

Things Your Horse Should be Able to do for Back Country Work

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and

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(Edited for High Desert Riders by Dick Rahal)

The following is a list of skills your horse should possess in order to be a safe and pleasant backcountry or trail riding horse. These skills can and should be practiced at home so that accidents are avoided. If you need any ideas on how to best introduce/ teach any of these skills, please feel free to contact any backcountry horsemen member or an experienced HDR member. We are always willing to help.

1. Good ground manners
 - Leads politely from either side by anyone (in situations when other people might need to handle your animal).
 - Stops and backs on command.
 - Ties well to trees for up to an hour
 1. Doesn't pull back
 2. Doesn't paw (it damages the environment). Pawing is pretty common at first, but generally a few reminders can teach the horse to stand quietly.
 - Doesn't bite or kick people.
 - Doesn't bite or kick other horses; however some degree of aggressive behavior can be accommodated during the rides by making sure the group is aware of the issue and then using proper spacing between horses as well as choosing a position in line that makes the horse most comfortable. The line position can be changed. Some issues resolve themselves as the horse becomes more experienced riding in groups.
 - Understands hotwire: Only if you need to pen your horse in a hot wire pen overnight.
 - Trailer loads. Obviously, we haul to rides.
2. Comfortable in groups
 - HDR rides are group rides, so the horse needs to be comfortable riding in a group. Sometimes horses need a few rides to get used to riding in a group. They might jig or just be nervous in general on the first few rides. This usually goes away with experience and as your horse gets to know some of the other horses. Also, sometimes just changing position in line or rearranging the neighboring horses can help. Club members must always be willing to stop to rearrange—or just stop to help if problems arise.
3. Comfortable going slow
 - HDR rides could entail a lot of slow riding with occasional stops. Horses that can't abide going slow could become a problem by creating problems for other horses and riders. All horses are capable of walking slowly. HDR rides should be no faster than the pace of the slowest horse and rider. However,

all horses are capable of walking quickly. If you have a very slow walking horse, practice having the horse walk with some pace and cadence. If your horse has a tendency to walk swiftly, practice having your horse walk calmly and slowly.

4. Base level of fitness (You and your horse)

- Even though most HDR rides can entail a lot of slow riding, sometimes the rides will include steep inclines/declines, more than a few miles and thousands of feet of elevation change, at up to 11,000 feet above sea level. Unfit horses (and riders) can get in serious trouble if they do not have a good basic level of fitness. Regular exercise for both horse and rider is important.

5. Comfortable encountering various obstacles.

- The experienced horses and riders help the new horses gain confidence. Members must be willing to wait while horses get used to new things. It is always acceptable to dismount and lead horses over, around, or through obstacles. Sometimes horses can be ponied. Safety is our first priority. The best way to avoid unpleasant surprises is to practice at home!
- Water: Water crossings can occur on rides. There is a creek at Four Hills if the horse needs practice. In wet years, water may be quite deep, but most years 1-2 feet is about it. Keep in mind that horses unfamiliar with water crossings often attempt to jump their first body of water—sometimes with fairly hilarious and or disastrous results.
- Mud, Bogs (Yuck) and Snow: There are not many places to practice bog or snow crossings, but as with water crossings, the experienced horses usually help the newer horses gain confidence. (Stay on the trails, though. Some of the Pecos bogs are pretty deep off the trail. Snow banks can hide obstacles and horse hooves do tend to penetrate into the snow).
- Wooden bridges: There are a number of trails that have bridge crossings. Practicing walking over plywood or even a trail-course type bridge can help.
- Going over logs: Usually we ride trails that are clear. But, every so often, we get in situations where we have to go over down logs. It is safest if horses step over logs rather than jumping them. It is sometimes the case that the rider can get off and send the horse over the log. Again, practice at home.
- Going under trees and branches: We sometimes lean or duck to go under branches. Occasionally, we even have to ride under trees that are hanging across the trail. This is where short horses have the advantage!
- Boulders: A surprising number of horses are afraid of boulders, but most horses get over it pretty quick.
- Backpackers: We encounter backpackers regularly. Most horses simply don't recognize the backpackers as people. Asking the hikers to talk to you really helps. Hikers are supposed to yield the right of way and should go to the low side of the trail to decrease the chance of spooking the horse. Practicing at home can obviously help, too.

- Dogs: Dogs often accompany hikers. Dogs should be under control, but not always. Some horses are “jumpy” around new dogs. It is a good idea to arrange to ride some place safe where there are dogs. Or have a friend bring a dog to your location. It is important to practice.
- Bicycles: Not that common on most rides but very common at Elena Gallegos and Cedro Peak. As with hikers, bikes should yield to the horses, and asking the cyclist to speak to you helps. Desensitizing at home is well worth the effort!

6. Other riding skills:

- Backing and turning in tight spaces. Sometimes the trails are narrow or cramped.
- Mounting and dismounting from both sides (in case you have to bail and you’d rather not get off and fall over a cliff).
- Carrying saddle or pommel bags with water bottles, food, etc.
- Comfortable with rain gear, maps, plastic bags, Velcro, rattling tools on a pack animal, and crinkly candy bar packages. It is a drag to have rain and be unable to wear your poncho or slicker because your horse is petrified. Even worse if the horse is afraid of every one else’s rain gear! It is nice to be able to receive a map from another rider or unwrap a trail snack without scaring your horse! PRACTICE all of the above at home before going on a trail.
- Comfortable wearing a halter under the bridle. (Saves time with the frequent stops but not absolutely necessary.)
- Comfortable wearing a breast collar (some horses really need cruppers, too). If your saddle fit is excellent and your horse has good withers, you might not need a breast collar, but because many trails climb steeply for long stretches, breast collars can prevent a lot of discomfort for your horse and can save you a lot of saddle readjustment time, so they really are a must. Most horses don’t have a problem with them, but it is nice to know before the ride!
- Optional: Ability to pony another horse or mule. Conversely, ability to be ponied can be useful in an emergency.

7. If you have any questions about how to get your horse comfortable with any of the above, please feel free to contact any knowledgeable HDR member!