Backcountry Horsemen of California

LOST RIDER PLAN

"If you don't know how to get where you are going, or how to return from where you came; then admit you are lost."

"Being lost can be a state of mind; Denial and Panic are your enemies."

PLANNING

- Research the area using maps, guidebooks, and various online and computer-based resources, to become familiar with trails, streams, mountains, roads, and other features.
- Plan your route using US Geological Survey (USGS) topographical maps — especially if you are traveling long distances through wilderness - bring the map with you.
- Just prior to leaving obtain current locations for livestock water and safe/unsafe water crossings, trails to avoid, and any potential new hazards. Know the hazards in the area you are going into: animals that could be dangerous, edible and poisonous plants, etc.
- Get a current weather forecast for the area, and wear appropriate clothes and equipment. Bring additional clothing layers for unexpected weather.
- Leave your trip information, including the time you're planning to return, with a responsible person and/or with the local Ranger Station. Don't change the route without notifying your contacts.
- It's wise to travel with a friend and sign the register at trailheads.
- **BE PREPARED!**
- Communications can save a life. Carry a list of emergency and contact phone numbers for that area. Consider these options:
  - ◊ Bring a cell phone, you might be able to get a signal. Text messages and GPS phone signals can be picked up by satellite.
  - ◊ Consider a satellite phone in the backcountry, where there is often no cell service.
  - ◊ Stay in touch with others in your group using FRS or GMRS 2-way radios.
  - ◊ If venturing into a remote area, consider renting a PLB (Personal Locator Beacon), which allows you to activate a satellite-based distress signal to send help.
- Accidents, injury, and illness may need to be addressed. Consider, at minimum:
  - ◊ First Aid or Wilderness First Aid training.
  - ◊ Basic survival training, such as building a shelter.
- Are the **CHILDREN** in the group prepared?
  - ◊ Provide children with camp and trail safety instructions, including what to do if lost. (Lost is an exception where they ARE allowed to talk with a stranger.) Provide appropriate gear, with training on use.
  - ◊ Consider participating in the **Hug-A-Tree** program, providing training for children lost in the wilderness. www.hugatree.com

BASIC SURVIVAL!

Consider carrying basic survival items on you, not your horse. Lightweight essential items can fit in a small waist pack, be attached to your belt, etc. Don't leave camp without them, even for a short walk!

Child waist pack (minimum):

1. Water
2. Clean, bright color bandana (dust blocker, scarf, bandage or sling, washing, signal flag, etc.)
3. Pack of gum, hard candy, energy bar (replenish as needed)
4. 2 trash bags (use as emergency rain gear or groundsheet)
5. A plastic whistle (three regular repeated tones means help)
6. Pocket size emergency blanket (great for shelter, warmth or light-reflecting signal)
7. Small palm size flash light (with fresh batteries)
8. Chemical light stick(s)
9. 2-way radio (with fresh batteries)

Adult waist pack (add to the above):

1. Compass (and map of the area)
2. Knife
3. Condoms (un-lubricated) for water storage
4. Water proof matches, flint and steel or a metal match
5. Water purification tablets or water bottle with filtration
6. Long strip of folded aluminum foil for cooking
7. Fishing kit (hooks, sinkers, and some line)
8. Small back-packing first aid kit (with instructions)
9. Cell phone and other communications devices (turn on if lost)
10. Spare fresh batteries for GPS, flashlight, cell phone, radio, etc.

REDUCE THE POTENTIAL FOR BECOMING LOST!

- Know how to use the topographical map and compass to locate yourself, and to navigate.
- Carry a GPS and know how to use it.
- Orient yourself to landmarks when you start your trip, and continue to orient yourself throughout the trip. Turn often to look at your back trail so a return on that trail will look familiar, particularly at trail junctions.
- Learn some tracking basics so you can follow your own shoe prints or horse's hoof prints on your own back trail.
- Stay on the trail.

LOST and SEPARATED FROM YOUR HORSE?

- **STOP!** (Stop, Think, Observe, Plan.)
- If injured, apply first aid. Clean off blood as much as possible. Bury anything with blood on it, away from your location.
- Don't go looking for your horse. **STAY** where you are!
- Take inventory of what you have for food, water, etc.
- Try to get your bearings using map and compass, GPS.
- Try to backtrack yourself to a familiar location. STOP if you lose your back trail or not sure of your route.
- Your biggest threats are probably dehydration and hypothermia. Find water (be prepared to purify/filter), and stay warm and dry.
- Water is a priority— you can go a longer time without food. Do not eat anything you are unsure of. Wild berries, fruit, mushrooms, etc., may make you sick.
- Try to stay as clean as you can. (Dirty clothing loses insulating properties. Good sanitary conditions will assist your body in fighting infections from cuts.)
- **Help rescuers find you!**
  - ◊ **Stay put** after you find water and shelter. If you keep moving, you will be harder to find.
  - ◊ Gather wood and start a small fire (use extreme caution in the dry season.)
  - ◊ **Be visible**. Find an open space, make a sign of wood 'SOS' or 'HELP'. Spread out the reflective emergency blanket and secure the corners.
  - ◊ If circumstances *force* you to move, leave obvious **CLUES** such as frequent clear footprints, directional arrow made of rock or sticks, a message with name, date and time, break some branches along the trail (particularly at an intersection), etc.
  - ◊ **Stay on the trail**, since searchers will usually search trails first, or others may be traveling that trail who can provide help.
  - ◊ **Make noise**—use your whistle (3 long blows) —to help rescuers locate you. Listen for voices calling, helicopters, vehicles, etc.

LOST and YOUR HORSE IS STILL WITH YOU? (Do all of the above, plus):

- Stay calm. Your panic can panic your horse.
- Injured horse? Apply equine first aid.
- If you turn your horse and start on your back trail, the horse may instinctively return to the camp or trailer area. Mark the trail as you go. While riding, look ahead 20-40 feet to try and spot your own back trail. If the route doesn't look familiar soon, STOP.
- Secure your horse.
- Find food and water for your horse, after you have taken care of yourself.
- Pay attention to your horse. His behavior may tell you if someone is nearby before you hear or see them, or locate a water source.

A Rider is Overdue?

STOP! THINK!

Be part of the SOLUTION, not part of the Problem!

♦ **Stay calm, get organized, and HAVE A PLAN before you act!**

Someone needs to take charge. Perhaps the Trail Boss? Does anyone there have training as a Search Manager? Your objective is to help, not inadvertently cause problems. Do NOT simply dash off to start searching. Assess the situation. Plan!

- ♦ **Attempt to Communicate!** Can you reach that overdue person by cell phone, 2-way radio, etc., to determine status? If you yell, blow a whistle, and try to draw attention to your location, is there a response? If at a vehicle, try honking the horn periodically to act as an audible guide back to that location.
- ♦ **Assess the Situation!** If communications efforts fail, information must be gathered and assessed before any search is planned or performed by the riding group or by Search and Rescue (SAR) professionals.
  - ◊ **Who, What, When, Where?** When and where was the person last seen, and what was the direction of travel? What was the destination, by what route? When was this person due back? How long would it take this person to ride … or hike if dismounted … to the most likely destination if there are problems? How prepared and experienced is this person, and what survival gear is carried? Are horse and rider experienced in this terrain? What else might be pertinent?
  - ◊ Is there anything to suggest a *life threatening situation* to create a high level of urgency? Are there any known major health issues that require medicine … and where is the medicine? Are there potential problems based on the *current* weather forecast, or new hazards in the vicinity?
  - ◊ Document known information for easy reference when reporting to local authorities, including name, age, description, and any available emergency contact information. It may also be advantageous to describe the missing rider's vehicle and location, or describe the horse and other livestock.
- ♦ **Protect Clues!** Trained searchers look for **CLUES**. **Stay away** from all **areas** where experienced trackers might find that person's shoe print, the horse's hoof print, etc. If a search dog is available, is there an item (clothing, sleeping bag, etc.) that would carry that specific person's scent? DO NOT TOUCH, simply know where it is for SAR personnel to collect.
- ♦ **Report the Incident!** *This is a great time to have emergency communication capabilities, like a satellite phone*. If necessary, travel to call the county Sheriff's department and report the overdue person. (Better to alert the authorities now, and cancel response later if the person is found safe!) Provide concise information. Use USGS map location names and latitude-longitude when available. Provide your call-back number. Be prepared to meet responding agency or SAR personnel at a designated location.

To Search, or Not to Search? Every situation is different!

A critical concern is the potential destruction of CLUES. If valuable clues are destroyed by untrained searchers, this can seriously handicap the SAR professionals later. If the decision is to search anyway, understanding the problems this action is likely to create, minimize the damage by minimizing the number of untrained searchers involved.
Limit to people with some tracking experience. Do NOT allow uncontrolled or mass searching!

- ♦ **Assess available resources.** How many people are there, available to search, appropriately equipped and physically capable? Does anyone there have SAR training, or substantial tracking experience, or training in protecting CLUES? In case of injury, what medical supplies are available? What is the highest level of medical training present? Is anyone there trained to perform mounted rescue or evacuation using a saddled horse or mule? What survival supplies, food, water, etc., are available if people from the group go search? What methods of communication are available within the group, and with outside resources? What other issues should be addressed?
- ♦ **Would it make more sense to wait for trained searchers, or quickly perform your own untrained search?** Reach logical, safe, and common sense decisions regarding performing any initial search. Consider the known degree of urgency (injury not assumed), capabilities and preparedness of the overdue person, available resources, safety issues for searchers, weather, **time** estimated to follow the most likely trail to the known destination, etc. If you don't have a known destination, or if a loose horse returned, do you have at least one experienced tracker available to track or back track the horse?
- ♦ **PLAN the search** based on available resources. If circumstances appear to require an immediate preliminary search, key locations to quickly check are the known destination using the most obvious route (stay on the trail!), and to monitor the most likely destinations in case the loose horse and/or rider go there.
  - ◊ Can you **safely** send a team of people out (minimum 2), or should the search wait until daylight? Should the searchers go on foot, by vehicle, or riding? Do you have riders and livestock experienced traveling in that terrain after dark, or in inclement weather, with appropriate gear and equipment to *also* perform a search? What extra gear or supplies should you send with them? Should you send along an extra saddled mount? A pack animal? **Remember the more new hoof prints there are on that trail, the harder it will be to track the overdue rider later!**
  - ◊ **Prioritize search missions.** Everyone deployed—even to monitor elsewhere—is considered a searcher. Are all aware of the critical importance of spotting and protecting possible CLUES found on the trail and at monitoring locations? (On the trail, flag and protect any found clue, note the latitude and longitude or triangulate an approximate location to report to SAR management.)
  - ◊ **Coordinate** communications and rendezvous plans **before** deployment. Keep a record of what searchers are assigned where, and other pertinent information to share with SAR management. Leave at least 2 people (buddy system) at the initial rendezvous point, or an obvious note for the overdue person to stay there until you return. Can you safely leave a method of communication and some basic supplies?

LOST PERSON or LOST RIDER?

- ♦ Did the horse come back without the rider?
  - ◊ If so, the rider may be injured.
  - ◊ Definitely he/she is on foot.
  - ◊ Any CLUES from the horse's direction of travel, or condition of the horse or tack?
  - ◊ Where is the closest "help" destination for the overdue rider?
- ♦ Are horse and rider **both** missing?
  - ◊ The horse might still bring the lost rider back to … where?
  - ◊ The rider, horse, or both could be injured.
  - ◊ The horse may have a problem resulting in the rider hiking to … where?
  - ◊ Horse and rider may be separated.
  - ◊ The rider may be looking for his/her horse.
  - ◊ A loose horse may return to … where?

The horse is a search partner. The horse is indicating someone or something is straight ahead. Pay attention!

Searchers look for **CLUES**! Hoof prints, boot prints, small or large items that may/may not belong to the overdue person, etc. *A trained professional can see what the untrained eye won't see.* **Don't trample those clues!**

NEVER put others in jeopardy! Search team of up to 4 people. For safety, all searchers must be appropriately skilled, equipped, and experienced in that terrain. **You don't want any missing searchers!**

When searching, be alert for CLUES. Continue to try to contact that person using communications devices, shouting his/her name, blowing a whistle, etc. Make **NOISE**, then **LISTEN and LOOK!**

The content of this material has been officially approved by the Backcountry Horsemen of California 10/07
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Does SAR interest you? Ask your Sheriff's department about joining local volunteer Mounted SAR, or assisting SAR as Packers.