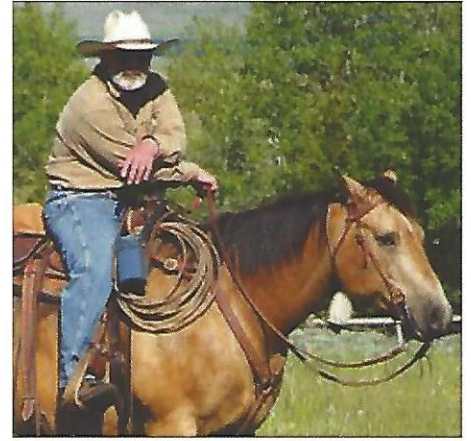


Safe Trail Riding

Submitted by Henry Glenn~Gallatin Valley BCH



Safe trail riding makes for fun riding. When there are unsafe conditions for either rider or horse then no one is having fun. Let us review some common problems we see on our trail rides.

Riders: Think about the weather; we can have every kind of weather in every month in Montana. Prepare for the worst and you will never be caught unprepared. Take extra clothes to layer up and always have a rain coat and hat of some kind. I always have some way to start a fire with me. Sometimes things don't go as planned. You could find yourself spending the night in the back country? Will it be the night from hell or will it be an adventure that you tell your grandkids about. How you were prepared will determine which story you have to tell. A fire, water and a space blanket could determine how your story ends. In our fast paced, modern, digital world we often forget that Montana back country is missing all this technology and help is not minutes away. We must be prepared to survive on our own; 911 is not an option.

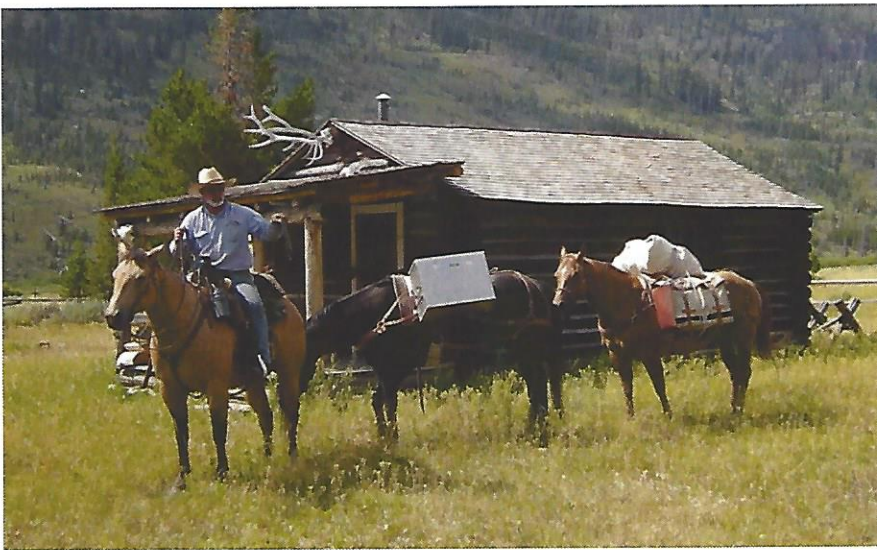
A trip through my saddle bags is a journey through my past experiences. I carry a Leatherman, knife, flashlight, leather string, nylon cord, fire starting tool, GPS, space blanket, food and water. Practice with the fire starting tool of your choice, it is of no value if you can't use it. Food is usually jerky and granola bars. Someone on the ride needs a first aid kit and know how to use it. Boots are a very critical part of our equipment. I wear boots that are both safe to ride in and comfortable to walk in. Imagine walking several miles in uncomfortable boots over rough terrain and the blisters that you would get and the picture becomes clear. I tend to go with things that can't break because Murphy is like a mole on my back. Remember preparing is also fun and makes the ride memorable for the scenery instead of the wet, cold and miserable day that you forgot your slicker.

Horses: So often I see inappropriate tack headed into the back country. What looks good in an arena or around the barn where the consequences are a trip back into the tack room may not work in the wilderness. Remember, Murphy lives in the back country so those bridles with pretty spots and Chicago screws could leave you with an uncontrolled horse or worse no horse as he runs toward the trailer without his bridle or you. Reins that snap on are a no no. They seem to come unsnapped at the most inopportune time. The best bridle is a working or ranch bridle with a brow band and a throat latch. The throat latch is important because it keeps the horse from rubbing the bridle off on a tree. A curb strap is also important to keep the bit from pulling through the mouth. I prefer split reins with a keeper tied on with a leather string. Should your horse step on the rein all that is broken is the string and I know that you have several with you.

Halters are another piece of equipment that we take for granted. I only use rope halters with a tied on lead rope~ no snaps or buckles, they break at the most inconvenient time. More specifically I use the best 8MM climbing rope halter and a yacht rope lead 12' long. This way I can tie my horse securely or pony him if need be. I know that this is an expensive halter and lead but it will not break. Something I see all too often is a loose horse because the person changing from the bridle to the halter doesn't have control of their horse. Never let your horse go loose in the back country or you may get to test your choice of boots. The proper way to transition from the bridle to halter is to tie the lead rope around the horse's neck near the ears and then remove the bridle and replace it immediately with the halter, always maintaining control of the horse. Some riders prefer to simply ride with a halter underneath the bridle. This is ok provided the halter does not rub or sore your horse. Do your training before you go into the back country.

Hobbles are a part of my gear; so often when we get to the most beautiful high places there is nothing to tie to so I hobble my horse. Also, sometimes you need to hobble your horse to keep it from pawing and damaging the soil. Back Country Horsemen encourage you to practice Leave no Trace. Be sure you and your horse are trained in the use of hobbles or a wreck is sure to happen.

Now let's move back to the saddle pad. A good saddle pad is essential gear. Natural materials are best such as wool fleece or wool felt. The saddle should be one you have ridden in several long days to make sure it fits

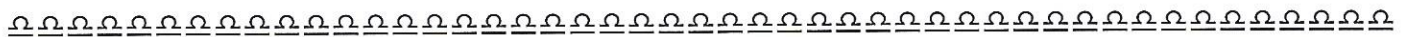


Safe Trail Riding Cont.

your horse and you. Good natural fiber girths are a must. I have had several bad experiences with neoprene girths making horses sore. They are great for the arena and training horses because you can wash them but have no place in the back country. Cruppers or a breeching to keep your saddle in place on steep slopes are a good thing but must be tested at home to see your horse's reaction to them. You don't want your horse bucking when you are going down a steep rock slide nor do you want your saddle slipping over your horses head. Guess where you might be?

Most horses do best with some type of shoes on. Remember you can't just go around the rock slide. A sore footed horse is no horse at all. Yeah, you get it, you brought the horse to ride not lead and you wore good boots just in case, not to really walk 10 miles in.

I have attempted to help make your next trip into the back country safe and enjoyable by sharing some ideas with you. This is not the final authority on back country travel with horses nor is it the only way to outfit you or your horse. I hope it has opened your mind to evaluate your gear and make your next trip into Montana's back country memorable for the scenery not the things you forgot.



HORSEMEN MANNERS & ETIQUETTE

How closely should I follow on the trail?

Submitted by Deb Schatz~ Flathead BCH

What is the proper distance between horses when riding the trail; three feet, a horse length, two horse lengths, or more?

For safety reasons on our edgy Montana trails, I like to have time and space to maneuver my horse around and over obstacles without feeling crowded from behind. If I have a pack string, I need even more time and space to slow down and allow each animal to negotiate obstacles without them feeling crowded or rushed. My saddle horse doesn't need as much space as the string, but it depends on the day. Sometimes he likes the other horses around him, sometimes not so much.

What it really comes down to is courtesy. Ask the horse in front of you; he will always tell you how closely you can follow. If you are making him or his rider nervous, you're too close. If he is in a string and is pushing up into his buddies, you are too close. If he is turning around and making nasty faces at you or kicking out, you are too close. If your horse is so close to the horse in front of him that he's tripping over obstacles, you are too close.

Practice rating your own horse's speed at home, so you can do so easily on the trail. Then everyone can have a fun and safe ride.



Education is learning what you didn't even know you didn't know.