



Lead-Horse Trail Etiquette

If you're the leader on the trail, here are a few do's and don'ts to help make your ride safe and pleasant.

By Jennifer Corkery

A trail ride with a few barn buddies should be enjoyable. And even a small group on a casual outing will benefit from established guidelines and a sensible trail leader. If you're that leader, here are a few do's and don'ts to help make your ride safe and pleasant, from North American Trail Ride Conference (NATRC) judge Jim Ferris.

- ***Don't*** assume every rider—or horse—in the group is comfortable with changes of gait. Before you head out, determine which gait is acceptable to everyone on the ride. And once you initiate a gait change, continuously check (by sight and voice) that everyone is doing okay. If the pace is too fast for anyone, slow down.
- ***Do*** establish a method for downward transitions. Horses can pile into each other during unannounced slowing or stops—just like a cartoon, but not so funny when it happens in real life. Use a hand signal or your voice to convey your intentions to the rider behind you. That rider should, in turn, relay the message to the rider behind him or her, and so forth. When the last rider gets the signal, she slows first, then the second-to-last rider, and on through the group. As leader, you'll slow last.
- ***Don't*** lope or gallop in a group on the trail. Fast gaits tend to "hype up" horses, which, in turn, can cause serious problems that even an experienced rider may find difficult or dangerous. All it takes is for one horse to act up at a fast pace, and the whole group can get out of hand.
- ***Do*** look for changes in the trail and terrain. Increase following distances when traveling down a heavily wooded trail, so branches swept aside by one rider don't hit the next horse and rider. Keep to a safe pace over tricky footing and on difficult trails.
- ***Do*** keep a sharp eye for upcoming obstacles, and warn others. If you must duck to avoid low branches, warn the other riders to be ready to duck, too. If you spot a hoof-sized hole in the trail, make sure the other riders see it, too. Just as your horse will be more vigilant in the lead, it's your job to scan for any hazards and warn the group.
- ***Do*** trade positions within the group. Each member of the group will benefit from taking the positions of lead horse, middle horse and last horse in turn. (For tips on getting a reluctant horse to lead a group, see "Horseman's Handbook," *Horse & Rider*, October 2001.)
- ***Don't*** allow slow-moving horses to fall too far behind the group. If they do, they may become anxious, and even resort to rearing or bucking. Moreover, it's not wise for riders of slow movers to make a practice of trotting up behind the group to catch up. This can startle or stir up the other horses in the group. Best to keep the group at a pace that's comfortable for everyone.