

Tips to make every trail ride with your new horse a safe and enjoyable outing.

Trail Riding DOS & DON'TS

By Jennifer Waitte

Sometimes we have to make mistakes in order to learn. However, when it comes to horses, it's far better to avoid mistakes by planning ahead and understanding capabilities and limitations—your horse's as well as your own. The best intentions can go wrong without the right preparation. Here are some common mistakes that trail riders make and advice on how to avoid them.

Mistake #1

Overdoing It

The most common mistake trail riders make is overestimating their horse's physical conditioning. Avoid doing this by knowing your horse's fitness level in order to help you determine what length of trail ride he can comfortably do and what degree of difficulty he is up for. Don't take your horse out on a four-hour trail ride if he's never been out for more than an hour at a time. Similarly, don't venture out over difficult terrain if your horse hasn't been training for that type of ride. Just as with any athletic pursuit, horses need to build their fitness level and stamina slowly. Regular trail rides of several hours or five to eight miles that incorporate some trotting and/or hill riding will prepare a horse for longer distances and durations.

Be conscientious of your horse's sensitivity to heat and humidity as well. Horses that aren't acclimated to working in hot and/or humid conditions can suffer from heat exhaustion and dehydration very quickly, which can lead to potentially life-threatening metabolic failure.

While assessing your horse's fitness capabilities, judge your own too. Ask yourself how long you can realistically spend in the saddle and how tolerant you are of heat and humidity. Because trail riding is a fun, social activity, riders often forget that it is a form of exercise that can be exhausting. For this reason, it is important to stay hydrated. Take water with you and remind yourself to drink, even if you aren't thirsty. If you wait until you are parched, then it's too late; you're already dehydrated.

Mistake #2

Using Ill-Fitting Equipment

Whenever you make a tack, equipment or apparel change, always try it out on a shorter ride first. Don't make the mistake of choosing a day-long trail ride to break in your new boots or jeans. Riding clothes that don't fit properly or are rubbing in the wrong places can cause a lot of pain.

Your tack should fit your horse comfortably, as well, and be kept in good repair. Ill-fitting or worn-out tack is a recipe for disaster. A saddle that doesn't fit could slip, roll or pinch—any of which could result in a cranky horse or a wreck.

Mistake #3

Having an Uncooperative Horse

Nothing spoils riding plans like a horse that won't load into the trailer. Teaching your horse to load and unload safely and calmly is a must. He should also accept being tied to the trailer and be calm and quiet in new surroundings.

Mistake #4

Forgetting Your Map

Inexperienced trail riders frequently make the mistake of getting lost or riding for a lot longer than they intended because they didn't plan their route carefully in advance. Choose your route based on the length of time you would like to ride, the difficulty of the terrain you feel you can negotiate, and the climate. Ask park rangers or other trail personnel as to the conditions of the trails you plan to ride on, and if there are any hazards or closures. Also, if you are planning a long ride, choose a route that provides access to

water for your horse along the way in the form of stock tanks or streams.

Avoid the temptation to explore. If you encounter a new trail and want to find out where it goes, save the exploration for another day—after you have had a chance to research it. Don't venture out on an unknown trail, especially if it looks like it hasn't seen much use. If the trail is rutted and overgrown, there is likely a very good reason why it's not being used.

Mistake #5

Skipping Basic Training

Understanding your horse's capabilities includes not only what he can accomplish physically but also what training he's had and how he behaves and performs in the company of other horses. Just because your horse is used for recreational riding doesn't exempt him from needing basic training.

An insufficiently trained horse is both unpredictable and unsafe to ride. If your horse is not safe and responsive at home in an arena, he won't be out on the trail, either. He should walk, trot and canter on cue. He should halt easily and be willing to stand quietly. He should obey leg cues to side pass and back

Be a Good Citizen

Physical fitness, training, temperament and experience are all attributes of a good trail horse. However, it's not just the horse that should possess certain traits to be trail-worthy; the rider should too. Like your horse, you need to be physical fit and have some riding skill to make the most of trail riding. However, etiquette is most important. This, combined with a dose of common sense, is the greatest of virtues. No one wants to ride in the company of a badly behaved horse—or rider.

Here is the trail rider's code of ethics:

- Be courteous at all times, even when others aren't. Horses do have the right of over mountain bikers and hikers. However, just because you are entitled to it, don't insist on it. If you encounter less-than-thoughtful bikers or hikers, or if your horse is startled by their presence, then move off the trail a safe distance and allow them to pass. We must all share the same trails, and a negative encounter with another trail user will have a far greater impact on everyone's enjoyment of the trails than will simply getting out of their way if they do not yield to you.
- When riding with a group, always go the pace that is comfortable for the least experienced rider in your posse. Never take off at a trot or lope without first making your intentions known to everyone with you. If someone in the group objects, then save your gallop for another day.
- If your horse has a tendency to be ill mannered in the company of other horses, then make sure your riding friends know this so they can steer clear of him. If your horse has a tendency to kick others, then put a red ribbon in his tail. This is the universal sign of a kicker, however, be prepared to explain the reason for the red ribbon if necessary.
- If your horse is aggressive, then it is your responsibility to keep him a safe distance from other riders. Don't take your kicker up to the front of the group and then expect everyone else to stay out of your way.
- Never rush past other horses unannounced. You will likely create an unwelcomed disruption in your wake. If you want to pass, make your intentions known in advance and then wait until it is safe to do so. Never attempt to pass on a narrow or difficult trail. When it is safe to do so, pass on the left at a safe pace. If someone asks to pass you, move safely to the right side of the trail and let them know when it is safe to pass. If your horse may become unsettled by having another horse pass, then move off the trail altogether and turn your horse's hindquarters away from the passing rider.
- Don't tailgate. When riding in a group, keep a safe distance from the horse in front, approximately the length of one horse.
- Don't crowd around the water trough. Take turns so the horses don't feel the need to kick or bite. Always wait for the last horse to finish drinking before leaving.
- Never leave a rider behind. If someone in your group needs to stop to make an equipment adjustment, then the entire group should stop and wait. Leaving a rider behind will likely cause his or her horse to become upset, making it difficult for the otherwise simple adjustment to be made, and potentially dangerous if the horse tries to run in order to catch up.

up. At any time on a trail ride, you could be expected to stop and wait. If this occurs on a stretch of narrow trail, having a horse that won't stand quietly puts you and other trail users at risk.

Be conscientious about bringing an inexperienced or unruly horse to a group trail ride. If you do, make sure everyone is aware of this. Otherwise you will quickly discover that it will make you very unpopular with your fellow trail riders.

Mistake #6

Reinforcing Your Horse's Fear

One of the most valuable attributes of a good trail horse is a "bomb-proof" demeanor. Seasoned trail horses are desensitized to the many sights and obstacles that trail riding presents. This comes with time and repetition. A big mistake you can make is reprimanding him for spooking or balking at an unfamiliar object. Doing so only serves to reinforce his fear. Instead, reassure your horse that the giant tree stump isn't a horse-eating monster. Teach him to trust that you would never steer him toward danger through practice at home with groundwork and exposure to new obstacles. If your horse spooks and spins or bolts, get him back under control as quickly as possible and back on course. Push him forward with a reassuring tone. Don't "negotiate" with him or try to coax him forward. Ask him with firm aids but do not be forceful.

Mistake #7

Ruining Other Riders' Fun

On par with confidence are manners. Your horse should be on his best behavior when riding in a group. He must be trusted not to kick at or

intimidate other horses. It's no fun to trail ride on a horse that is behaving badly, and it's just as unpleasant to ride in the company of one.

Out on the trail, you will encounter a variety of riders—some of whom pay serious attention to the health and welfare of those around them, and others who don't. It's important to remember that just because some else isn't exhibiting the best trail etiquette or is mounted on a badly behaving horse doesn't mean that you should forget your own manners (see "Trail Rider's Code" pg. 3).

The best way to guarantee a fun, safe trail riding adventure is to adequately train and condition your horse, and prepare yourself for the unique challenges of trail riding.

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