

University of Missouri Extension

G2884, Reviewed October 1993

Community Pleasure Trail Riding

Melvin Bradley
Department of Animal Sciences

Trail riding is fast becoming a major part of the pleasure horse industry. More and more people are spending their leisure time saddling a quiet, sensible horse and enjoying its companionship in scenic surroundings.

Mountain riding affords a wonderful opportunity and challenge for trail riders. On government land, trail riders face some restrictions. Therefore, riders need permission from the controlling agency to avoid trespassing. Private land usually can be used with permission of the owners. Abandoned roads or logging trails are ideal for trail riding.

Many areas with scenic streams, hills and trees have numerous trails on which local groups can ride. You usually can get permission to use these trails or to join local riding groups.

Stream crossings should have solid bottoms and banks that can be negotiated without danger of the horse falling. Stream sites are good places to camp because there will be water for the animals.

Almost all places have road right-of-ways available for riding. Check local highway departments in case there is an ordinance against use by riders. Although road riding may not be the most desirable, it is a good place to ride when getting a horse in condition or when going from one scenic area to another.

Sometimes part of a state park is set aside for trail riding. Cooperative planning between riders and city governments can help make sure that good horse trails and extensive facilities for camping are included in large parks.

Organizing the ride

Many riders prefer to ride in a group. Saddle clubs are turning out in larger numbers for trail riding. Although an impromptu trail ride can be organized at any time, usually it is easier to have appointed committees for the ride.

A trail boss and drag rider committee will lay out the trail on a map, or from memory, and will call the landowners for permission to use it. The committee then rides the trail, chops brush if necessary, and hangs ribbons to mark the trail so riders will not get lost. They also time the length of

the ride and plan areas for rest and refreshment stops.

A publicity committee is needed if a large number of riders will be invited. They prepare handbills with the time, location, distance and equipment that riders need to bring. They may print mimeographed pages and post them in saddle shops, feed stores and other locations that attract horse people. When using publicity, it is important to be prepared to handle a large number of riders. Often, more people attend the trail ride than are expected.

A concession committee will decide the types of refreshments to serve. Trash cans for litter should be provided at every stop.

Most larger rides should have a cleanup committee. Riders with saddlebags are designated to collect trash to be sure nothing is left on the trail. They also assume responsibility for cleaning the camp site before trail riders leave.

Campgrounds should have a large parking area and water for people and animals. If the weather is hot, shade and water are necessities. The trail boss and his assistants select the site.

Sleeping accommodations on rides range from pup tents to elaborate travel trailers. If the ride is close to home, riders may wish to leave their horses and sleep at home.

Beginning the ride

Courtesy in trail riding is important. Arrive at the location in time to prepare the horses and leave on schedule. Don't delay the ride.

Young riders who can handle their horses should be encouraged to participate. Some 4-year-olds, when well-fitted to the size of their ponies, are quite capable of riding alone.

After orienting the group, the trail bosses lead out. Riders should not pass them and should remember they are guests of landowners. Trail safety and courtesy should be practiced. Drag riders bring up the rear.

It is a good idea to start a trail ride away from public roads or other distractions to young, anxious horses. After an hour on the trail, these horses tend to settle down and will tolerate strange objects.

One horse length should be kept between riders. Raincoats should always be carried unless the climate is extremely dry.

Riders should not fall too far behind the rest of the group. Small rides do not always have drag riders, and it is possible to get lost.

The trail boss will periodically stop the ride to check for overheated horses. The trail boss rides back from the front of the trail while drag riders from the back come forward. This gives the horses time to rest and allows riders to check their saddle cinches.

Rides should not cover too much distance or be taken at excessive speed. Riders and horses usually enjoy about a three-hour ride in the morning

and a two- to three-hour ride in the afternoon. The ride should be kept at a reasonable pace, with a refreshment stop in the morning and the afternoon. Riders may wish to carry water and a snack with them.

An hour usually is taken for lunch. Most riders loosen the cinch on their saddles while the horse rests during lunch hour. Be sure a tie rope or halter is available for the horse. Horses are not fed at the lunch hour, but they should be watered. Hot horses, however, should not be allowed to drink large amounts of cold water until they cool out.

As the heat of the day increases, the trail should lead to shaded areas. When riding through timber, long sleeves may be needed. Branches are also a "headache" for riders wearing wide-brimmed hats. If the ride is in brushy country, wear a narrow-brimmed hat, a cap, or go without a hat. In hot weather or in areas of intense sunshine, hats usually are desirable.

Some people ride bareback on trail rides. However, this is hard on both horse and rider. Trail riding probably can be best enjoyed with the comfort of a good-fitting saddle.

Most rides involve some road riding. For this reason, horses should be shod. Most horses cannot travel barefoot two or three miles on a gravel road without developing sore feet. Horses that have been foundered or have signs of laminitis may need pads if they are to travel over rocks.

Rest stops on the trail

A common mistake for many new trail riding groups is to ride too far, too fast, without adequate rest stops or time for relaxation. Scenic views are always appreciated on trails. Trail bosses should plan to stop, take a few minutes to dismount, and enjoy them. It is disappointing to be on a ride, hurrying to cover more miles, and to miss a beautiful spot.

The trip back to camp at the end of the day should be shorter than the ride in the morning. Also, the steepest obstacles should be on the morning ride. Most horses and riders will be more tired in the afternoon, and some horses may lose shoes or develop lameness as the day progresses.

Evening camp

Many trail riding groups try to have the evening camp in an area that has swimming facilities, usually a natural stream or a lake.

Secure horses safely at the end of the day. A good method is to run a neck rope through the ring in the halter before it is tied to the picket line. Be sure the halter is heavy enough to hold the horse. Use a rope with a 10,000-pound breaking strength so the horse will not get loose. The halter shank should be tied just long enough to allow the horse's head to reach the ground.

Tie the hay feeder high enough to prevent the horse from getting his feet in it. If the horse is not tied properly, it can step over the halter shank and become tangled in the meshes of the hay feeder. Horses can be permanently injured if circulation is cut off while entangled in hay feeders.

Preparing for the second day

On the second day of the ride, feed and water your horse two hours ahead of the time when you will be riding. Clean and saddle the horse and be at the starting point early enough to choose a place to ride in the line. Some people prefer to ride near the front. If there are many riders, the riders at the back of the line may have to wait. This may not be a problem for fast-walking horses that do not have to jog or trot to catch up.

Trail riding safety

Accidents prevent enjoyable trail riding. Be sure the trailer is secured to the hitch before you haul your horse. According to the National Safety Council, three-fourths of accidents with trailers are caused when they come loose from the towing vehicle.

A horse that kicks other horses or people should have a red ribbon tied to its tail to alert other riders. The horse should be disciplined until the habit is corrected. If it can't be corrected, stop riding the horse on trails or ride at the back of the line.

When riding behind a horse with a red ribbon on its tail, be sure your horse doesn't "tailgate." It is a good safety practice to keep one horse length between horses on the trail. Almost any horse will kick when approached too closely from behind.

Youngsters riding ponies should be especially careful, since their legs and body are in easy kicking range of other horses.

Be cautious when crossing a stream on horseback. In a swift stream, when water reaches half way up a horse's side, the its feet may be swept from under it. Children should cross streams only with supervision, particularly if they are on small ponies.

Don't play around on horseback when riding with a group. It might disturb or frighten other horses.

Large spurs should not be used when riding in timber. It is easy for a branch to catch your foot and press the spur into the horse.

When descending steep hills, space your horse about three lengths behind the rider ahead. If the horse in front falls, the horse behind it needs ample room to stop. Ride with loose reins, so the horse can maintain better balance. Be sure the saddle cinch is tight.

When riding along railroad tracks, know the schedule of the trains and always be sure there is an exit.

Happy trail riding results from being well mounted, rider and horse being in good condition. and avoiding accidents. Trail riding is fun. It is reasonably inexpensive, easy and relaxing.

G2884, reviewed October 1993

Related MU Extension publications

- G2870, Tips for Pony Pleasure Drivers
<http://extension.missouri.edu/publications/DisplayPub.aspx?P=G2870>
- G2878, Safe Ground Handling of Horses
<http://extension.missouri.edu/publications/DisplayPub.aspx?P=G2878>
- G2883, Intermediate Trail Riding
<http://extension.missouri.edu/publications/DisplayPub.aspx?P=G2883>

Order publications online at <http://extension.missouri.edu/explore/shop/> or call toll-free 800-292-0969.



■ Issued in furtherance of the Cooperative Extension Work Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture. Director, Cooperative Extension, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO 65211
■ an equal opportunity/ADA institution ■ 573-882-7216 ■ extension.missouri.edu