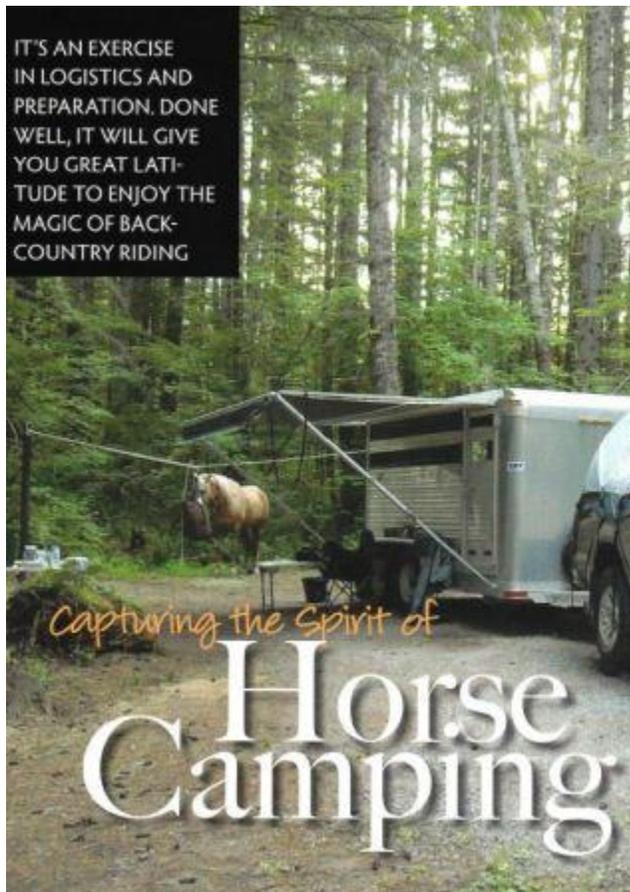


# Capturing the Spirit of Horse Camping

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## Who has smelled camp smoke at twilight?



The vast majority of horse riders have considered camping with their mounts and the mental pictures that we paint range from a snug tent tucked beside an alpine lake deep in the backcountry to all the luxurious comforts of home afforded by a living-quarters trailer parked in a formal camp ground; complete with hot showers and delivery pizza; and everything in between. Regardless of what our various versions of the perfect camp look like, perhaps the bigger question is why do we ride the trails? Whether to experience the primal joy of the back country or to spend a relaxing weekend with friends riding out from a local trailhead, riding is the

reason why we'll venture abroad. The act of camping is merely the culmination of a logistics exercise that will decide how well, or miserably, we and our horses and mules will live between bouts of riding. And our choices are as vast as the areas where we'll ride.

Rather than dive too deeply into the noun version of "camp" which is simply the location where the tent or trailer will be parked, let's explore the much more exciting verb and look at the whys and hows of the act of camping. Merriam-Webster defines the verb "camp" as "to live temporarily in a camp or outdoors". I think Stewart Edward White defined the spirit of camping much better with this quote from his 1903 treatise *The Forest* "The end in view is a hot meal and a comfortable dry place to sleep." How we get to that hot meal and comfy slumber is the essence of camping. So the act of camping is simply how to arrange for ourselves and our animals during the times when we're not actively riding. At the risk of being trite, we simply have to think about the basic needs of both ourselves and our mounts and how to accommodate those requirements.

## You knew This Was Coming: Preparation is Number One



Abby is enjoying her Alpine Wilderness area campsite. In the backcountry, hammocks are a wonderful low weight and volume alternative to traditional tents.

Preparation is unfortunately the first thing that any aspiring horse camper needs to do. Sigh and roll your eyes if you must but the relative safety and comfort of familiar surroundings is where you really want to make sure that your horse understands what hobbles are and that a highline means rest and relaxation. Likewise 15 miles into the wilderness is not the best place to set up your new tent for the first time. ***Learn from my errors: The first time I took our Icelandic mare camping was also the first time I put her on the highline I normally use. The highline was white rope; similar in shape and color to our farm's electric fencing material. It was a very long night for both of us.***

Preparation also includes gaining knowledge on your destination. What is the campground like? What are the trails like and very importantly what are the rules and regulations for the area? If weed free feed is required at your destination, as it is in many National Forests, you'll quickly regret your lack of awareness if you get caught with a bale of uncertified hay from home. Fortunately there are numerous sources of this type of information. The web is an excellent information resource (Try

www.TrailMeister.com first) as well as local riding groups, especially the Back Country Horsemen organizations. Take advantage of the many tools that are freely available; you'll be glad you did when you have accurate directions to the trailhead, and a good idea of what to expect. Surprises are wonderful at Christmas, not when camping.

## **Are You and Your Mount In Shape?**

Another key bit of preparation is getting both you and your mount in shape for camping and the increased amount of riding you'll probably be doing. Start a conditioning program well before you leave home lest you both suffer from exhaustion on the trail.

Don't make the mistake of thinking that you're "just" going trail riding, or "just" going on a trail ride camp trip. Indeed, the "just a trail rider" utilizes aspects of every competitive equestrian sport that has been devised; from dressage to western pleasure, endurance and many other sports, the trail rider is competing in it and in an "arena" with constantly changing footing, weather and seasons. Our trophies for competing in this sport are far more than a mere ribbon or tchotchke to hang on a stable wall; they are transcendent for those intrepid enough to brave the trails and camps less visited.

Just as there is no "only" a trail ride, camping with your horse can easily be thought of as college for riders and their mounts. Prior to making the leap into camping with your horse or mule first ask yourself if both you and your mount have completed the prerequisite courses for this advanced endeavor. Is your mount emotionally stable and ready to handle the company of strange horses and unfamiliar terrain? Are you confident in your ability to tend to matters away from home? If the answer is not yet, don't despair, you have plenty of time between now and summer. Late at night in a strange place is a poor time to discover that you forget both the flashlight and how to tie a bowline knot for that highline setup that looked so easy on the web.

## **Know Your Knots**



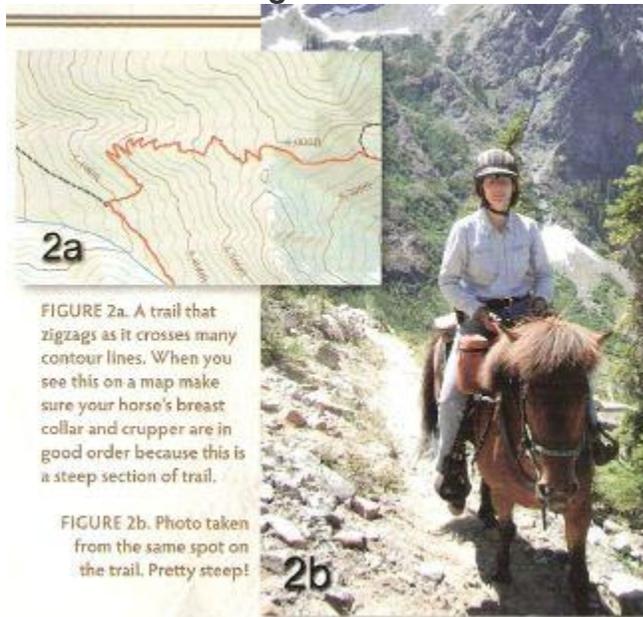
Learning to tie a handful of knots will make your camping trips more enjoyable and much safer. The bowline is an easy and versatile knot to start with.

A few bits of knowledge that I consider indispensable to horse camping are the ability to tie a few basic knots, a good working

knowledge of first aid procedures, the skill to find my way back to camp wherever that may be, and the ability to improvise.

We're horsemen not sailors and in most instances the same few knots can be pressed into service in many different ways when camping, from setting up a highline to stabilizing your tent. The king of knots is the bowline as it won't slip, is easy to tie, and if done properly can be set with a quick release for dealing with emergencies. The halfhitch is another excellent knot as well as a component of many other hitches and knots. It is my personal preference but I have much more faith in a simple knot and a hank of rope than any uni-tasking wonder gadget that weighs much and does only one thing.

I value my life and the ability to perform basic first aid is a prerequisite that I ask of anyone that I ride with. If I get hurt I want to know that someone can take care of me in an emergency. I hope you feel the same about your safety. If you're the only one in your group who knows CPR, what's going to happen should you be the one who gets into trouble? **Case in point: A friend who is a veterinarian stopped camping with a group because they solely relied on him to take care of first aid for human and horse – he never got to relax since he was always on call!**



[There was an excellent Trail Blazer article in June of 2011 that discussed how not to get lost in the first place by Staying Found and how to employ that compass and map we all have stuffed in the bottom of our saddle bags but woefully too few people know how to use.](#) The ability to read a map and orient yourself is a necessity on all but the most urban of trails. Besides, despite their assertions to the contrary, your friends will not save dinner for you if you return late from a ride; know how to navigate and be sure of returning to camp in time for the dinner bell.

Once the prerequisites have been attended to and you're feeling confident in your and your mount's ability to prosper in a strange environment it's time to load the truck and

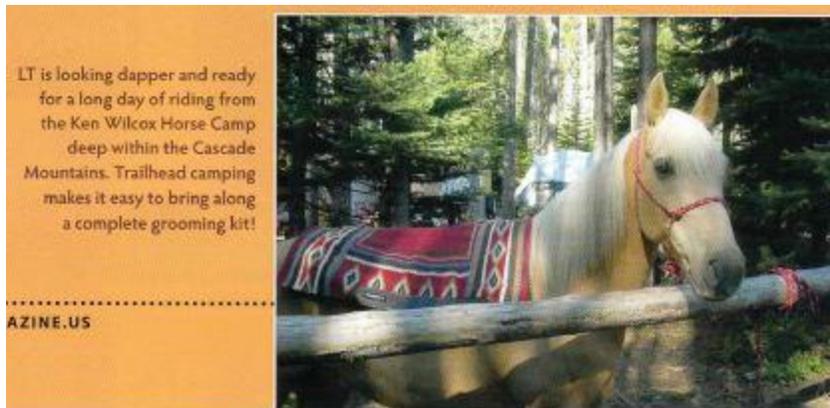
trailer with whatever you'll need for your adventure. The specific makeup of what you take will be dependent upon the pre trip planning and preparation that you've done as well as the type of camping trip you're embarking on. My load list for a back country pack trip is vastly different from what I would take when heading to a local campground for a weekend's group campout.

You can find lists of "essential" camping items in a thousand different places. The vastly more important item that you rarely see in these lists is the knowledge to use what you bring and the ability to improvise what you've forgotten. Your actively engaged brain is the real essential when camping. As any good horseman or horsewoman will attest, there is always an element of learning when you're around horses and that goes for camping with horses too. ***Learn from my errors: Don't trust yourself to remember what items to take with you, make a packing list. I used to be confident that I could remember everything that I needed until one trip when I forgot my sleeping pad. It made for several very long and very cold nights.***

## **A sample list of camping items for any trip:**

- First aid kit for humans and equines
- Fly and insect repellent for humans and equines
- Duct tape • Flashlight
- Feed bags and water buckets
- Grooming supplies
- Horse containment system (highline, portable corral, etc. )
- Repair tools
- Equine feed (check to see if it must be certified weed free)
- Human food
- Means to make fire (A cold marshmallow, graham crackers, and a hunk of hard chocolate is not a Smore!)
- Tack you'll need
- Hygiene kit
- Water (check for availability)
- The knowledge to effectively use all of the above

## **Setting Up Camp**



LT is looking dapper and ready for a long day of riding from the Ken Wilcox Horse Camp deep within the Cascade Mountains. Trailhead camping makes it easy to bring along a complete grooming kit!

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Once you've arrived at your destination, either at the trailhead or 20 miles and 8 hours beyond it, you'll want to attend to establishing camp and that means tending to your stock's needs before your own. They've either worked hard getting into camp or will be working hard once you start riding, now is the time to care for them with a safe and comfortable temporary home complete with good eats and water.

At the campsite find a place to contain your mounts. Maybe there will be permanent corrals for you, if not take a few minutes to look around to find a suitable area with decent footing and no nearby hazards (look up and down in addition to all around you – you don't want to highline to a dead tree). Once you've found a good spot set up your highline, picket line, or portable corral then make sure that your beasts have plenty of food and water to keep them occupied and content while you attend to setting up making your accommodations. In back country situations I like to first provide water, then hobble my stock so they can graze while I set up a highline and then my shelter for the night. Only later does my dinner come into the picture.

Regardless of where or how you're camping make sure to follow Leave No Trace guidelines and keep a clean camp. You've done it right if the next campers arrive and feel that they are the first souls to ever pick that spot.

Once your stock has been tended to, you can then make your camp. For trailhead camping this may be as simple as rolling a welcome mat out under your camper's doors and turning the AC on high. If you're not in the same tax bracket as the LQ set don't despair there are plenty of ways to be comfortable. One person's version of comfort is another person's version of unnecessary extravagance and baggage.

Here in the Pacific Northwest I rarely bring a camper or LQ with me to the trailhead, I'm just not indoors enough to make it worthwhile for me. Those living in the far south where extremes of heat and humidity make air conditioning a necessity will certainly disagree. Instead, I have a simple truck bed canopy that provides plenty of shelter and warmth for

the few hours that I'll need to sleep over a weekend. The rest of the time I'll either be on the trail with my horse or under an awning that keeps the worst of the heat and sun at bay, relaxing in my folding rocking chair, telling tall tales, and occasionally checking on the progress of dinner in the Dutch oven. I've also seen absolutely delightful camps set up in the back of horse trailers that have been swept clean. It all boils down to what works best for you. ***Food For Thought: Camping with your horse doesn't require the expenditure of large amounts of money on equipment and gadgets. Start with the very basics and add on as time and cash allow. I have little use for expensive single purpose widgets when I can do the same with a bit of strong cord and a little ingenuity. The riding will be just as memorable whether you spend the night in a hammock or a queen size bed.***



Back country camping requires a lot more planning and preparation; if only because your horse or mule doesn't have the payload capacity of a good pick-up truck. Weight and volume are your concerns even if you have the luxury of a full pack string behind you. [Rather than go into too many details here, you can find an excellent article written on the subject of camping off your horse without pack stock support in the April 2012 issue of Trail Blazer.](#)

So after two thousand plus words, a few pages, and a couple minutes of reading time I'd have to say that horse camping is neither something to fear nor believe is too difficult a challenge. Some basic planning for the few bare essentials will have you ready to camp with your horse by the first of summer. It may take one or two camping trips before you establish your own setup and routines and that's great because everyone makes mistakes. The important thing is to not make the same mistake twice.

Once you've smelled camp smoke at twilight, you'll be hooked for life.