

Appendix F

The Land Managers' Reasonable Expectations for Trail Horse and Horseman Performance

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Land managers with trail system responsibilities typically have statutory mandates to design, construct, and maintain those systems for user safety and environmental soundness goals. However, it has been our experience that it is impossible for the manager to manage for every possible contingency that may have an uninformed horseman and a fractious horse in a position of compromised safety and environmental protection.

While trail riding falls into the category of leisure activity, it is also widely recognized as a hazardous activity for which the horseman must take responsibility for himself/herself and the horse. We offer here a set of guidelines that are first meant to guide the rider towards appropriate preparations for a recreational, wildlands trail experience. And second, these guidelines should inform the manager of what his/her expectations might be for the trail horse and rider.

Before undertaking any trail ride, it is reasonable to expect that the rider should:

1. *Know his/her horse and be able to anticipate and handle its likely behaviors.*

There are young horses that because of good training and competent horsemanship may appear totally under control. It can be said that they are experienced. In contrast, there are old horses that because of inadequate training and inadequate horsemanship may be accidents waiting to happen. The best trail horses are going to be highly experienced as well as physically and mentally mature. Unfortunately, we do not always have the best trail horses to ride.

It is the horseman's responsibility to know what to expect from the horse based on its experience, maturity, and generally how well the horse handles in stressful situations. A stressful situation may be posed by encounters with other trail users, including other horses, as well as trail obstacles and terrain. Numerous accidents have happened when horsemen have tried to force a horse through a trail situation that the animal or rider was unprepared to handle. The trail manager has no responsibility to try to manage such lapses of judgment on the part of the horseman or lack of capacity of the horse to accomplish a reasonably challenging trail task. Troubles with crossing streams and separating from other horses would be two common examples of problems of which the horseman should be aware and be prepared to handle as necessary.

2. *Be prepared to appropriately tie the horse securely and safely.*

The horseman must accept the responsibility to tie the horse securely and safely in situations that range from short rest breaks on the trail to overnight at camp. Several methods are appropriate for safe, secure tying and include procedures that prevent the chewing of tree trunks and damage to tree roots at the base of trees. The horseman must be knowledgeable of these procedures and have on hand the equipment to implement them.

3. *Be informed of the trail system and the conditions that are likely to be encountered and be able to cope with those conditions. Coping includes having the common sense to turn away from unsafe situations, such as deep waters in swollen streams.*

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Trails in wildland ecosystems are going to be highly variable. Those in Wilderness Areas typically will be old, and because of the difficulties of maintenance in these remote locations, there could be a high frequency of encounters with obstacles such as fallen trees, rock slides, and streambeds that have changed in configuration. The horseman is going to have to be sufficiently skilled to negotiate such obstacles and smart enough to know when to turn back or go another way.

Some trails cross rivers that vary widely through the year in water depth. Knowing the profile of the streambed is the responsibility of the horseman. Horses have been drowned by foolish attempts to cross water that was too deep and/or too swift.

In arid ecosystems, or even in times of drought in normally humid areas, water for the horse can be an issue. Trails vary widely in opportunities for the horse to get to water. The horseman must judge what should or should not be attempted in these situations where the horse could become dehydrated.

4. *Be physically capable and properly prepared to cope with likely weather conditions.*

It would be an unusual trail horseman that has not experienced unexpected changes in the weather while on a ride. It can happen even on a day ride, and is substantially probable on multi-day rides. The horseman should understand the possibilities for variable weather patterns in the geographic area, and be prepared for both himself/herself and the horse to cope with the extremes.

5. *Either ride with one or more partners, or make sure that someone knows where he/she is supposed to be and an expected time of return.*

Trail horsemen tend to be individualistic and highly independent. Anyone can get hurt and die on a trail, but the probability of that would appear to be greater for those who ride alone. Cell phones often do not work in remote locations or in mountainous areas even if the injured rider is conscious and capable of using one. The lone rider that has no one who knows his/her approximate location or expected time of arrival back home or at camp is truly alone. The trail manager may end up involved in search and rescue or recovery efforts, but he/she has no responsibility for irresponsible decisions on the part of the rider.

6. *Comprehend the potential adverse impacts that improper riding may have on the trail and the ecosystem in which the trail is embedded. Improper riding includes rates of speed that result in trail tread destruction.*

It is not uncommon for trail riders to be their own worst enemies. The unthinking and unethical riders mis-use trails in a manner that exceeds the capacity of the trail to sustain their activity. A fast gait on a wet soil is likely to destroy the trail tread. This problem worsens as the trail grade increases and stoniness decreases. The trail manager may have regulations that prohibit this behavior, but it is a rare situation in which a law enforcement officer can be on the trail to enforce the regulations. The horseman is therefore left to his own level of comprehension of what his activities are doing to the trail and the ecosystem in which it is embedded, including streams that the trail crosses. It is the responsibility of the horseman to be sensitive to the trail, and to behave with a sense of ethical responsibility toward the land in which the trail is embedded, as well as toward fellow trail users.

7. *Respect all other trail users, including other horsemen that may not ride in the same manner as he/she rides.*

It is a clear responsibility of the horseman to extend common courtesy to every other trail user. It is equally clear that he/she does not have to practice trail etiquette, but failing to do so puts recreational horse users in a bad light in the view of the rest of the trail community. Because horses tend to have greater impacts on trails than do other non-motorized users, it is not uncommon for managers to think that life would be better if there was no horse traffic. When managers who think this way and trail users who have had bad social experiences with horsemen team up against the horsemen, the horsemen usually lose. Common courtesy and ethical behavior can prevent, or at least suppress these situations.

In addition to showing respect to other trail users that do not ride horses, horsemen need to be respectful of each other. Disrespectful behavior, even in the least sense, can ruin a day that was supposed to have been one of enjoyment. At worst, it can cause some bad accidents. An example of the latter could be a horseman riding at a fast gait as he/she approaches one or more horses that are being unnerved by such an approach. Either the faster rider slows to a walk, or someone else could get thrown and hurt. Manag-

ers have no control over these situations, but such events can cause adverse reactions to the recreational use of horses.

It is reasonable to expect that a horse brought to the trail:

1. *Is already adequately broke to ride, and accepts basic requests for movement and stopping.*

The trail manager manages the trail to the best of his/her ability to establish and maintain user-safe and environmentally sound conditions. The manager cannot accept responsibility for behavior of a horse that is inappropriately responsive to its rider. While the trail experience for the horse can be one of enlarging its education, and even relaxing it by offering a change of pace from ring training routines, it is not the place to acquaint the animal with the basics of being ridden.

2. *Is properly shod and tacked for ride and trail conditions.*

Except in areas of light textured soils, trail horses are normally shod at least on the front, and usually on all four feet. Broken hoof walls and stone bruises may result in significant problems that can be easily avoided by proper shoeing. Stony soils are always problematic, and heavy clay soils that are dried to a hard pavement condition can offer problem situations.

Just because the horse has shoes on does not mean that it is well shod. Trail managers often find shoes on trails that came off because the horse was improperly shod at the time of the ride. Typically those shoes were in need of being either reset or replaced after appropriate hoof trimming and fitting. If the horse is properly shod, typically, the shoes will stay on.

3. *Is physically capable of coping with the conditions that are likely to be encountered on the trail, including but not limited to elevations, grades, obstacles, and treads of the particular trail system.*

Horses that are going to an environment for a trail ride that differs greatly from the environment normal to their lives, need to be conditioned to that environment. Horses moving from a farm located at 500-1000 feet above sea level to a trail system with normal elevations exceeding 6000 feet need to be conditioned for that move. Typically the transition, even for horses in good working condition, needs to

be done over a period of several days including days of rest at the middle elevations.

Horses that are not ridden regularly may not be adequately conditioned for rides lasting more than a few hours. Even on these relatively short rides the unconditioned horse might end up sore and stiff. Soreness and stiffness will increase as the challenge of the trail increases. Horses that will be used for day-long and multi-day rides need to be well conditioned for the physical challenge. Usually, very young and old horses are going to have more problems than middle-aged horses. Proper conditioning will usually take several weeks of regular riding to tone the muscles. Having a horse breakdown as a result of several possible ailments, including but not limited to tying-up and colic, are often situations that can be avoided.

4. *Will stand tied both alone and in the presence of other horses.*

The trail horse must stand tied! Teaching this behavior at home is an absolute necessity. The horse that will not stand tied is prone to injuring itself as well as people and other horses around it, and doing significant amounts of environmental damage as it attempts to escape its restraints. In addition, a runaway horse can leave the horseman with no option other than a long walk and a worried mind. It is not the recreational experience that he/she had pursued on the ride. Furthermore, location and capture of the free-running horse may pose a significant safety hazard for vehicular traffic, and it will usually require a substantial time investment of more people than just the rider that failed to adequately tie the animal.

5. *Will accept being hobbled.*

Teaching a horse to hobble at home is an essential for the trail horse for two reasons. First, if the horse learns that restrained leg movements do not mean death or injury is imminent, then if it should get its legs tangled in vines or wire on the trail, it is unlikely to panic and injure itself and its rider. Second, hobbling of the front legs can reduce the environmental damage done by a horse that may stand tied, but that is prone to pawing due to boredom or other causes of psychological discomfort.

Many, if not most, horses can learn to move, even canter, easily if turned loose with only front leg hobbles for restraint. If hobbling for restraint of substan-

tial movement is required, the three-legged hobble is normally used. (This configuration has a rope running from a hobble on one hind leg to the center of the front leg hobbles.)

6. *Knows how to step over trail obstacles that are not higher than its knees.*

The ability of the trail manager to remove all obstacles that can interfere with trail traffic is limited by availability of time and manpower. As the trail system becomes larger and more remote, the manager's limitations increase rapidly. Therefore, it is not unusual that the horse is going to have to negotiate rocks and trees that have fallen onto the trail. Usually, the first impulse of the inexperienced horse is to jump the obstacle. This is usually an undesirable behavior for safety reasons. The horse has the ability to easily step over objects that are not higher than the level of its knees, and it should willingly do so.

Furthermore, if the horse has been properly prepared, it can negotiate multiple obstacles lying on the ground and in close proximity to each other if the rider will just give the animal its head and time to figure out where it wants to step. The horse is a natural athlete, but it does need some training and psychological conditioning before it can express its full abilities.

7. *Will cross trail bridges.*

Trail bridges may be the least liked issue in trail construction and maintenance. However, they are sometimes necessary if the mandates for user safety and environmental soundness are to be met. On the other hand, trail bridges can be scary situations for some horses.

Preparation for crossing bridges can begin at home by conditioning the horse to step on and walk across a raised wooden platform that definitely will not break under its weight. Stepping onto this unfriendly looking obstacle is the first accomplishment. Walking across it and accepting the sound of a drumbeat at each step is the second. The trail horse absolutely has to master this little challenge.

When on the trail, if the horse still has a problem at a bridge crossing, it should follow an experienced horse across with no problem if it has been conditioned at home. After a few such crossings, the horse should cross alone or even lead other horses across without incident, but, it must cross a bridge. That

bridge is there for a purpose. Serving that purpose has cost the manager time and money. Attempting to go around a bridge is not only unnecessary, it also can be unsafe or environmentally unsound behavior.

8. *Will cross both narrow and wide streams.*

The trail horse must be psychologically capable of crossing both narrow and wide streams. Narrow streams can be scary because not only is the ribbon of water moving, but the horse often has to step down into that movement. If properly constructed, the point where the trail crosses such a stream will have a minimum distance that the horse must step down and when it does so, it will find a firm footing. However, there will be times when user-created trails have not progressed to this level of reconstruction, and the horse will have to cope with what is at hand. This is one of the instances in which training on the trail is often the only option. The best thing to do is to have an experienced horse cross in front of the horse new to the experience. After having done this a few times, the new horse will be experienced in these situations.

Most horses will have fewer problems crossing wide, shallow streams than they will narrow streams. However, as the water gets to the level of their knees and higher, new anxiety begins. Again, normally the only option for conditioning the horse to this experience is going to be on the trail. And, also again, the best way to get the horse comfortable with the exercise is to have it follow an experienced horse through it several times.

A related issue for horses and bodies of water is the edges of lakes. It may be convenient and appropriate, depending upon the footing, to water a horse at the edge of a lake. However, horses that have never seen waves of water coming at them find this to be a scary situation. Obviously people that ride horses on ocean beaches provide ample evidence that a horse can be conditioned to waves. However, it is normal for the horse to be uncomfortable with this type of water movement.

9. *Knows how to both ascend and descend a reasonable trail grade at a controlled pace.*

Many horses seem to be naturally inclined to run when ascending or descending a hill. While a great deal of tread damage can be created in either case, it appears that damage due to horses running uphill exceeds that of those running downhill. Energy is

transferred from the muscles of the horse through the hooves to the trail tread. The magnitude of environmental impact is proportional to the amount of pressure exerted on the tread.

Pressures exerted against the trail tread by a running horse greatly exceed those exerted by a horse moving at a walk. So a horse running on a grade seems likely to exert maximal pressure against the tread thus causing major adverse environmental impact.

And third, if allowed to do so when moving uphill, some horses tend to gather the strength of their hindquarters and catapult themselves uphill. In each such action, great force is exerted by the hindlimbs. Such force is likely to cause substantial damage to susceptible trail treads.

Downhill movement is usually more of a breaking process as the horse collects itself to adjust its center of gravity and gathers its hindquarters to do most of the breaking. Wet, heavy textured soils that are largely stone-free can suffer severely from this action as can light textured soils in almost any moisture condition, but probably not nearly as much as when the direction of travel is reversed.

Depending upon soil phase, moisture condition, stoniness, and percent grade the amount of actual tread destruction by these movements varies widely. In order to minimize potential damage, the horse needs to learn to control its natural tendency to run either up or down slope.

10. Does not panic at the sight of unfamiliar objects, including wild animals and other types of trail users, unfamiliar noises, including those made by waterfalls and flushing birds, and unfamiliar scents, including that of a dead animal.

As a prey species, the horse's instinctive reaction to unfamiliar sights, sounds, and scents is to run away. Only a dull horse would not react to these things. However, it is a highly undesirable trail horse that

panics at them. Before coming to the trail, the horse needs to have learned how to control its fears.

All trails on wildlands contain many surprises. If they didn't they could be pretty dull. The trail horse is going to see a variety of wild animals, including in some cases, wild horses. Typically, it is not only the sight of this different, moving life form that gets its attention, but also the fact that it often seems to appear from nowhere and then move away rapidly. If the animal suddenly appears in close proximity to the horse, it can be startling, but the horse must not panic.

Often wild animals are more heard than seen. Deer jumping up from their beds and dashing through the brush can make a lot of noise. Flushing turkeys, quail, and grouse do the same thing. The approach to a waterfall on an unfamiliar trail can also make the horse uncomfortable and edgy. The animal must be conditioned to sensing that if its rider is not upset, then it has no need to be upset. This also places a huge responsibility on the rider to know what he/she is doing.

Of course the horse has a keen sense of smell, and strong-scented wild animals, such as wild hogs, and the scent of decaying flesh can be substantially bothersome. Again, these kinds of encounters are going to be normal to the wildlands experience, and the horse is going to have to learn how to deal with them by controlling its instinctual fears.

While some are much better than others, there has never been either a perfect horse or a perfect rider. We try to mitigate our imperfections with knowledge of them and taking steps to prevent vulnerabilities from turning into wrecks. Constant vigilance of our abilities, the abilities of our horses, and awareness of appropriate behaviors towards the land and other people will go a long way to keeping us safe on trails, and assuring that there will be trails available for our beloved recreational riding experiences.

