

## Trail Etiquette By Ron Ostrom

What is Etiquette? In the horse world this could mean lots of things, from your views and values to someone else's that are completely different. Figuring how to apply etiquette to trail and backcountry situations is another challenge.

To begin, etiquette must start with personal responsibility. Common sense plays a huge role as well as courtesy and decency. Let's look at a few things that dictate how we look at etiquette.

*Training*- the more we work with our animals, the better the animal will act and the more enjoyable the ride will be. Being able to relax on a trail ride helps others as well. We all know not everyone spends as much time with his or her stock as needed. Having individuals with nice animals helps settle the group and keep things better controlled.

*Experience*- this plays off of training. Confident riders have confident animals and comfortable rides. Learn from everyone and everything. The best riders never stop learning and asking questions. The more experience and training we learn from, the more etiquette we can have. Etiquette is best shown rather than told. Here are some things to consider when riding with others.

*Riding with a group takes leadership and flexibility.* Lining out the animals in an order for safety and ability is crucial to an enjoyable outing. Everyone has some ability to see if anything is going to cause a problem. Selecting a leader for the group is very important as well as being able to fix and adjust as the group rides along to make sure safety and enjoyment is hand in hand.

As with the leader being important, so must the last rider. The last rider must be in communication with the leader and has a view of the group from behind.

Fast horses go to the back of the group and slow horses are in the middle. The leader must keep all things in mind, as animals that have not been together will attempt to play natural roles of herd dynamics and dominance to establish their own pecking order. Kickers must be dealt with as well as biters. Horses are much like dogs, they learn all the good and bad behavior from their caretakers. I say caretakers, due to if the owner only rides once a year and the horse is conditioned by someone else, then the animal learns more from the rider, not the owner. Animals get good at what they do most. If they stand in a corral most of the time, that's what they get good at.

*Passing other riders* seems to be a large obstacle. This comes down to unwritten rules and common sense. *Usually, the larger group or longest pack string gets to stay on the trail.* One variance to this is professionalism. Usually, the US Forest Service and Outfitters show respect for other riders, no matter how long their string or difficult the situation is, and get off the trail.

Another key point to be able to recognize is horsemanship and ability. The inexperienced riders usually get to stay on the trail. In areas like the South Fork of the Shoshone National Forest which is arguably the most dangerous trail system in the lower 48 states, experienced riders and packers learn where they can look for up coming riders, take breaks to wait for riders and eliminate the chance for a dangerous passing or turning around to find a better place to get off the trail.

Backpackers and hikers are becoming more of a dangerous passing as the backpacks and equipment attached to the human is becoming larger with different shapes and colors. *When approaching these hikers the best thing to calm stock is to get the hikers to speak.* Animals calm much quicker when they hear familiar sounds and can look at the other animals in the group that are in front of them who can see what is going on ahead. Animals learn to read each other early in life and going back to *having someone experienced and calm out front for the leader will set the tone for the group.* Speaking with the hikers with a calm voice will help and could even make a new friend.

Many hikers don't know or want to step off the trail to the down hill side. I don't blame them for the work to get back on the trail, but explaining why is very important. When a hiker steps below the trail, the animals have both the security of the high ground and if needed they can jump up slope if scared. Better for stock and the trail. If the hiker is above the trail, the animals tend to jump off the trail, lose their footing and big wrecks have happened from this.

Another reason to have the hiker step off the down hillside is trail conditions. When stock break the tread on a trail, the edge is gone and erosion takes over. Trail crews are needed to dig tread back into the hillside to bring the trail back to standards.

Today we are seeing other livestock. Llamas and goats in some areas are appearing on the trails. Distance is always the best way to deal with unfamiliar animals. Being able to stop your animals so they can look up and see what is coming will help immensely. The ability to come face to face and control your stock is great for conversation as well as helping the animals realize that this is a comfortable situation. The dreaded -come around the corner- meeting is the one we all fear. I have been with groups where the horses and mules were uncontrollable, the riders dismounted and tied their animals to trees and let the llamas or goats go on by. Nothing is wrong if it works. Passing in heavy timber can be a problem for the animals to identify what is the threat. Slow is better and when the passing is a confidence builder, future passes are more relaxed.

Another situation could be wildlife. Here on the Shoshone National Forest Grizzly Bears usually put some fear into most visitors. Livestock can sense the fear from humans as your horse or mule is looking for leadership from you. Bears are stinky creatures and a horse has a nose hundreds of times more sensitive than ours. Experienced riders and stock are the best way through this. Staying calm helps the other stock and riders and everyone holding together.

Letting others pass by because they are faster is another situation for etiquette. Watching for places to get off the trail is very helpful as well as getting off the trail far enough for safe passing. Biting and kicking should not be possible when passing if far enough off the trail. The difference of gaited horses versus the Sunday rider makes a big difference with miles to travel. The long pack string takes its time for a reason.

*Tying up on the trail* seems to be increasingly more of a problem. Having the courtesy to get off the trail far enough to not cause any animals to endanger the animal or the rider is important. During hunting seasons, some people get excited when they see an animal run across the trail and immediately jump from their animal and tie to the first thing to get to their rifle. This can be OK for a very short time, however when the next people come along and the trail is blocked, problems begin.

*Rules are in place for pack stock* being tethered together for safety reasons. Sometimes pack animals break loose in a string and it is not noticed until meeting another group. Fixing this is very important to keep your stock together. Many times a loose pack animal wants to join the riders going out as it is where they just came from. Llamas and goats must be tethered as well and yield to horse and mule strings.

*Dogs* need to be watched when passing as some dogs just look at the legs and may go with the other group. Makes for a lot of discomfort for the owner when you can't find your dog.

*Crossing water and gates.* These have *the same rule as a person off their mount.* All animals get the same time and space to drink, the leader is responsible for this. At gates, the leader makes sure no one is off their horse when the group is moving. In large groups, it's usually better for the leader to open the gate and leave it open as the entire group rides through, then the last rider can close gate as the group stops until the rider closing gate is ready to go.

*At break time, tying stock* to not damage the trees is as important as getting off the trail. Animals that can't stand to be tied will need to be hobbled or held. Some animals just need to see their buddies to feel comfortable. Tying far enough away from other stock and people is also very important. Animals being able to bite and kick can happen after you walk away from them. Don't tie your animal so another rider can't get past yours to other tie spots; the first riders goes the farthest if possible.

Other rules we get into in the backcountry deals with *camping with stock.* First is containing them. Many ways to do this, but with this article I will stay focused on etiquette. Camping far enough off the trail, regulations state 50-foot minimum. Contain your stock at least that far with durable ground, whether it be picket, hobble or high line. The bell mare method is by far the best for limiting damage to the resources, however keep in mind how close to the trail your loose stock can roam for those

passers-by dealing with a protective mule. Each wilderness area has different rules on camping with stock; some won't allow you to over night or graze. Distances to water sources vary, but common sense would be to not contain your stock in wet areas.

Keeping stock from the core camp area is very important as well. Outfitters are required to keep this area around their campfire, or center of camp clear of animals unless they are saddling or packing. The core camp area is an area for people to sleep, cook and enjoy their stay. Keeping it clean helps future use and makes using the remote campsites more enjoyable by all users. If an animal leaves a pile, most people use a rake or shovel or the original method of kicking to disperse manure.

*Leaving your campsite better than you found it applies to the trail and backcountry as well.* No one wants to ride ten miles into the backcountry and find garbage along the trail or in a campsite, particularly a fire ring. Being responsible for the things we do, and "pack it in- pack it out" is the right thing to do. Having a little extra room (in your packs) for some trash is the best method. As your food and grain is consumed, there should be some room to help (pack out trash). Not over-packing a critter helps as well. Sometimes it's lighter on the land to have one extra animal to pack lighter than to over-pack and spend more time and effort repacking and losing things along the trail, or soiling an animal.

One sure way to have a more enjoyable ride through the beautiful mountains is to spend the time it takes to make your mount and yourself comfortable and being able to relax and enjoy the scenery. I've heard many things all my life to help me out, one sticks in my mind as to this subject: *"Money can buy you everything but love and time, your horse and mule need your time, which turns into love."* There is No replacement for your time.

Riding with a group can be very enjoyable, relaxing and building relationships with others as well as your stock. All we need to do is consider others and walk a mile in someone else's shoes. Get out and enjoy your public lands while relaxing and enjoying the reasons you have your stock.