Common Horse Sense

Horses and mules don’t think like you do—something you should remember on the trail.

By Sunni Stolpa-Bradshaw

Imagine the following scenario: You are riding down a wooded path on your mountain bike, blikely unaware of a horse and rider just around the bend. As you round the corner you spot what appears to be Roy Rogers on Trigger, heading down the trail away from you. You call out, "Hey!" and the horse suddenly stops, and the rider has been flushed from the brush by your passing. Although you have followed typical bicycling etiquette as you speed by, "Trigger" has probably broken and caused "Roy" to consternate.

leaving the horseless riders with alot of work—not to mention a lasting prejudice against all horses, no less. As horse/mountain bike encounters become more frequent, there is a greater need for wilderness etiquette on both the rider's and horse's part to avoid such encounters. Unfortunately many folks today have anthropomorphized the behavior of horses, left over from the days of "My Friend Flicka" and other such television stories. Horses and mules simply don't think like humans do, Mr. Ed notwithstanding. They aren't motivated out of affection for you and I know the term, but rather a result of being trained, or lack thereof. They are unpredictable in their behavior and can be unexplainably aggressive and avoidant of pain. Horses and mules do have individual temperaments and moods, and they can be unpredictable in their behavior. Understanding some basics of how these four-footers process information and respond to these influences can keep you, the handler, and the mountain biker on your trail. You'll be better equipped to handle these situations and avoid conflicts of interest.

C. Respond as requested. The rider is in a better position to judge which of these will be safest and how to handle the situation. As a cyclist you are the single most threatening object a trail animal will probably encounter in the woods or on the road. Often, when cyclists move at 10 to 15 miles per hour, the trail animal, usually the downhill side, as the animal would be easier to control if they were to speak up (away from you).

D. Watch for signs that the animals are nervous and be prepared to move if necessary. You can usually tell where a horse's attention is by looking in the direction of the ears and back at the head (or at you in this case). Warning signs that a horse or mule exhibits when another animal is present can be any of the following: ears laid back, tail swishing hard or held tightly to buttocks, body tense, dancing around or rearing, feet rapidly piling the ground, teeth clenching the bit, head thrown around, eyes rolling or looing to a distance. Cues given by the rider, too. Hands pulling strongly back on the reins or stepping on the stirrups and kickers are being picked up or kicked out of the stirrup and under the leg of the horse, slanting them into the stirrup. All indicate the rider feels the mount is aroused to some degree. Respect the need for maneuvering space as agitated trail animals.

E. More slowly back on the trail only after the string has completely passed you and is down the trail or has completely stopped. To avoid disturbing the animals, at least 25 feet of distance between you and the horse is recommended, depending upon terrain and location when a rider is in the midst of mounting or dismounting—the horse could take off with the person dangling from its stirrup.

These guidelines are "horse sense"—as common sense would have it. If you know horses and mules, you may not care for the creatures, especially if they are left behind of their protection by you. On the other hand, the avid horse rider doesn't look for trouble with cyclists on the trail either. Being a cyclist and a mule rider I can tell you there is a valid appeal and challenge to both sports. The riders of both bicycle and beast are outdoors for many of the same reasons: exercise, fresh air, enjoyment of nature, personal fulfillment and so on. It is my belief that the use of the simple courteous and understanding of both the man on the bike and the man on the saddle will minimize any friction that exists here and make use of the mountain trail a benefit to all who use it.

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Beyond Horse Sense

There are other considerations in deciding where and how to ride. Here are a few of them.

By Michael McCoy

Now that you know how to act in the presence of your equine friends, can you head out on any trail that you please? I'm afraid it's not that simple.

The United States is blessed with vast tracts of publicly owned land—lands owned by you and me. These mountain bicycling areas in our country are within these lands, which are administered by various federal and state governments. These are the same lands on which most of our biking, horseback riding, trail running, hiking, camping, and all the other vehicle activities take place.

Some public lands are suitable for the pursuit of mountain biking and others are not. Because mountain bikers are the "new kids on the block", we're obliged to prove that we are responsible, that we'll do our share in maintaining and using trails, and that we'll respect the land. We must demonstrate why we deserve a place or already heavily used public lands.

Mountain biking is an illegal activity in the federal wilderness areas and in the backcountry of our national parks, and this is a situation which will not change. Mountain bikers
who complain about not being allowed to ride
in wilderness areas are accomplishing nothing
positive. Their energies should be directed
elsewhere.

If wild places could feel emotions, then our
wilderness areas and national parks—because
of the degree of protection they receive from
the Wilderness Act of 1964—would be the
envy of natural areas the world over. These
backcountry getaways provide respite from
the gadgetry of 20th century existence. Here a
person can travel on foot, horseback, canoe or
raft, or ski, the means by which men made
their way in the mountains a hundred years
ago.

Bob Marshall, one of the great early Ameri-
can conservationists, defined wilderness as
"regions which contain no permanent inhabi-
tants, possess no means of mechanical con-
voyagey, and are sufficiently spacious for a
person to spend at least a week of active travel
in them without crossing his own tracks." The
mountain bicycle, in addition to representing a
mechanical intrusion, moves too quickly to be
at home in wilderness.

When it comes to the designation of new
wilderness areas, mountain bikers should join
forces with environmental organizations to
show support, thereby demonstrating their con-
viction to protect the land. In turn, enviromen-
talists may come to the aid of mountain
bikes interests "down the road."

Most non-wilderness trails on USFS and
BLM lands are open to mountain bicycles, but
this may change as mountain biking participa-
tion continues to grow. The degree of access
available to mountain bikers varies from place
to place on state and local lands, and ordinar-
ly relates to how much or how little use trails
have seen by them. One or two cyclists on a
ten-mile stretch of trail containing a couple
dozen bikers may not be perceived as a con-
lict. But add one or two dozen mountain bik-
ers to the scene and it's a different story.

Mountain bikers shouldn't ride anywhere
when the trail or road surface is wet and in
danger of being rutted. I'm convinced that fat
tires are less destructive to ground surfaces
than are, for example, horses' hooves, but we
must police ourselves, all the same. Nothing
will expedite the banning of mountain bikes
from a trail quicker than a bunch of ruts that
exhibit tell-tale knobby tire tracks.

There are thousands of miles of fireroads,
logging paths, and jeep and motorcycle trails
that cross cross public lands. These pathways
provide superior mountain biking conditions.
Not only do they tend to be deserted, but their
grades are ordinarily more manageable and
their surfaces smoother than those of most
trails.

Many cross-country and downhill ski
resorts now promote mountain biking as a
summer activity. Their systems provide some
of the most enjoyable mountain biking avail-
able. A trail designed for cross-country skiing
might just as well have been designed for
mountain biking.

Some trails on public lands are appropriate
for mountain bikes, because they traverse rela-
tively subdued terrain and they see little use for
other recreational activities. Mountain bikers
should work with land administrators to iden-ty these as mountain biking trails. Some will
be low-use (or no-use) motorcycle trails, while
others will be seldom-trod hiking and horse
trails. Most people head for the well-known
spots, because they are the ones they've heard
of from friends or have read of in the outdoor
press. Cyclists should search out the miles of
trails that go virtually untouched by Vibram
soles, horseshoes and fat tires.

On urban area trail systems, mountain bik-
ers should work to have certain trails set aside
for their activity, especially when new systems
are being planned. Ideally, some trails should
be for bikers only, some for equestrians only,
and some solely for mountain bikers.

However, in most urban settings trail
mileages are limited, and they must be shared
by various users. Here, cyclists should suggest
that speed limits be set for mountain bikes. The
rider should call out or ring a bike bell before
heading around a blind corner and when over-
taking others from behind. He must always
ride in control. Thirty m.p.h. kamikaze down-
hills have no place on co-use trails.

In the end, it will prove to be mountain bik-
ers' behavior and the degree to which they par-
ticipate in "the system" that will determine
where they can ride. The mountain biker can
share the trial with bikers and equestrians, with
all users being safe, and happy.

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Michael McCoy oversees the Trips and Trails
departments. His "Mountain Bike Guide to
the Northern Rockies" will be released by
Mountaineers Books of Seattle in spring of
1989. In 1975, Michael helped lay the ground-
work for the inaugural ride across the
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