

“How to speak ‘Tigger’”

By Alex Brubaker

I’ve been living on the island of Chincoteague since June, working as a kayak guide until mid-October, and now the off season provides a chance to reflect on the experience and some “island ways” . . .

The island is about 4×7 miles, and easily accessed (or escaped!) by a no-toll bridge, so it doesn’t have the same truly separate feel as other islands that are way out in the middle of an ocean and require a plane or ferry to get to. And although it’s geographically and culturally within the United States, it’s also definitely its own entity. The regional differences are subtle, but they have been fun to pick up on.

Starting with the basics—i.e., where are we? How to pronounce CHINCOTEAGUE? Not how it looks!

“Shingk-eh-teeg,” or sometimes, especially by those with super laid-back, drawling accents: “Shingk-eh-tigg” or even “Shingk-tigg.” but a sure sign that someone’s not from here is if they refer to the island as “Chink-oh-teeg.”

- People who *are* from here are called islanders, locals, “from-heres” or, believe it or not, “Tiggers”. Tigger must be more-or-less a corruption of “Teaguer.” itself an abbreviation of “Chincoteaguer.” There are about 4,000 year-round Tiggers. However, the island’s population temporarily swells ten-fold to about 40,000 during the annual Pony Penning in late July. Pony Penning—a wild pony roundup & associated festivities-- has been going on since 1925, plenty of time for word to spread so that the institution is literally world famous by now.
- People who are not from here are “come-heres.”
- There are all sorts of variations on the theme of from here/ come here, and various and sundry levels of acceptance, good-natured teasing, and thinly veiled hostility, too. For example, some people have a summer house and have been spending summers on island for umpteen years, but aren’t full-time, year-round residents, so they fall into a nebulous category somewhere in between. Oriented, savvy to local ways, invested for the season, integrated into the community, but not as entrenched as a year-round “from here” who stays on long after the T-shirt shops are shuttered. Another twist—at least two people on my street grew up here, but studied, lived and worked elsewhere for decades, and are now back, more worldly and educated for the time away. Unfortunately, Chincoteague’s very popularity as a tourist destination (best seaside town 2014 according to Coastal Living magazine) has a dark side. The demand has elevated realty prices, and so many houses are vacation rentals (probably literally half of the houses on the entire place), which makes for a rather odd vibe, with temporary “neighbors” coming and going every week. Finding a residential rental can be tough, and would-be local homebuyers are often outcompeted by come-heres with more income, so can’t afford to buy on the island they grew up on . . . hence the hostility.
- “went up” = broke. My landlady told a story about her Prius breaking down on the highway, where the dashboard “went up.” Horrified, I asked her how she managed to steer to the shoulder if she couldn’t see through the windshield. A blank look ensued, she

translated, and we had a good laugh. Now, “went up” is not to be confused with “get up” . . .

- “get up” = contact, to catch up with someone. ~ “I have to get up with so-and-so and see if they can make it to the party on Friday.”
- “I gotcha”= very common expression, basically literal, conveys conversational continuity, ~ I’m listening, I understand, mm-hmm.
- “how about it?”= another pleasantry frequently sprinkled in conversations. not so much a request for agreement to a plan or asking for someone’s opinion on something, instead, it’s more like ~ what do you know?, isn’t that something?
- to “carry” = to take or bring, can apply equally to objects or people. Had to stifle a laugh when I heard one of my neighbors suggest that her son carry me to their friend’s place on the northwest side of the island to enjoy the sunset view.
- “fell out” = this is an odd one, and very context-dependent. Apparently, it can mean anything from literally falling out (as in from a boat) to dying!
- “down the county” = a) literally, driving south within Accomack County on the mainland, or b) getting taken to the police station on the mainland.
- OC= Ocean City, Maryland. You know you’re not in California anymore when OC no longer refers to Orange County as the default definition of the acronym!
- “carve” = carve decoys. Decoys are really important here, and again, regional differences show up. For example, I think that in snow country, “carve” usually refers to making swooping turns on skis or a snowboard.
- “son” = equal opportunity expression, used to address either guys or girls by real old-timers before making a point.
- “talking” = if used in certain contexts, not just straight up ordinary talking as in ‘speaking,’ but courting, getting to know a member of the opposite sex.
- “my cousin” = my cousin, but the funny part is that often said cousin remains unnamed, so you have to guess by context which cousin among many (sometimes *very* many) is starring in the conversation!
- “bay” = probably came from “baby” or “babe”, but quite often used in a non-romantic way between guys.