

Winter Riding by Marty Morris

One of our members read an article about riding in winter conditions and suggested that I write an article on the subject. Many of you reading this have considerable experience with riding in cold and stormy conditions while hunting or just being caught out when a storm comes in. Those of us that have done it have relied on common sense and our knowledge of the country and horses to get the job at hand done and get back to some place that is more comfortable.

You need to have a good reason for being out in very cold or stormy conditions. If you have that reason, you know that you must be prepared for what could occur during the time you are out.

For example, my longest coldest ride was in the Alaska Range in September 1992. A volcano blew up and the weather changed from nice fall to winter overnight. When I woke that morning in the guide shack, I had no idea what had occurred, but it was sure different than the day before. It was very cold, snowing and the snow had a gray look to it.

I was sent to rescue 3 hunters that were in a drop off camp 20 miles from the lodge where I was working. As I prepared for the ride, I borrowed all the heavy clothing I could from whom ever had something and dressed in layers. I packed quite a bit of food and drinks and tied a sleeping bag to the back of my saddle in case of a survival situation. Of course, I carried my .44 mag and .338 Win. Mag. I did that wherever I went. The mountain grizzlies there weren't friendly or used to people.

I had no idea what the temperature was but later found out the chill factor was 30 below. It probably varied a lot with the country I rode and whether it was daylight or dark. I got back about 2 in the morning. There was no way to contact anyone if I had gotten into trouble and most likely no one could have gotten to me within reasonable time to help if I needed it.

Without going into detail, I made the trip, nonstop 40 miles and got the hunters to where they could be flown out to safer conditions. The point being that I was prepared for what could have happened during the ride. It took a little common sense to get there and back without problems. When crossing streams and rivers, water turned to ice as soon as it hit the cold air. Blocks of ice were on the horse's tails and everything else that got splashed. The stock of my rifle had an inch or more of ice on it. It was a cold ride.

If you ride in the winter, it is best to ride with someone who has experience with the country and conditions. Check weather conditions and if the weather looks severe, don't go at that time. Travel slow and try to avoid slick places. If there is any doubt about the footing, get off and lead through the bad places. When the ground is slick a horse or mule can go down so quickly that you don't have time to get away from them.

Make sure that someone knows where you are going and when you will be back. Carry a means of communication with you should something unexpected happen.

Remember that your horse or mule is haired up for the winter. Avoid getting them hot or sweaty. If they do work up a sweat, don't push them and let them cool down while saddled. When saddling up and tightening the cinch, be sure you don't pinch the winter hair in the front of the cinch ring. Run your finger through there to make sure the hair is free.

Winter is a great time for riding in our country. I generally ride several times a week if I can. You can get a lot accomplished with your horse or mule, keep them in condition and see some interesting things that nature provides.