND HORSES

More than 100 Sea Islands dot the waters off the southeastern shores of the United States. Daufuskie, Hilton Head, Kiawah and others are extensions of the South Carolina Lowcountry, a region known for alligators, swamps, hurricanes and the Marsh Tacky.

As Daufuskie Island's lone paved road winds north and west out of the Haig Point development, it cuts through forests of towering pine and sprawling live oak trees. Just before the river and the Daufuskie Crab Company, there's a clearing and a sign that reads Daufuskie Marsh Tacky Society. In the pasture are two small horses. The roan stallion with a star on his forehead and mess of a crimped black forelock falling around his eyes is Lowther's Lucero. He's a direct descendant of the horses the Spanish abandoned on this slip of land in the 16th century, and he's one of the foundation animals for Erica Veit's mission to preserve the Marsh Tacky right where it evolved.

In the late 1500s, when the Spanish arrived on the Sea Islands to establish colonies, they brought horses with them from the Iberian Peninsula. However, the settlements soon



Marsh Tacky horses, like this gelding named Harry Potter, can be black, dun, roan or bay and most stand under 14.2 hands. In addition to walk, trot and canter, many have two additional gaits.

failed—perhaps because of the dense swamps or the humid climate—and when the colonizers abandoned their efforts, they left their horses behind. Nearly 500 years later, on Daufuskie Island, Lowther’s Lucero and his pasture mates have roots that can be traced back to those deserted horses. Already selected for toughness to survive the Atlantic crossing, Lucero’s ancestors lived semi-wild on the islands for centuries and during that time adapted to the unusual landscape.

In the years immediately following the colonies’ failure, Native Americans living in the Lowcountry began using the horses to help hunt and transport deerskin along the coast, from Maryland to Florida, often selling them along the way.

“At one time [all these coastal horses] were called Marsh Tackies because they were the common horses of the marshes, just like the farmers were known as ‘tackies,’ ” says Jeannette Beranger, a senior program manager with the Livestock Conservancy.

Beginning in the 1700s, the British established plantations on the Sea Islands. Daufuskie Island was divided up into 10 plantations, and its surprisingly fertile soil was cultivated to grow indigo, sea cotton and Carolina Gold Rice in turn. Plantation owners preferred Tennessee Walkers and other larger horses over the Marsh Tackies, but the breed remained the equine of choice for farmers with smaller plots of land throughout the region.

Following emancipation and the 1861 Union Confiscation Act of slave-owner land, liberated slaves returned—now as owners themselves—to the places they had once worked as property starting around 1864. Within 20 years, more than 100 freed slaves had purchased or been deeded land on Daufuskie Island, and it became a stronghold of the Gullah Geechee culture. Individuals held onto the crafts, art, language and even land use of the continent from which they and their ancestors had been torn. And Marsh Tackies became integral to their survival and way of life.

According to Emory Campbell, who manages Gullah Heritage Trail Tours on Hilton Head Island, “The Marsh Tacky was a work animal for us. We used them to farm, for transporting goods and people,” he says. “They weren’t considered a pet of any kind, but we took care of them because they took care of us.” Come harvest time and holidays, people celebrated the little horses by holding beach races.

Well into the 20th century the Sea Islands remained sparsely populated and accessible only by boat. Marsh Tacky owners—even those living on the mainland—often used the islands as fenceless paddocks: The horses would roam free until there was work to do, when people would wrangle them to plow a field or barge them across the channels to go hunting.

“When you needed a horse, you went and got it. When you didn’t, you put it back on the island,” says Beranger.

As farming and transportation became more mechanized, the need for working equines declined, and as bridges were built and human populations on the islands increased, the “leave them be” strategy was no longer an option. In the mid-20th century, Marsh Tacky numbers went into a freefall.

THE COMEBACK

As of the 1990s, the Marsh Tacky breed was labeled critically endangered, with only about 100 individuals remaining. But the early 21st century brought a comeback and a series of concerted efforts by enthusiasts and advocates to define the Marsh Tacky, publicize its historical relevance, and bring it to the Sea Islands once again.

One of the Marsh Tacky’s saviors was D.P. Lowther, a rancher who liked the horses for their hardiness and work ethic. As the islands developed, he brought animals to his farm in Ridgeland, South Carolina, and continued to selectively breed for the trademark characteristic, becoming an accidental conservationist and essentially building a calm-but-strong swamp-savvy foundation herd.

In 2006, the Livestock Conservancy and other advocates began conducting scientific testing to demonstrate that Marsh Tackies do in fact have old, rare genes worth preserving.

Over the years, the effort to build a Marsh Tacky studbook has proven somewhat controversial, and some owners who thought their equines were purebreds were disappointed to learn that there was, in fact, something else in the mix.




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Make It Happen:

VISIT DAUFUSKIE ISLAND

See The Marsh Tackies

Daufuskie Island is currently the best place to see Marsh Tackies in their native environment. Daufuskie Marsh Tacky Society keeps two or three small herds, including the two young horses born there in November 2017. The group hopes to build an information center and host short informational tours, but for now it's a self-guided experience—just follow the colorful signs that dot the island.

Plus, the beach races are returning to Daufuskie this fall and will be part of a bigger celebration of food, wine and all things island. Contact the Haig Point Equestrian Center (haigpoint.com/lifestyle/equestrian) to stay in the loop for details.

In addition, Hilton Head Island's Coastal Discovery Museum has two Marsh Tackies, though they're not always on exhibit to visitors. And if you're in the area on a regular basis, keep an eye out for Marsh Tacky history presentations hosted by The Morris Center for Lowcountry Heritage in Ridgeland.

Ride The Sea Islands

Thanks to Haig Point Equestrian Center's new-to-the-public trail rides, Daufuskie Island is the place to ride on South Carolina's coast. They offer 1- to 3-hour rides through the pine and oak forests, touring historic sites and meandering stretches of wide open beach (and even swimming in summer, though beach riding sometimes isn't available in that season because of turtles hatching their eggs).

Where To Stay

Daufuskie doesn't have any hotels, so your best bet is to book a new Stay & Play package through Haig Point. Accommodations are at the historic Lighthouse or Strachan Mansion. Transport to and from the island via ferry or water taxi is included in the package; for a splurge, ask about helicopter pick-up from Savannah or Hilton Head. Once there, Haig Point will hook you up with an electric golf cart for getting around, and of course arrange trail rides and any additional activities, such as golf.

Need To Know

Prime riding seasons are fall and winter, when the cooler weather keeps the bugs at bay. But it can be quite chilly, so if you know you want to take a dip in the ocean—with or without a horse—brave the summer swelter.

So Beranger and others are constantly working with equine geneticists to improve their definition of a Marsh Tacky. Because the breed is a non-standardized “landrace,” they require a larger-than-typical point of reference to ensure researchers included the right horses and did not exclude isolated populations.

“Typically you use 25 horses to establish a baseline,” explains Beranger. “But that’s insufficient because some pockets had never been crossbred. Horses from Hilton Head never bred with horses from Walterboro. So both could be Marsh Tackies, but they’re isolated genetically.”

The breed’s primitive roots show through in the horses’ coloring. They can range from black to dun and roan to bay, and many have dorsal stripes and banded legs. Though small in stature—averaging 13 to 14.2 hands—they are strong, with sloping shoulders and long, tapered muscles. Their heads

are sometimes convex, their skin unbothered by biting gnats or sharp tree branches, and their well-formed hooves are impervious to the region’s incessant moisture. They tend to be bold and confident, yet personable and eager to work. The breed is well known and loved for its quiet mind and diverse athleticism, traits that serve us as well today as they did during Marion’s time.

A study out of the University of Mississippi showed that Marsh Tackies have a unique gait that just might be the reason for their effortless travel through the swamps. In addition to a walk, trot, canter and gallop, many exhibit a four-beat gait with no suspension, and a lateral footfall sequence similar to but distinct from the foxtrot. In 2010, the gait was coined the Swamp Fox Trot in honor of the breed’s American War history, and the Marsh Tacky was named the South Carolina State Horse.



Riders can now see Daufuskie Island on horseback thanks to the Haig Point Equestrian Center’s tours.

COMING HOME

In November 2017, two Marsh Tacky foals were born within six days of one another on Daufuskie Island, the first births on the island in at least four decades. Both were both sired by the young stallion, Lowther's Lucero, in the wake of 2016's Hurricane Matthew, and they represent the beginning of Veit and the Daufuskie Marsh Tacky Society's mission to "bring the breed back in the context of its historically native roots."

Veit first learned about Marsh Tackies about 10 years ago when she saw the little horses racing down a Hilton Head beach as part of the annual Gullah Celebration. The races, which are no longer held on Hilton Head but will return to Daufuskie this October, imitate the friendly competitions held by the Gullah Geechee during harvests and holidays, and honor the Marsh Tacky horse's importance to that culture. They also showcase the horses' athleticism and mild manners—according to Marsh Tacky owner Donna Marsh, they tolerate the cannon shots and gunfire of the festival with remarkable calm—so they serve as an advert for the conservation of the breed.

Five years after that first encounter, Veit founded the Daufuskie Marsh Tacky Society, acquiring horses from Lowther and the Livestock Conservancy to develop a little herd. She now has about eight horses that live in groups of two to three horses scattered around Daufuskie Island. Veit's project is part of a larger effort that has been gaining traction.

MAKING A MODERN MARSH TACKY

For hundreds of years now, Marsh Tackies and their ancestors have proven themselves to be incredibly able partners no matter the task at hand, and that characteristic holds true today. Donna Jones, 55, grew up on Johns Island in Charleston County, South Carolina, and has had Marsh Tackies in her life since she was 12.

Today, she has two of her own she rides recreationally—26-year-old Buck and 19-year-old Jack. Both horses are descended from foundational island herds and have been used for hunting, trail riding and very occasional jumping. A couple of years ago, Jones even rode Buck in the Kiawah Island beach race, where he won three of four heats despite being at least a decade older than his competition.

"He's fast as all get-out," Jones says. "When we were training him for the race, we clocked him at 32 miles per hour on the straightaway. Looking at him, you'd never imagine that could be possible, but he can really push forward and fly."

Jones' older brother, David Dent, also has three Marsh Tackies, all of which are in training to be cutting horses.

And while Jones adores her clever, athletic little horses for their versatility, as with so many people, her favorite thing about them is their minds.

"I literally can do anything with these horses," she says. "I don't have to crosstie them to groom them; you can lie on their backs. I can not ride for six months then put a saddle on them, and they don't do a thing but go where you tell them to go. Tomorrow I'm going to take them out to the beach, and I have no worries in the world that they'll act up even though I haven't ridden them in a couple of months off the property."

Thanks to local affection for the Marsh Tackies and the efforts of organizations such as the Daufuskie Marsh Tacky Society and the Livestock Conservancy, the breed's comeback is real. There are now roughly 400 registered Marsh Tackies living in the Lowcountry. And those little horses can do just about anything. 🐾



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