

Camping with your Horse

By Bill Mayfield

Annette and I have been camping with horses for 11 years (and counting) with minimal injuries, to our horses or us. By sharing our experiences with you, we hope to minimize the "wear and tear " to both horse and rider. Hopefully most of the suggestions will seem like common sense, but we realize that not everyone starts out with the same foundation of knowledge. We also understand that there are different or perhaps better ways to accomplish the same thing, depending, upon you and your horses' tolerance, temperament, experiences; and camping locations. What follows isn't meant to be all-inclusive, but merely a starting point.

Before setting out on your camping trip do some research.

Most Horse Camp Grounds are, unimproved (no electricity, no showers, and pit toilets). Some only have hand pumps for water. Know what to expect before you leave home. Some camps have unreliable sources of water. Buckets lined with large garbage bags (twist tied shut) can be used to haul water from a different location. Water can often be obtained from a local friendly fire department, service station or nearby people camp. Call to see if you will need reservations and to insure that the trails are open. It would not be fun to drive for hours just to arrive and be told you can't camp without a reservation, the campground is full or the trails are closed due to wet weather.

My focus in this article is going to be on the needs of the horse. All the dynamics of camping change when you decide to bring a horse along. There are several books on the market covering Camping with your horse if you would like a more in-depth study after reading this article.

There are several ways to contain your horse while camping. These range from simply tying your horse to the side of your trailer, using a picket line, a portable hot wire, to portable steel/aluminum corrals. Each of these has advantages and disadvantages. Whichever method you choose you will want to practice camping at home first. Most people use either picket line or portable hot wire.

Picket Line Advantages:

- If the horse is properly tied with a quick release knot it's a more secure method of containing your horse than a portable hot wire.
- Typically you can contain your horses in a smaller physical area

than is necessary with portable hot wire.

Picket Line Disadvantages:

- There's a risk of your horse getting off the picket line. This usually happens in the middle of the night due to improper tying methods or ill-fitting halters.
- Your horse can get tangled. This is possible if the drop line is too long. The horse could get a nasty rope burn, or worse!
- If the drop line is too short your horse will not be able to reach the ground and clean up dropped hay. Also, your horse will not be able to lie down. Riding your horse hard during the day and tying it so that it can't lie down at night will take a toll on the horse by the end of your camping trip.
- The horse may not have free will access to water. Thus the horse could be at higher risk of colic. Horses usually don't drink as well as they should when they're away from home. If the water taste different than at home they usually will not drink it unless they are really thirsty. Thus the need to give electrolytes when camping with your horse.

Portable Hot Wire Advantages:

- Your horse has more room to move about freely. This is important considering that you're riding your horse long and possibly hard during the day. If the horse can walk about freely in the portable hot wire there will be less chance of the horse getting stocked up or sore muscles and muscle cramps.
- The horse will have free access to water. Annette and I put a 60-gallon stock water trough in with our horses. They have free access to water day and night. This is important when the horse is being used and sweated hard during the day. This equates to less labor for you (carrying buckets of water over to the horse two or three times a day).
- If the grass is tall your horse will have grass to eat for at least the first day of camping. I've been camping where I would move the portable hot wire pen every day so the horse had grass to eat for the entire camping trip, but this was an exception and not the rule. Usually you will have limited space and where you put your portable hot wire pen is where it stays for the entire camping trip.

Portable Hot wire Disadvantages:

- If your horse gets spooked there's a higher risk of your horse getting loose by running through the portable hot wire pen. This could also happen if two horses are "buddy sour" and you leave

one behind in the portable hot wire pen. If you plan to leave a “buddy sour” horse behind it’s best to securely tie the horse in a safe place where it will not get hurt while you’re gone, or simply put the horse in your horse trailer while you’re gone. Never put a horse in a trailer that’s not attached to a truck, that could be an accident waiting to happen.

- Kids running through your campsite could get shocked. Make sure your portable hot wire pen is marked or highly visible.

Get your horses used to a picket line or hot wire corral at home before trying this at the campground. A few years ago some friends of mine arranged to go camping with us. They were picking up their newly purchased Walkers and then meeting us at the campground. These Walkers were Show Horses, had never been camping, and were not used to hot wire fencing. About 5 minutes after putting their horses in the hot wire corral, one of them walked into the wire with its chest and got shocked. Having never been shocked before, it took off running through the wire, ripping the whole thing down. Both horses ended up running down a blacktop divided highway before being caught and returned to the Camp Ground. Luckily they only had minor cuts and bruises from their excursion.

At home put up a portable hot wire or construct a picket line inside your pasture or paddock. Preferably away from and out of sight of any other horses that will be left behind (at home) when you go camping. Doing this will tell you how well they handle separation anxiety. When camping most horse injuries happen on the picket line. I advise a picket line at least 8' from the ground with a drop line for attaching your horse. You will need to carry a small stepladder with you to get up this high on the pole or tree. Make two passes of the picket line through a welded steel ring wherever you want a drop line or tie a loop in the picket line every place you want a horse connected. The ring can't slide when in use, but can be easily adjusted when the rope is slack (e.g. when you get to the next camp and need to adjust distances). The drop lines should be attached to the steel ring (or loop) with a quick disconnect snap, to allow easy release in case your horse becomes tangled. When your horse pulls, he should just barely be able to touch the ground with his lips. Avoid nylon ropes, they stretch too much and give awful rope burns. Sisal or cotton rope works great, but will require retightening after the horses have pulled on it, check it often. Most people we know use in-line ratchet devices to make it easier to tighten the line. Don't picket your horse so close to a tree that they can chew on the trunk or disturb the root system (in many parks it's illegal to tie to trees, so check the rules). Many camps have sturdy posts to picket your horses to. Space the horses far enough apart to prevent fighting. Hang a hay net/bag within reach of each horse, insure it's up high enough as to not be a hazard for getting a

leg caught in it. Select the horses you're going to take camping. Put your horses in the portable hot wire corral (into which you've placed hay and water) or tie your horses to the picket line and check on them a little while later. If your horse is attached (buddy sour) to a horse that's going to stay at home you want to find out how well they handle separation anxiety. If after a few hours all is well then leave your horses in the hot wire pen or on the picket line overnight. This will seem strange to do when you're at home, but it's better to fine out at home if these horses are right for camping, and if they get loose your pasture fence will still contain them.

Below is a list of things to take with you:

- **Horse food**-- Make sure you have plenty of high quality hay and grain along. We prefer, grass hay, that can be offered almost continuously cutting down on boredom. Others use alfalfa fed in smaller quantities
- **Electrolytes**--you should add electrolytes to their diet since they may not have free access to a salt block. I sometimes carry a small white salt block with me camping and put it in the hot wire pen with the horses. How much electrolytes depends on how much your horse is sweating. If you mix it in their grain make sure they actually eat it. I've seen horses that somehow figured out how to eat the grain and leave the electrolytes behind. Many riders add the electrolytes to the water the horses drink. Be aware that this does change the flavor of the water, and some horses will not drink it unless extremely thirsty. They also make it in a paste tube, which may be the easiest way to insure the horse actually gets it all.
- **Buckets**--your horses will need as much water as they will drink. Though it varies from horse to horse and is weather dependent, plan on at least 15 gallons a day per horse while camping. An indication of whether or not your horse is getting enough electrolytes and water can be obtained by watching the consistency of their manure. Hard and dry means you should get more water and electrolytes down your horse. Excessively runny, loose dropping can indicate "too much" electrolytes.
- **Water tank**—I have a 35-gallon water tank that I fill at home and take with me camping. So, at least the first 35 gallons of water is water that the horses are used to. You can blend in water from the campground to slowly get the horses used to the water at the campground.
- **Water trough**—I carry a 60-gallon water trough with me camping. I put in the portable hot wire pen with the horses. I refill it with the 35-gallon water tank mentioned above. The horses have free access to water the whole time we're camping.

- **Grooming tools**--depending upon the weather, this may range from bucket washing to just brushing. If the trail has a lot of sand; you want to make sure the dried on salt from sweat and the sand are removed from their skin before you tack up for the next ride to avoid rubbing your horse raw. Brush, shake or wash as much sand and dirt from the girth as possible. Dirty tack causes just as many problems as a poorly cleaned horse. Bring, at a minimum, 2 saddle pads and girths per horse. This allows one to dry while the other is in use. Watch for saddle sores (warm raised areas) and either adjust your tack or ride in a different saddle if you detect any suspect areas. When untacking, note the pattern of sweat on the back. Dry areas indicate excess pressure and possible problem sites. The back should be uniformly wet. Don't neglect your horse's hooves, check for stones and loose nails at least a couple of times a day.
- **First aid supplies**--for horse and people. Vet wrap, 'bute, electrolytes, antibiotic ointment, old clean diapers or rags for bandages, scissors, duct tape, etc.
- **Extra tack**--take along 2 of almost everything, including saddles and bits. We use trail bridles. These are halter/bridle combinations that allow the bit and reins to be removed and the horse can be tied up if you want to stop and have lunch, or carry a halter and lead line with you when you go trail riding.
- **Quick to prepare people food**--after all that riding and caring for your horse, who has the time or energy to cook a gourmet meal? A few suggestions: spaghetti, Hamburger or Tuna Helper, Instant hot cereals, cold cereals, bagels, cream cheese, coffee, tea, hot chocolate, instant juices, popcorn, chips, hot dogs, eggs, flour, instant milk, bread, jelly, peanut butter... What foods you take depends to an extent on the type of camping and storage resources available to you--camper with fridge/freezer/stove or tent, campfire and cooler. Take water and energy bars riding with you.
- **Plenty of clothes**-- Plan for variations in weather--sweatshirts, T-shirts, shorts, flannel shirts, lots of socks and underwear, etc. There are a few camps that have Laundromats within driving distance. Some people camps will allow you to use their facilities, for laundry or showering. Make sure you carry waterproof boots. In the morning when you first get up the grass is always wet. If you do not have water proof boots you will regret it
- **Rain gear**--you can get pretty cold and miserable when that afternoon storm unexpectedly dumps on you or you find yourself faced with a steady, all day rain. The least expensive (good for sudden down pours) is the light-weight pull-on poncho that can

be purchased at most discount or sporting goods stores.

One last topic

I strongly recommend physical conditioning your horse, before undertaking a camping trip with your horse. From my experience you usually end up doing a lot of riding while camping. Trying to force unconditioned bodies, be they human or animal is dangerous. Saddle time is important and should be done as frequently as possible; but be realistic with your training. Start with short comfortable distances (4-5 miles), slowly building to longer distances (10-15 miles or farther) as you both build more endurance and stamina. The goal is not to cover the distance as FAST as possible, but to do so in a reasonable amount of time with the least stress to your mount and your body. You want to be able to socialize with your buddies while out on trail! The most efficient training gait (and traveling speed) is your horse's medium speed—the running-walk. This gait should be alternated with Flat walking (example—Dog walk or Flat walk a mile, Running-walk a mile). Ride with the equipment you plan to use on the trail. It's better to work out tack problems at home rather than on the trail, miles from a tack store.

Safety lies in knowing how your horse will react and what it takes to remain in control of the situation. Ride in a group when possible. We enjoy camping with the Gaited Horse Cavalry. Pay attention to how your horse reacts to being crowded, bumped or passed by a strange horse. Does he attempt to buck, kick, bite, and bolt? These are all bad trail "manners" and should be corrected or eliminated as soon as possible.

Happy Camping & Happy Trails

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