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## [Don't Drown Your Horse, Part 1](#) ★★★★★



Most horses are naturally curious about water and enjoy playing and splashing, especially on hot summer days.

Going swimming with horses is nothing new, although the idea of doing it purely for fun and enjoyment is usually left to unsupervised children with their ponies. Come on, raise your hand if you've ever gone swimming with your horse--it's fun! There are numerous professional horse training facilities that swim horses for fitness and rehabilitation from injuries. And if you are like most people, you just enjoy taking your horse for a dip after working or during a trail ride or campout.

However, a sad subject seems to come up every year in the really hot dog days of summer, and the stories are always tragic. Drowning is not something that can easily be solved by calling 911, either for people or horses. You have to think ahead and prevent these tragedies:

- Children or adults that get knocked off their horses in the current and found downriver.
- [Moncks Corner Man Drowns After Falling Off Horse Into Lake](#), June 10, 2012
- [Man Drowns But Manages To Save His 5-Year-Old Daughter](#), May 07, 2012
- [Body Of A 9-Year-Old Utah Boy Found](#), August 07, 2012
- [Maskell Man Drowns In River Near Vermillion](#), August 7, 2012
- Horse panics in the mud, sometimes falling onto their riders to drown them or drowning themselves.
- [The Gujarat Police has a horse drown during a drill](#), May 06 2012
- Driving horses accidentally steered into the water and pulled down by the weight of the carriage or wagon.
- [Man Kicked Helping Drowning Pony In Hampshire](#), July 11, 2011

Too many incidents occur when involving humans, horses and water. Most of these incidents do not make it into the media--I am aware of at least 20 incidents over the last 25 years where a horse drowned and did not make the newspaper.

What you see in the movies (cowboys running their horses into swollen rivers) is not always what you think it is - those horses are being swum in an area that was pre-determined for safety, cleared of obstacles that might impede the animals, and movie horses are familiar with swimming.

A recent drowning this summer of a horse in Lake Hartwell in South Carolina illustrates several features that contribute to these tragedies: horse was tired or overheated, horse had on a tie down or gets caught in rigging or reins, horse was ridden into an area where there was thick mud hiding under the surface of the water, and a sudden drop off into deeper water. Based on numerous eyewitness and Facebook posted accounts of what happened: The young horse was ridden into about a foot of water, panicked when it got stuck in thick mud, unfortunately turned away from the shallow water and threw its rider. The horse, wearing a tie-down, was prevented from raising its head into a natural position to swim. According to witnesses, the horse's head went under water several times--it tried to come up for air, but the tie-down quickly ensured drowning of the animal. In this case the horse's body sank out of sight, later it floated to the surface and was pulled by boat to a nearby boat ramp for loading and burial on the owner's property.

All horses can learn to enjoy the water, but they have to be introduced slowly and carefully so that they get over their fear and become curious about it. Just like us, they have to learn to swim, too.

- [Horse drowns while owner was teaching it to swim](#), July 7, 2010

Swimming horses use a trotting or pacing gait under water and are extremely powerful swimmers once they get the idea. Normally, horses breathe very loudly when swimming, probably due to the amount of pressure of the water on their lungs, and they should swim with their ears, eyes and nose above the water's surface. Some horses will act as though they cannot swim. They may drop their bodies to the floor of the lake and then push off with their hind legs, surging up like a submarine coming out of the water. Others get a little water in their ears and start shaking their heads while swimming - making them uncoordinated in their movements. Occasionally a horse will really panic and start frantically paddling, sometimes with the head under water.

Once they get the hang of it, most horses will go in by themselves, even at liberty. It is a stressful and aerobic event for a horse to swim and it cannot be recommended without preparation and attention to dangerous conditions. Bear in mind that swimming is one of the most aerobic activities that animals can do; a 10-minute swim is equivalent to a several mile canter. There is no such thing as CPR for an adult horse--their lungs are too large and their bones too rigid to be able to compress their heart.

Things to watch out for:

- Alcohol continues to be a tragic factor involved in drowning of both horses and humans. Poor decisions are often made when alcohol clouds your judgment, so be very careful when riding with others that are drinking.
- Water that appears shallow and slow can be insidiously fast and deep, particularly if it is moving. If you are riding your horse into the water, you *must* be able to swim yourself. Too many people have been knocked off their horses into even shallow water and drowned because they didn't know how to swim. And don't be tempted to take your small children into the water on the horse with you.
- Tacked horses can easily get in trouble in the water. Reins or martingales and tie-downs can get caught by the legs or pull the head down into the water as the horse fights to swim. Even professional riggers and outfitters still occasionally lose an animal or client to drowning.