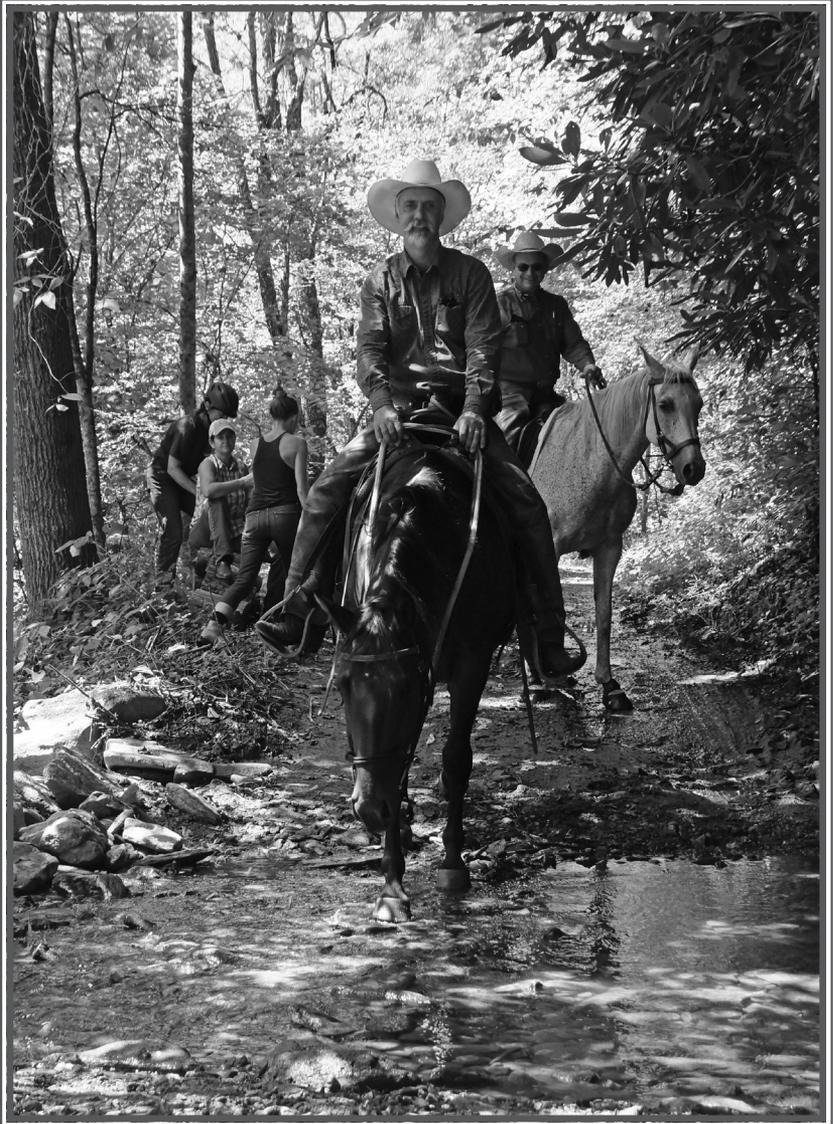


Handling Spooks on the Trail



(Photo: Danielle Gruber)

The thing about handling spooks on the trail is that the best way to deal with them is to do so before you ever leave home.

To put this in terms I have learned from many years of studying with horsemanship clinician Harry Whitney—if your horse is not in the habit of letting go of his thoughts to willingly go along with what you present at home, and you get into adverse conditions where your horse has a pretty strong thought, then you are going to be in trouble.

In other words, the best way to avoid having a wreck when something spooks your horse on the trail is to spend plenty of time in ideal conditions working on this with your horse. Experiment at home with some things to see how tenaciously your horse stays with a sidetracked thought when you ask for his attention.

As a simple example, imagine your horse is in a round pen. If another horse comes into sight, will your horse leave you mentally and focus on the other horse in such a strong way that you have difficulty getting his attention back? Set up a friend over in the bushes with a plastic bag to crinkle—can you become more important to your horse than that? You get the idea. If you can not get through to your horse in these kinds of scenarios at home where your horse ought to naturally feel the most confident then it is very unlikely your horse will be available to hear you when out in the wild country and something frightens him.

This situation is a bit like a parent trying to talk to a child who is engrossed in a favorite TV show. Sometimes the parent has to get pretty big to break the spell of a show so the child can hear what is being said. Get into the habit of looking for similar instances where your horse is not with you mentally. Learn to check in with your horse by asking in various way—like presenting a little feel on a lead rope or rein to see if the horse can soften and acknowledge you—to know if he is available for you to ask him to do a task.

If not, then do something just big enough to get the

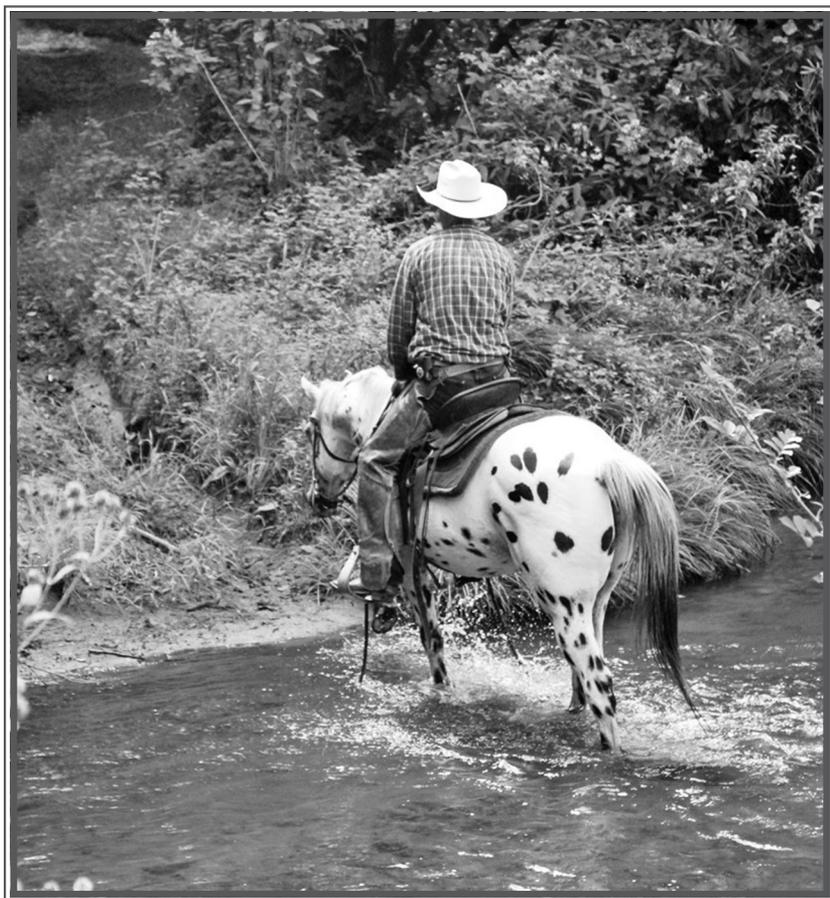
horse's attention. You might slap your chap, kick the ground, scratch your jacket—whatever works to dislodge the horse's diverted thought is fine. But, do not do anything to the horse or direct anything at him to intentionally drive him. Instead, try to draw the horse's attention towards you. You need to be a bigger bugger than the one in the bushes. But when the horse checks you out, stop what you were doing and present a sweet spot to him so that coming to you mentally becomes very rewarding and comforting to the horse.

Getting into a routine of checking to see where your horse's mind is, and establishing the ability with your horse to let go of other thoughts when it is time to pay attention to you, will be cash money in large bills (metaphorically speaking, of course) if you find yourself on a trail and something spooky happens. Conversely, if you can not get your horse with you at home, then it is very unlikely you will succeed in doing so out there.

Regardless of all the best laid plans to prevent trail troubles by training ahead of riding out in the big wide world, we all realize that with horses spooks still can happen. When they do, if you've done your homework, hopefully your horse will be able to hear your input as a rider rather than just bolt in sheer panic blocking you out completely. One of the most important and helpful bits of advice to follow when a spook happens is to keep your horse pointed towards whatever it is that is spooking him.

“Depending on the level of worry,” Harry says, “you might need to let them stand there and look once you bend them back so that they can realize that it's not going to kill them. But if they're too worried, then you better let them move a little, but don't let them get their tail to it. Angle over here and over there, and get a little distance away from it.”

This scenario is critical because a horse is hardwired to flee from fear, and they are supremely good at it. If a horse is spooked by something and turns so that it is behind him, his concern typically escalates to a panic and your horse may show you just how these critters stay alive in a pinch (by clearing a



My wife Carol's gelding Stoney and I cross a creek. It is easy to see Stoney's apprehension as we step out of the creek and pick up a road on the other side. (Photo: Danielle Gruber)

quarter mile faster than many other animals on the planet!). But, keep the horse facing the spooky thing the best you can and two helpful things happen.

First, it keeps the horse from fleeing forward, and if he tries fleeing backwards away from the booger it will be a whole lot slower and more manageable for the rider. The other thing is that the horse's mind will be more engaged to think about what

is happening. He may be frightened by the spooky thing, but he will be forced to face it and see what it is and if it really is a horse eating monster or not. This is a much more preferable set up to a horse just bolting in a panic: scooting first and asking questions later.

This bit of advice also can be worked on at home.

“Program your mind to bend your horse back around towards the spook and try to keep his nose to it,” Harry says. “So many times people go fetal and the horse takes off with them. If they had their minds programmed ahead of time, they maybe could have reacted in a way that got the horse bent around to start over, sorting things out, instead of hauling on both reins more like a race horse heading away from it.”

Harry teaches that in a situation where a horse spooks, using one rein is far better than engaging both.

“If you panic and grab both reins,” Harry says, “the horse can get straight as a board and have tremendous power. If they’re resistant to one rein, then they are exponentially resistant to two reins. Not only does he have tremendous power then, but like I said, he’ll lean into the bit just like a race horse on the track and away he goes. If they’re that panicked and going that hard, you’d pick up one rein and try to get them bent by thinking to that one rein and start to come around to that side.”

Harry warns not to haul the horse’s head around because that can throw the horse off balance and tip him over—a move that is easy to see stunt riders do in many old western movies, but not a stunt you would like to see on a trail ride. You also must be mindful that if your horse is truly in a panic and bolting, if you pull his head around but he remains fleeing forward, he may not be able to see where he is going. That is when a horse runs into a tree or through a fence. Once a horse bolts, use one rein to try to get him to think about bending around to one side and then spiral him down slower and slower until he stops, if you can.

“I knew a woman,” Harry says, “and she’d have four or

five children riding with her, and at any random moment she'd holler, 'Oh no!' Then they all bent their horses around to a stop. The point is that they were programming their minds to bend a horse if something suddenly happens. But the randomness of when she would do it was different than if we are doing it ourselves. You could do that with a friend, just riding along and your friend hollers 'Oh no!'"

And one more piece of advice...if you trail ride with others, your horse may not need to be the spooky one to have a spooking episode. If another horse spooks and bolts, other horses including yours may decide that leaving the area with the herd at a high rate of speed is the best plan.

"If you have the horse 'with you' instead of allowing him strictly to be going with the other horses then you can avoid this," Harry says. "A lot of horses are just going down the trail with another horse. So, if the other horse disappears, then your horse is going to disappear, too."

The "with you" that Harry refers to points back to where this discussion began. Having a horse who is capable of letting go of strong diverted thoughts and is capable of being "with" the rider in a mental sense is one who can be most effectively supported when something unexpected happens.