

Things Your Horse Should be Able to do for a Back Country Horsemen Work Project
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The following is a list of skills your horse should possess in order to be a safe and pleasant backcountry horse. These skills can and should be practiced at home so that accidents are avoided. If you need any ideas on how to best introduce/ teach any of these skills, please feel free to contact any backcountry horsemen member. We are always willing to help.

1. Good ground manners
 - Leads politely from either side by anyone (in situations when other people might need to handle your animal).
 - Stops and backs on command.
 - Ties well to trees for up to an hour
 1. Doesn't pull back
 2. Doesn't paw (it damages the environment). Pawing is pretty common at first, but generally a few reminders can teach the horse to stand quietly.
 - Doesn't bite or kick people.
 - Doesn't bite or kick other horses; however some degree of aggressive behavior can be accommodated during the rides by making sure the group is aware of the issue and then using proper spacing between horses as well as choosing a position in line that makes the horse most comfortable. The line position can be changed. Some issues resolve themselves as the horse becomes more experienced riding in groups.
 - Understands hotwire: Only if you need to pen your horse in a hot wire pen overnight.
 - Trailer loads. Obviously, we haul to the projects.
2. Comfortable in groups
 - BCH rides are group rides, so the horse needs to be comfortable riding in a group. Sometimes horses need a few rides to get used to riding in a group. They might jig or just be nervous in general on the first few rides. This usually goes away with experience and as your horse gets to know some of the other horses. Also, sometimes just changing position in line or rearranging the neighboring horses can help. Members are always willing to stop to rearrange—or just stop to help if problems arise.
3. Comfortable going slow
 - BCH rides entail a lot of slow riding with many stops. Horses that can't abide going slow generally do not enjoy BCH outings.

4. Base level of fitness

- Even though BCH rides entail a lot of slow riding, sometimes the rides cover 10-15 miles and thousands of feet of elevation change, at 7,000 to 11,000 feet above sea level. Unfit horses can get in serious trouble.

5. Comfortable encountering various obstacles.

- The experienced horses and riders help the new horses gain confidence. Members are willing to wait while horses get used to new things. It is always acceptable to dismount and lead horses over, around, or through obstacles. Sometimes horses can be ponied. Safety is our first priority. The best way to avoid unpleasant surprises is to practice at home!
- Water: Water crossings are common on project rides. There is a creek at Four Hills if the horse needs practice. In wet years, water may be quite deep, but most years 1-2 feet is about it. Keep in mind that horses unfamiliar with water crossings often attempt to jump their first body of water—sometimes with fairly hilarious results.
- Mud, Bogs (Yuck) and Snow: There are not many places to practice bog or snow crossings, but as with water crossings, the experienced horses usually help the newer horses gain confidence. (Stay on the trails, though. Some of the Pecos bogs are pretty deep off the trail. Snow banks can hide obstacles and horse hooves do tend to penetrate into the snow).
- Wooden bridges: There are a number of bridge crossings on our regular projects we regularly complete. Practicing walking over plywood or even a trail-course type bridge can help.
- Going over logs: Usually we are clearing the trail, but every so often, we get in situations where we have to go over down logs. It is safest if horses step over logs rather than jumping them. It is sometimes the case that the rider can get off and send the horse over the log.
- Going under trees and branches: We sometimes lean or duck to go under branches. Occasionally, we even have to ride under trees that are hanging across the trail. This is where short horses have the advantage!
- Boulders: A surprising number of horses are afraid of boulders, but most horses get over it pretty quick.
- Backpackers: We encounter backpackers regularly. Most horses simply don't recognize the backpackers as people. Asking the hikers to talk to you really helps. Hikers are supposed to yield the right of way and should go to the low side of the trail to decrease the chance of spooking the horse. Practicing at home can obviously help, too.
- Dogs: Dogs often accompany hikers. Dogs should be under control, but not always.
- Bicycles: Not that common on our project rides but very common at Elena Gallegos and Cedro Peak. As with hikers, bikes should yield to the horses, and asking the cyclist to speak to you helps. Desensitizing at home is well worth the effort!

6. Other riding skills:

- Backing and turning in tight spaces. Sometimes the trails are narrow or cramped.
- Mounting and dismounting from both sides (in case you have to bail and you'd rather not get off and fall over a cliff).
- Carrying saddle or pommel bags with water bottles, food, etc.
- Comfortable with rain gear, maps, plastic bags, Velcro, rattling tools on the pack animal, and crinkly candy bar packages. It is a drag to have rain and be unable to wear your poncho or slicker because your horse is petrified. Even worse if the horse is afraid of every one else's rain gear! It is nice to be able to receive a map from another rider or unwrap a trail snack without scaring your horse!
- Comfortable with the rider using limb loppers from horseback (sometimes the trimmings fall on the horse—trimming smallish branches is advised). Easily learned on the trail once the horse is comfortable.
- Comfortable wearing a halter under the bridle. (Saves time with the frequent stops but not absolutely necessary.)
- Comfortable wearing a breast collar (some horses really need cruppers, too). If your saddle fit is excellent and your horse has good withers, you might not need a breast collar, but because many of the trails we work climb steeply for long stretches, breast collars can prevent a lot of discomfort for your horse and can save you a lot of saddle readjustment time, so they really are a must. Most horses don't have a problem with them, but it is nice to know before project day!
- Optional: Ability to pony another horse or mule. Conversely, ability to be ponied can be useful in an emergency.

7. If you have any questions about how to get your horse comfortable with any of the above, please feel free to contact any BCH member!