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HORSE SENSE

"Things to Know While Horseback Riding in National Forests"

[National Forests in Alabama](#)

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Striving for Minimum Impact

How's Your Horse Packing Sense?

You've packed the finest horses and mules, explored national forests while riding on designated trails and open roads, and used your favorite spots every year. The problem is, most good campsites even in remote places, are used all season. Careless use often results in polluted creeks, campsites covered with ash and beat to dust, trampled tree roots, and overgrazed meadows. Since more people visit the backcountry every year, we'd like to remind you of a few simple ways to lower your impacts in the backcountry. Minimum Impact Philosophy: Disguise the sight and sound of your passage, leaving no sign that you were ever there.

Planning

Before You Go Information

Before you go, contact local land managers for maps, regulations and opportunities for your area(s), information and rules concerning permits, campfire, party size, grazing, trail conditions and closures, and more. Make alternate plans in case of bad weather.

Physical Fitness

It's easier to travel outdoors when both you and your animals are in shape for the trip.

Stock

Know your stock: Which animal leads best? Which ones follow better? Which is the slowest traveler? The slowest animal determines the speed of the pack string. Are they familiar with trails, packing, and with the equipment you plan to use? Get your animals used to high lines, pickets, hobbles, and various temporary corrals before you go.

Feed

Supplemental Feed

Don't get caught unprepared when you find your favorite grassy meadow is dry or overgrazed. Plan to take supplemental feed and get your stock used to it at home. Ask local land managers about available grazing and restrictions, so you know how much supplemental feed to bring and where to camp.

Packing

The Bare Essentials

Lightweight, compact camp equipment: sleeping bags, tents, camp stoves, cookware, and utensils help reduce the number of pack animals, allowing you to take what you really need.

Nosebags and Mangers

Use these to feed your stock hay, pellets or grain. They help reduce waste, you don't have to feed stock on the ground, and it's easier on the land.

Safe Drinking Water

For short trips, carry enough water for the area you're in. Or, check into water filtering devices for longer trips. A giardia filter is highly recommended.

Food

Try prepackaged meals, dehydrated or freeze-dried food, or repack food to save space and to reduce weight. Use lightweight, reusable plastic containers and plastic bags instead of glass and cans.

Around Camp

A shovel, axe, and water container are useful for fire safety and keeping camp clean. Use these tools to clear brush and trees that fall across trails when you can do so safely.

Minor Mishaps

Take insect repellent and a first-aid kit for both yourself and your stock, and make sure you know how to use first-aid kits.

On the Trail

Hints for Smooth Trails

Use your "horse sense!" It's easy to overlook, but your own or your animals' lives could be at risk in rough country. Let your stock pick their way through boggy places, slide zones, on slick and steep trails, and through deep water and snow. Or get off and lead them through treacherous stretches.

- Please stay on trails. Cutting across switchbacks tramples plants and creates parallel paths which erode severely.
- Although it's tricky, keep your stock from skirting shallow puddles, small rocks, and bushes. This helps prevent the creation of wide, deteriorating trails.
- At rest stops even short ones tie your stock off the trail. This is courteous to other trail users and helps reduce wear and tear on the trail. Before you move on, scatter the manure.
- Especially during fire season, **NO SMOKING WHILE TRAVELING!**

Trail Courtesy

Making Friends in the Backcountry

In the backcountry, say hello! A little simple courtesy makes life more pleasant for everyone. Observe the basics of trail courtesy:

- In steep, rough country, down-hill traffic usually yields to uphill traffic. If you have a better place to pull off, do so, and let the other folks pass through.
- People on foot or on mountain bikes should yield to stock traffic because it is easier for them to move off the trail. If they don't, smile and yield the way, or ask them to stand below the trail and wait quietly for your stock to pass.
- In the backcountry, say hello!
- IN STEEP COUNTRY, DOWNHILL TRAFFIC YIELDS TO UPHILL TRAFFIC.

Stock

Keeping Them with You

Your animals are important if they wandered off, you'd have a heavy load on your shoulders! Be sure to familiarize and re-familiarize stock with all containment methods you plan to use before you ride into the backcountry. A few ideas are listed below.

Where to Put Stock

Keep pack animals at least 200 feet from streams, lake shores, trails, and camping areas. This helps keep water clean, protects the soil and plants, and keeps trails and campsites clear of loose stock. Rotate stock throughout the area to reduce trampling and prevent overgrazing.

Methods

Tree-Saver Straps: Used with high lines, these make a big difference in keeping your stock from girdling trees.

Highline: A highline is one of the easiest, lightweight ways to keep your stock in camp. It is easier to put up with a tree-saver strap. The highline prevents stock from trampling roots and chewing bark. See the picture of high lines and tree-saver straps for details.

Hitching Rails: If you must tie stock to a hitching rail or dead pole, tie a four-to-six inch round pole between two trees. Place padding or wooden shims under the lash ropes to protect the bark. Use rope or twine instead of nails or wire. Again, take it with you when you leave.

High lines

How to use them:

1. Choose a hard and rocky spot.
2. Place the tree-savers and rope about 7 feet above the ground.
3. Stretch the line between two trees using adjustable nylon tree-saver straps.
4. Run the rope between the straps, tie with a quick-release knot, and pull tight.

Picket Ropes and Pins

Bring an easy-to-move picket pin such as a metal one. Avoid areas with obstacles so the rope doesn't get hung up. If you walk your animal to the end of the rope before turning it loose, it's less likely to injure itself by running past the end of the rope. Move the picket pin frequently, to prevent trampling and reduce overgrazing. When you break camp, be sure to take that picket pin with you.

Hobbles: Wandering horse? Hobbles work for some animals, but others can move fast while wearing them. Again, get your stock used to them before going into the backcountry.

Temporary Fences and Corals: When you plan to spend several days in one spot, a temporary corral or fence is a good way to keep your stock in camp. Make sure your stock is trained to stay in temporary corrals before leaving home. If you find permanent corrals at trailheads or designated horse camps, use them! Try some of these temporary fences and corrals (don't forget to take them with you!):

Rope Corrals: Rope corrals are relatively easy to rig and move, but they do require extra rope. One method uses two parallel ropes tied with loops or bowlines and threaded with cross ropes for a more secure enclosure.

Camp

Keeping it Clean

At last, you've found your spot. Hmm, looks like other people like this place, too. Some areas receive lots of visitors, and they don't all follow the 'pack it in, Pack it Out' philosophy. Should you stay here and clean it up, or let the next person take care of it? You've decided to improve your site? Good for you!

Like most people, you enjoy campsite privacy and solitude. Where should you put stock and gear? You can follow the "200-foot guideline": keep stock and gear at least 200 feet from the nearest lakes and streams, meadows, trails, and other camps. In designated Wilderness, this is a requirement which helps keep streams and lakes clean, protects the soil and plant life, and keeps trails and campsites clear of loose stock. It's helpful to follow it in all areas.

Tips to Remember in Camp:

- **Picking a Spot:** Select an open, well drained, level spot. In wilder areas, you must follow the 200-foot guideline. Rotate stock throughout the area to reduce trampling and prevent overgrazing.
- **Soaps and Detergents:** For washing chores, use a basin at least 200 feet from water sources. Water plants and fish are extremely sensitive to soap, even biodegradable soap, and can die from it.
- **Cleaning up:** To prevent contaminating water sources with stock or human waste, dump it at least 200 feet from water, camp, and trails. Use biodegradable, unscented, white toilet paper. Bury human waste and toilet paper in a small "cat hole" in the top 6 to 8 inches of soil, or use a latrine for large parties or long stays. Cover your latrine completely.
- **Campfires:** Where fires are allowed, we all enjoy the romance of a campfire. However, campfires sterilize the soil, blacken rocks, and leave long-lasting scars on the land. Build them where campfires were previously built. Keep your fires small, attend them while burning, and let them burn down to a fine ash; then stir, scatter or pack out ashes according to local practice for that site.
- **Fire Pans and Cook stoves** are good alternatives to traditional campfires. Fires built in fire pans are similar to campfires on the ground, but cause less damage. You can also use a cook stove instead of a fire: it's light, convenient, and reduces impacts to the land.
- **Structures:** Rock walls, log benches, lean-tos, and other structures detract from and needlessly impact the natural landscape. If you need temporary structures, bring lightweight equipment with you.

Breaking Camp

"Pack it in, Pack it Out"

- Pack out all refuse, burned cans, unburned campfire debris, and garbage - including food scraps, grease, aluminum foil, and paper.
- Burn what trash you can. Burying garbage or burning aluminum foil is not an acceptable disposal method and is illegal in some locations.
- Break up and scatter horse manure and fill in pawed holes.
- Finally, scatter a covering of needles and cones over the site.