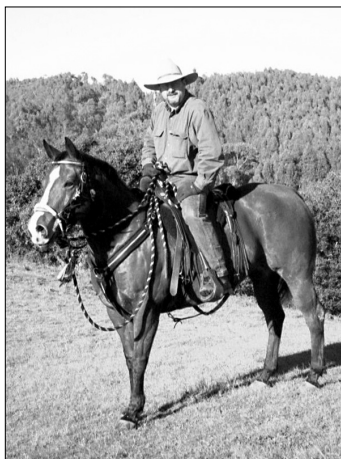


Risky riding? Don't go it alone



In 2003 Garry Stauber completed a 1350 mile, 3 ½ month horseback trip, riding the length of California with a packhorse.

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Watch any good Western and you'll quickly see that the good guys always have a sidekick. Roy and Gene always had one, though they changed in almost every movie. Even the bad guys didn't ride alone. There was Butch and Sundance, Frank and Jessie James, and Billy the Kid rode with the Daltons. Sometimes bad guys rode with good guys like Doc Holiday and Wyatt Earp. Even the Lone Ranger had Tonto, which always made me wonder why he was called the "Lone" Ranger. I think there is a pretty good message in those movies - always ride with a friend.

After riding 1350 miles for three and a half months on a solo horseback journey, it is hard to tell others never to ride alone. But there are many reasons (most of which are obvious) why you shouldn't. Like most Long Riders, I took many steps to reduce (as much as possible) all the risks associated with riding alone. There certainly are inherent risks in trail riding solo, and I would advise against it. But for those of you who do insist on riding alone, here are some additional precautions you can take to decrease the risks. Of course, even this list of precautions will not make solo riding as safe as riding with others, and you should carefully consider the risks.

When riding horses, you are never totally alone. If solo riding isn't the norm for you, it probably isn't for your horse either. Don't be surprised if your horse doesn't like the idea of riding off alone as much as you do. If your horse's anxiety increases, so may your risk of accidents, so be prepared.

Preparation for a solo trail ride is very important. Step number one is notifying others verbally and by leaving notes as reminders of your departure time, planned route and expected return time. If you drive to a trailhead or starting point, it is a good idea to leave this information and your emergency contact info on the front seat of your locked vehicle. Turn the paper upside down so the information is not visible from outside the vehicle. Step number two is to carry personal identification and emergency contact info on your person when you ride. I like having an emergency phone number on my bridle and saddle, should my horse and I become separated. Many pet stores make instant pet ID tags, and these work perfectly as bridle and saddle ID tags. The possibility that you and your horse may part company during your ride is also a good reason for carrying your car keys on your person, and not in your saddlebags.

Carrying a little extra gear is always wise on solo rides. Cell phones are great, but you can't always depend on reception. GPS, a compass, a whistle, and a mirror are important tools in survival situations, if you're riding in backcountry or wilderness areas. On urban rides these items may not be as necessary, but a few extra layers of clothing, water and a snack may make your longer-than-planned ride much more comfortable.

Solo ride routes should be better planned than riding with others. Sticking to a pre-planned route is safer than wandering haphazardly on unknown trails. Allowing plenty of time for you to arrive back at your final destination in daylight is not only safer, but allows you time to properly care for your horse before darkness. Though your plan is to arrive back at your rig in daylight, always try to park in a well-lit area, should you return after dark. Being able to see without a flashlight will help when loading your horse and increase your overall safety.

Stay on well-traveled trails that you have ridden before and where you know the entire route. Though it may sound exciting, solo rides are not the safest time for back country explorations. You just might discover more excitement than you bargained for.

You should use more caution when riding alone and meeting strangers on the trail. Good judgment is important in this matter. I usually feel comfortable having conversations with those I deem safe and friendly. I like to be cordial with hikers and bikers I meet on the trail, and often tell them of my route plans. My theory is, the more who know where I am, the better. This paid off on my trip, when some hikers I had met earlier in the day noticed me later on the wrong route. They took the extra effort to descend to a lower elevation and informed me of my directionally-impaired state. Had I not told them of my intended route, I would have spent that night on the wrong side of a mountain, without water for my horses.

I like to carry a first aid kit for myself and my horse on all rides, but these are even more important on solo trips. Most equestrian tack stores have them for your horse and camping gear stores have them for hikers.

A subject that often comes up with riding alone is whether or not to carry a gun. There are many schools of thought on this and I will offer my opinion and view. If this kind of journey is so dangerous that I need, a gun then I shouldn't be going. Statistics show that carrying a gun only increases ones own risk of injury. Firearms are illegal in most national, state, and county parks. Carrying a concealed weapon is illegal everywhere. Finally, most of the trails I traveled on my trip were so steep and narrow that a loud gunshot would almost assuredly have caused my own animals to react dangerously. I realize that horses can be desensitized to gunshots and humans can be trained to carry and use firearms safely. If you are riding for the sole purpose of hunting and you are following all laws, rules and safety regulations, so be it. For me, I think I will leave my gun at home.

Riding alone has many risks, and some may not be worth taking. I think we should learn from our western heroes and take along a trusty sidekick. But if you decide to ride alone, use these ideas and good common sense, to reduce your risks on the trail. 