



# Chincoteague ponies find a home in Muskoka

Chincoteague ponies have found a home in Bracebridge (above). Kris Barnes says the famous ponies are very smart (below).



**Article by Susan Smith  
Photographs by Scott Turnbull**

**W**ild horses from a small town in the U.S., made famous by a children's book, have found a home in Muskoka.

Kris Barnes of Bracebridge has established Chincoteagues in Canada to raise awareness of this breed of wild horse.

Her passion for the Chincoteague Pony, actually a small horse, is evident as Barnes describes the journey from discovering Chincoteague (pronounced shin co teek) was a real place, to owning seven of the ponies at her New Beginnings Stable. Barnes is smitten with this hardy, smart and versatile breed.

*Misty of Chincoteague*, a children's book by Marguerite Henry, is a story based in the small town of Chincoteague, Virginia. Henry wrote it in 1947 while holidaying there. It describes how a boy and girl save their money so they can buy a pony at the annual pony auction.

Many horse-crazy children have read the book and the subsequent stories by Marguerite Henry and fallen in love with the characters. A movie in 1961 made even more people aware of the wild horses and transitioned Chincoteague from a small fishing vil-



The wild Chincoteague Ponies have easily adapted to life at the New Beginnings Stable in Bracebridge (above).



These Chincoteague Ponies ran wild on Assateague Island, off the coast of Virginia, before running in the fields in Muskoka.



The barn built by Jerry Barnes to house Kris's horses Penny and Jack was modified to house their Chincoteague ponies.

*"When you get the foals, and they come off the trailer, they've never been touched by a human"*



Sydney Tytler spends time socializing the new ponies and builds a bond with each one.

lage to a tourist destination.

Several herds of wild horses make their homes on Assateague Island, a barrier island just off the coast of Virginia. How they got there is still up for debate. Some believe the horses escaped from a Spanish galleon shipwrecked on the coastal reef and made their home on the island amongst the dunes and fed on marsh grasses. Others believe early settlers put horses on the island to graze to escape land taxes and some were forgotten and became feral. Whatever their origins, Assateague Island is home to the wild herds managed by several different stakeholders.

Assateague Island is owned by two different states, Barnes explains. The National Park Service manages the Maryland herd and the Virginia herd is managed by the Chincoteague Volunteer Firefighters with a grazing permit granted by the federal government. The firefighters are required to keep the herd to about 150 horses. Too many more would impact on the other wildlife sharing their part of the island which is a wildlife refuge, home to many waterfowl and migratory birds.

Since 1925 there has been a roundup of the Virginia herd once a year, usually near the end of July. Firefighters become “saltwater” cowboys and at a slack tide, the herd of wild horses swims across the narrow channel from Assateague Island to Chincoteague Island. The current year’s foals are penned and then auctioned off. This manages the herd number and also raises money for the volunteer fire department. The event draws thousands of people every year.

After the auction, the remaining ponies go back to their home on the marshy lands of Assateague Island to live in the wild for another year.

When Barnes was surfing the web a few years ago, she stumbled upon a site about Chincoteague. She was amazed to discover it was a real place and got very excited. She mentioned it to her husband and suggested a family trip to the island to see the pony auction. “Our daughter was about 11 or 12 at the time and there were strict guidelines . . . no pony.”

They arrived in Chincoteague and fell in love with the place. “It was so hometowny and the people are super friendly. There are amazing people down there, very generous and warm. We have made many good friends who are friends to this day,” says Barnes.

Many of the people who attend the event have been doing so for many years and were willing to offer helpful advice to the Barnes’ attending their first auction. Suggestions on where to go on what day and the best places to see the ponies were all welcome advice, says Barnes.

The day of the pony penning was very exciting and seeing the mares and foals coming down the beach at dawn was particularly memorable for the Barnes family.

Before the auction took place, Kris assured one of her new friends they were only there to watch the auction; they were not there to buy a pony.

“No, we don’t need a pony, we don’t need an American pony. No, we’re not getting a pony,” she says. But, when the auction started, “We got a little caught up in it,” says Kris.

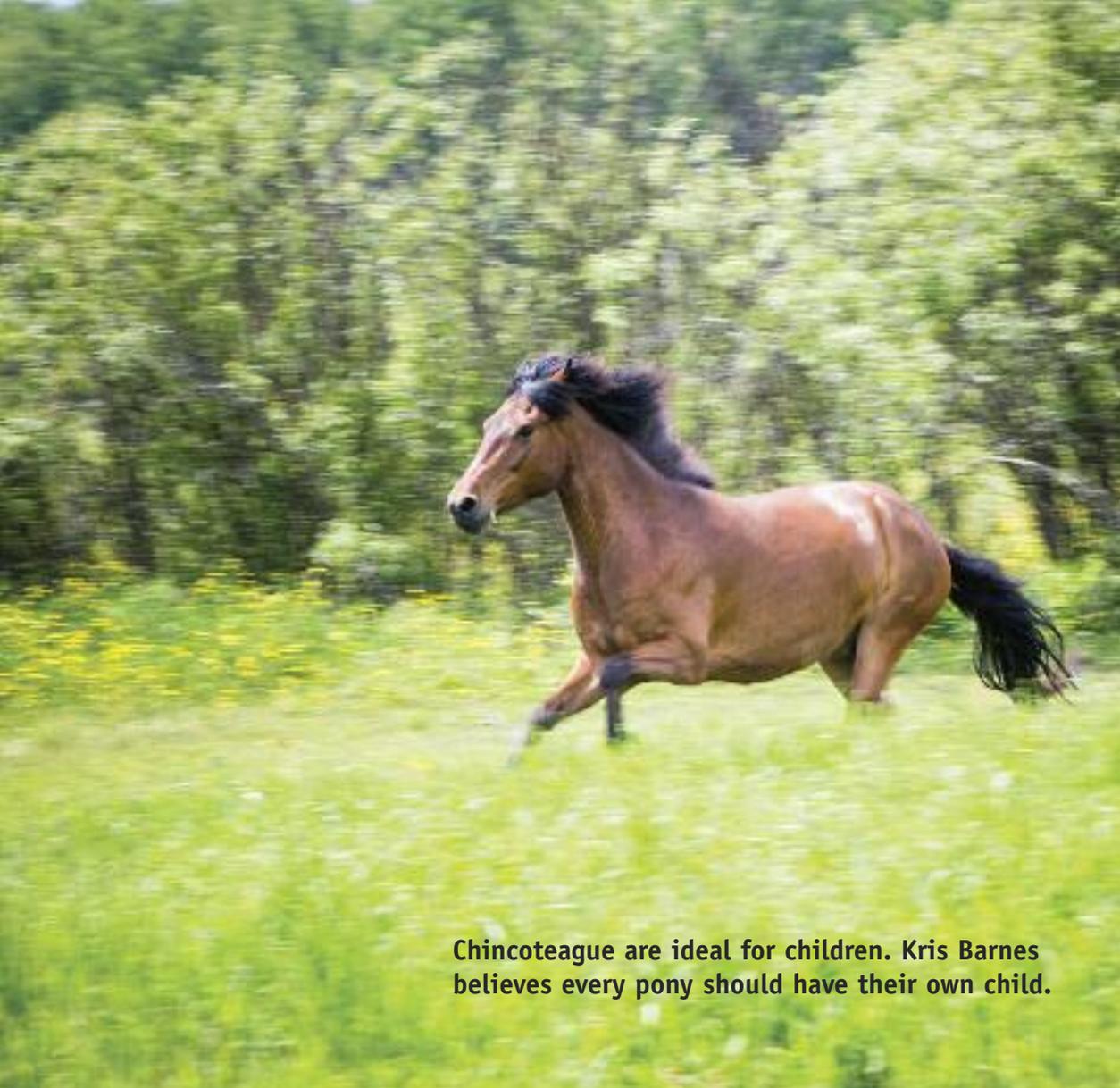
Her husband Jerry raised his hand and her daughter Sydney asked, “Did we just buy a pony?”

The next part of the adventure had begun. They



**The Chincoteague is a friendly, smart and playful horse (above). They were made famous by the classic 1940s book, and later movie, *Misty of Chincoteague* (below).**





Chincoteague are ideal for children. Kris Barnes believes every pony should have their own child.



Feathers are an important symbol for Kris and her Chincoteague ponies.



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were the proud owners of a Chincoteague pony they named Dreamer but there were a few logistical issues that needed to be addressed, such as how to get the pony home to Bracebridge. There was also blood work needed to ensure the pony was healthy and free of disease and the appropriate paperwork to cross the border. Again, Chincoteague friends pitched in to help. One of their newfound friends offered a stall for the foal. And a horse trailer was also offered, so they could trailer their Chincoteague pony home to Bracebridge.

Dreamer settled into his new life in Bracebridge with the help of Barnes's quarter horse Penny and her retired dressage mount Jack. Barnes's background in riding was with hunter/jumper and dressage disciplines that often focus on large breeds, 16 – 18 hands (a hand is four inches). The Chincoteague ponies are typically 13 to 15 hands in height once full grown. The smaller horses were a new experience for her but Kris was impressed with the personality traits of the pony and its willingness to learn and bond with its humans.

From the lessons they had learned from their first foray into the pony auction, the Barnes went back to Virginia in 2010, hoping to get another Chincoteague pony. They were not successful.

"We were heartbroken," says Barnes. The Chincoteague Firefighters also hold a fall round-up, although it is not on the scale of the summer event. They decided to go to it and see if they could purchase another Chincoteague pony. After the fall round-up, the family came home with two ponies, Bella and Storm. In 2011 they purchased Tripper and Royal and last July, Rhett and Jester joined the Chincoteagues of Canada family. The four-stall barn that Jerry built and renovated to house the additional ponies was now full.

Kris is always amazed at how the foals adjust from living in the wild, going through the pony penning and then adapting to life in Bracebridge.

"When you get the foals and they come off the trailer, they've never been touched by a human. They've seen them, driving by and taking pictures.

"Pony penning week; they're taken from their mothers, weaned, and their entire life is changing . . . It's not a gentle, easy transition.

"They are herded, rounded up by cowboys. Kept in a big pen, separated from their moms . . . Boom, they have a number slapped on their butt and they go through an auction. The firefighters, two per baby, drag them through the auction ring, and that's how they sell them. Then they're shoved onto a trailer, which is a huge ordeal as well, and put in a new place. It's pretty dramatic and traumatic for them."

Kris, Sydney and Jerry spend time socializing, gently handling and teaching manners to the ponies; how to get along with other horses, people and even their family pets which include an Australian Shepherd, a Shiloh shepherd and several cats.

The Chincoteague is a friendly, smart, playful and versatile horse, says Kris. It is an ideal children's mount or sport pony. Chincoteagues can be trained for many different equine disciplines.

Barnes wants others to share her passion for the Chincoteague breed. Her ultimate goal is to find loving, permanent homes for the Chincoteagues. That



**Kris Barnes, Storm, Bella and Jerry Barnes prepare to leave Muskoka. The two ponies now have a new family and new home back in Virginia.**

### ***Bella and Storm benefit the Feather Fund***

*Bella and Storm have a new home, back in Virginia, close to where their life began.*

*Kris Barnes, her husband Jerry and daughter Sydney purchased two Chincoteague ponies at the fall round-up in 2010. They named them Bella and Storm and although they were not related, they were inseparable. With gentle handling, they grew strong, confident and ready for a young owner of their own.*

*Kris thought she had found a home for them in June 2012 when a woman contacted her and explained she wanted to keep the two ponies together. She intended to have them grow up with her two children. Unfortunately, plans did not go as expected for Bella and Storm's new owners. When the decision was made that she could no longer keep them, the owner contacted Kris. The ponies made the seven-hour trek back to New Beginnings Farm in Bracebridge in January and they settled into familiar surroundings.*

*"We're fortunate to have Bella and Storm back," Kris said. She explained that many horses in North America aren't so lucky right now with the depressed U.S. economy and many end up in dire circumstances.*

*Wanting to find a suitable home for Bella and*

*Storm, Kris decided to donate the ponies to the Feather Fund. This non-profit organization has an essay contest and provides deserving children ages 10 to 18 with a Chincoteague pony. As explained on the website ([www.featherfund.org](http://www.featherfund.org)), "The Feather Fund is a non-profit organization whose mission is to continue the work begun by Carollynn Suplee to assist deserving children with the purchase and attendant costs associated with the acquisition of Chincoteague Ponies with the goal of helping a child learn about responsibility, care, love, work ethic, as well as the concept of 'giving back to others' through the care and training of his or her animal."*

*The organization was started in 2003 following the death of Suplee who was often called the "pony fairy." Following a bout of cancer, she felt she was divinely directed to give deserving children a Chincoteague pony.*

*Kris was put in touch with a family whose son's essay placed second in the Feather Fund's December foal contest. After communicating back and forth and trying to determine which pony the boy wanted, Kris learned the family also had daughters. "I knew they had a farm, so I said 'would you like both of them?'" She offered both Bella and Storm to the family. In April she made the trip south and met the family halfway. Bella and Storm's journey has come full circle - they have a new family and a new home in Virginia.*

feeling is reflected in the mission statement for Chincoteagues of Canada:

"At Chincoteagues in Canada, our goal is to introduce island born Chincoteagues into Canada. We are not breeders. We individually choose our foals every year from the wild herd in Virginia. The most important thing to us is that the horses go to good, loving, forever homes and will become a part of the family."

Kris believes every pony should have a boy or girl of their own and wants others to be introduced to the breed. It is essential to Kris that the right owner be found for each pony and she is very picky about who they sell to. She wants to maintain contact with the new owner and if the rehoming doesn't work out, she

will take the pony back, as she did with Bella and Storm (see sidebar).

It's been such a journey and it's such fun," says Kris adding the entire family is involved. Sydney has helped design promotional material for Chincoteagues in Canada and her sons often help at the barn.

Again this year, she and her family went to Assateague in May to scout out the new foals and take photos of potential new purchases.

Then, in July, they will join the many good friends and acquaintances they have made in Chincoteague and maybe bid on a foal – another addition to New Beginnings Stable and Chincoteagues in Canada. 