





A Rare Breed

Meet the South Carolinians fighting for the state's native horse

BY JENNY MAXWELL

In the fight to save the Marsh Tacky from extinction, David Grant was the first to bring the breed west.

"I'm not talking about west of the Mississippi. I'm talking about I-95," says Grant, who raises Marsh Tackies on his farm near Florence.

For those who don't know—and that includes many of us who live far from the state's coast—the Marsh Tacky is a distinct breed of horse that can only be found in South Carolina. Descended from the mounts left behind by Spanish explorers, Marsh Tackies developed in isolation on the sea islands, and after 500 years of roaming the Lowcountry, earned a reputation for being sure-footed on swampy terrain. Though small in stature (adults are 13 to 14 hands high), these rare horses tend to be calm and show great endurance. Before the age of the automobile, they were valued as dependable farm horses and as mounts particularly well-suited for women and children, though Grant cautions that you shouldn't underestimate a Tacky.

Dubbed the "Pee Dee Cowboy" by his friends, Grant does more than raise Marsh Tackies. He also rides them to hunt boar and deer

PHOTOS BY DANIELA SNYDER/EQUESTRIAN IMAGES

What's with that name?

According to the Carolina Marsh Tacky Association: The name 'Tacky' is derived from the English word for cheap or common. For most of their history, Marsh Tackies were the most common horse in the swampy and marshy Lowcountry region of coastal South Carolina and Georgia.



PHOTOS BY DANIELA SNYDER/EQUESTRIAN IMAGES



"The Marsh Tacky is the best-kept equine secret this century," says breeder David Grant, shown above on his stallion, DP. A member of Pee Dee Electric Cooperative, Grant raises the rare horses on his farm near Florence and rides them on hunting trips and outings with fellow enthusiasts, top. "We ride hard and aggressive."

in the swamps. "These horses aren't play toys. We ride hard and aggressive," he says.

For history buffs and horse lovers, the scrappy little horse seems to have it all, but with fewer than 300 pure Tackies left—and no more wild stock to draw from—the breed's future may be in jeopardy unless Grant and other enthusiasts can find a way to stage a comeback for South Carolina's native horse.

History on four hooves

Grant got into raising and breeding Marsh Tackies five years ago, after a hunting trip near Charleston. "I was raised in South Carolina and loved horses as a young fellow. I had heard of Marsh Tackies but didn't think a lot about them," he says. He enjoyed riding the good-natured, tough little horses. But it was their history that really got him.


The horse plays a role in much of the state's past. During the American Revolution, "Swamp Fox" Francis Marion's troops rode their own mounts—the most common horse being the Marsh Tacky. In the decades around the Civil War, Marsh Tackies were a central part of farm life, especially for Gullah families. The horses did everything—from plowing fields to delivering ladies to church. During World War II, soldiers on beach patrol rode Tackies.

Grant currently has 21 Marsh Tackies on his farm. He and other South Carolina breeders have managed to increase the number of horses over the last 10 years, but the breed is still in danger of fading into extinction. In 2007, breeders, owners and Tacky enthusiasts formed the Carolina Marsh Tacky Association (CMTA) to preserve the breed and share its history.

A girl, a horse and a Statehouse bill

Jackie McFadden, a CMTA board member, grew up fascinated by Marsh Tackies after learning about them in the third grade. "I told a teacher I wished that South Carolina had horses on the islands like North Carolina does. And she said we do," she recalls.

A librarian at Winthrop University, McFadden was working in the



The breed developed in isolation along South Carolina's sea islands and in coastal swamps, which honed an innate ability to navigate swampy and uncertain terrain. A calm demeanor also makes Marsh Tackies well suited to novice riders.

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government documents department in 2007 when a bill to make the Marsh Tacky the state horse came through her department. “I was shocked to see that it had failed,” she says.

Thanks to her efforts, a new bill was introduced in the 2010 legislative session and in May it was debated on the House floor. There, to McFadden's dismay, the bill ran into a mule. Or, to be more accurate, had a mule attached to it—in the form of an amendment to designate the mule the official state work animal. “I have no problem with the mule, but they tried to do the same thing in 2007 and it got laughed down,” McFadden says.

The 2010 bill, mule or no mule, earned the support of Jeannette Beranger of the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy, who wrote in an editorial, “We realize that debating the idea of appointing the Marsh Tacky as the state horse is not the most pressing item on the government's agenda, but it is an opportunity to further distinguish

Colonial breeds

Colonial Spanish horses, including the Marsh Tacky, are a group of closely related breeds. They descend from horses brought by Spanish explorers and colonists as early as the 1500s. The famed wild horses on Shackleford Banks in North Carolina and the Florida Cracker are two other equine breeds that trace back to the Spanish.

Colonial breeds are not limited to horses and include a wide range of livestock brought to the colonies by early European settlers. Ossabaw pigs, found on Georgia's sea islands, are another animal introduced by the Spanish. The Cotton Patch goose is a breed brought from Europe; rare today, these geese were once quite common on farms in South Carolina, where they weeded the cotton fields.

In recent decades, many colonial breeds have seen their numbers dwindle, some to endangered levels, others becoming extinct. The American Livestock Breeds Association works to identify colonial breeds and preserve them. At present, the association includes more than 150 historic breeds of farm animals on their registry. To learn more, visit their website at albc-usa.org.



Marsh Tacky races, a time-honored Lowcountry tradition, are back and drawing thousands of spectators to Hilton Head's Gullah Celebration. Here, 19-year-old Brittany Stevens rides 21-year-old Molly to victory in the Mare's Race this past February.

Where can you see a Marsh Tacky?

Seven days a week at Brookgreen Gardens. David Grant is lending two of his Marsh Tackies to Brookgreen Gardens near Murrells Inlet; brookgreen.org

Every year at the Hilton Head Island Gullah Celebration. The Marsh Tacky race on the beach has been revived as part of this annual event. In February of this year, 6,000 spectators came to see Marsh Tackies run on the sand; gullahcelebration.com

By appointment at Carolina Marsh Tacky Outdoors. Breeder David Grant welcomes visitors to see Marsh Tackies at his farm near Florence but asks that you call or e-mail through his website to make an appointment; (843) 858-0181; carolinamarshstacky.com

At various events around the state. Members of the Carolina Marsh Tacky Association regularly take their horses to events around the state. See their calendar at marshstacky.org

the uniqueness of South Carolina. Thousands of people across the United States recognize the horse as something special and uniquely South Carolinian, a claim no other breed can make."

As this issue went to press, the legislation was still pending (for an update, see scliving.coop). McFadden says she will keep trying until the horse is recognized, despite her frustrations with the process. One representative opposed to the measure issued a curt "Thanks for calling, little miss," then hung up on her. McFadden keeps her sense of humor about the encounter: "If I ever get a Marsh Tacky mare, her name's going to be Little Miss," she says.

A higher profile for the humble Marsh Tacky

With or without designation as the state heritage horse, the Marsh Tacky is finally getting some recognition. The Carolina Marsh Tacky Association is performing DNA tests on horses and has established a registry to facilitate more breeding of pure Marsh Tackies. Researchers at Mississippi State University are undertaking a study of the Marsh Tacky's gait in an attempt to discover the secrets to the breed's stamina.

Meanwhile, requests to visit his farm are up, says Grant, and a Marsh Tacky race at Hilton Head attracted 6,000 spectators in February. That race was a popular annual event up until the 1960s, and derbies were held on the beach with winners presented roses in the thoroughbred racing tradition. The race was revived in 2009 as part of the Hilton Head Island Gullah Celebration.

"We've kept them. We've hung onto them. Now people get intrigued with them," Grant says of the efforts to preserve and promote the breed. "It's past a hobby for me. Let's call it a passion. I feel like the good Lord put these Marsh Tackies in my life. It's been a gift." ☺