

Guide to Catching and Haltering a Loose Horse

Introduction

The Ohlone Riders unit of the Backcountry Horsemen of California is pleased to offer you the following instructions for catching loose horses. These instructions are intended to help you safely catch a loose horse, but they are not intended to cover all situations involving loose horses.

Interacting with horses can be very dangerous. Horses are unpredictable and reactive by nature. Even the most docile horse can kick, bite, strike or run over a human.

The average horse weighs over 1,000 lbs. and can shatter bones with just one kick. Loose horses are particularly unpredictable. They may be so frightened that they run over nearby humans or bite or kick them in an effort to escape. Frightened horses may also run through fences, down steep embankments or into the path of an oncoming car.

Horses can kick out to the front, side, and rear, and their long necks give them a long reach to bite. Their large heads and hindquarters can easily knock over a human.

When trying to catch a horse, your safety and that of any people nearby, should be your first consideration. If you are in doubt about how to handle the situation safely, seek help. Never try to catch a horse without a halter and lead rope.

Catching a horse can be a very trying experience, even with a halter and especially when the horse has broken free and is running

wild. Horses have a very strong flight instinct, and a thousand pounds of muscle-bound energy is not something you want to be hit or run over by. With a little training and good judgment, you can reduce the danger of unnecessary injury to yourself, others, and the horse. By showing confidence and demonstrating that you are a refuge and not a

threat, the horse will be easier to catch.

When trying to capture a loose horse, safety should always be your primary goal. Horses are not normally aggressive, and they prefer to flee rather than fight. However, a small percentage of horses will kick or bite, and a scared horse may accidentally run over you in an attempt to escape.

Horse are typically afraid of unfamiliar sights, such as humans wearing big hats, and unfamiliar sounds, such as an unzipped jacket flapping in the breeze. You can increase your chances of catching a loose horse by removing all potentially scary hats and jackets before the horse sees them.

Before Approaching the Horse

If the horse's owner is nearby, always try to allow them to make the actual catch. They are more familiar with the horse's habits and behavior. If the owner does not have a safe halter and lead rope available, you might offer your halter to him or her.

If the owner is not available, take a moment to observe the horse and assess his behavior. Does he look frightened?





What may appear to be a horse enjoying its freedom may actually be a very frightened horse seeking a safe refuge. Frightened horses are typically extremely nervous and flighty and will react quickly. They may also whinny or nicker, calling out to other horses, indicating that they are afraid of the situation and seeking friends for comfort.

Upon first seeing you, the horse may freeze, raising its head and looking straight at you.

The horse is assessing whether you are dangerous and judging its distance from you. When a horse freezes, it does not typically remain still for more than a few moments. This may be your opportunity to approach very slowly and cautiously, always thinking of your safety first. Make your movements slow, and speak softly and reassuringly to the horse. (See “Approaching the Horse” below.)

If the horse is occasionally stopping to graze, he is probably not so fearful, and he is enjoying his new food source. A less frightened horse is usually a wiser horse. Don't try to sneak up on the horse, because it simply will not work. However, bribing the horse with food may just be the answer. A neighborhood rancher with hay or a bucket of sweet smelling grain may help you catch this horse more quickly.

Approaching the Horse

When approaching a loose horse, your goal is to offer the horse a safe, comfortable refuge from his current situation. His natural instincts tell him to flee from dangerous situations, and you do not want to appear dangerous. Instead, you need to convince the horse through your actions and movements that coming toward you is coming toward safety, that he is among friends.

Observe the horse's body language. If the horse flattens his ears against his head or turns his hindquarters toward you, slowly back away from him, as these behaviors are warning signs that the horse may bite or kick. Your safety is always more important than catching the horse. Keep your eye on the horse at all times, watching for indicators that the horse may bite or kick.

Before approaching the horse, consider your surroundings. Look around and quickly assess where you don't want the horse to go, such as busy roads. It may be tempting to raise your arms and try to drive the horse where you want him to go, but resist the temptation! Driving the horse will make him much larder to catch later, and usually the horse will go in the opposite direction of where you are trying to drive him.

Instead, position your body between the horse and the area you don't want the horse to approach. You may use other persons to help

Important DON'Ts

- Attempt to drive the horse.
- Corner or trap the horse.
- Wave your arms or other objects (such as a rope).
- Use loud, quick, or sudden movements.
- Sneak up on or surprise the horse.
- Approach the horse from directly in front of or directly behind.
- Attempt to toss a rope around the horse.

set up a natural barrier, but instruct all the others not to approach the horse or try to drive it. To avoid having your rescue group frighten the horse, tell them not to flail their arms or make loud noises.

Do not attempt to corner the horse. Slowly moving the horse into an enclosed fenced area may work, but if a horse feels threatened, it may flee at any cost, including running over people or through solid fences.

Don't attempt to be a cowboy and throw a rope over the horse's head. Even if you succeeded, do you really want to be holding onto a rope with a 1300 lb. horse running away at full speed? A more deliberate and thoughtful method will be more successful and safer.

Avoid sudden, loud sounds or quick movements. Just as you are uncertain of the horse, the horse is uncertain about you. Right now, both you and the horse are probably feeling very unsure and possibly a little scared.

Horses have blind spots directly in front and in back of them. Therefore, you should always approach a horse so he can see you (never from directly in front or behind). Approach the front side of the horse, but do not walk directly in front of the horse. Move to the left side of its head, towards its left shoulder. Never walk straight from behind the horse. You might surprise the horse because it did not see you, and it may react by kicking you.

By approaching the horse's left shoulder, you will be in the best position to secure the halter latch, and most horses are used to being approached from this side. This position will allow you to move out of the way if the horse decides to bolt forward.

As you approach, talk gently and softly to the horse, reassuring it. Never raise or wave your arms. Remember, you are offering safety and comfort to the horse. Offer your hand slowly, palm down with fist closed, for the horse to smell. Do not reach out toward the horse's head. Instead, slowly place your hand on the horse's neck or front shoulder as the

opportunity arises. Talk calmly while petting or rubbing the horse. Safeguard your feet by keeping them away from the horse's hooves. One of the most common injuries to equestrians is a smashed toe.

Treats or buckets of feed may be very helpful in catching a horse you do not know. Most horses identify buckets with good things (food!), but your first attempt at approaching the horse should probably be without one, because the bucket could spook the horse. Treats should be offered on an open palm. Let the horse sample one treat or have a mouthful of feed from the bucket before attempting to halter him or grasp his lead rope. The act of chewing and eating is reassuring to a horse and may help calm him down.



Prior to Haltering

Prior to actually attempting to halter the horse, familiarize yourself with the halter. Imagine how the strap goes over the head and two the bands encircle the horse's nose. Practice haltering a well-broke horse to increase your confidence when catching a loose horse for the first time. If you explain the circumstances, most local barn owners would probably be happy to offer you a safe horse to practice haltering.

Start out with your lead rope attached to your halter. This will eliminate fidgeting with the rope and halter when you are close to the horse and they are most likely to run away from you. Also make sure the halter strap that goes

behind the horse's ears (the crown piece) is unbuckled.

Time to Secure the Halter

Place the end of the lead rope over the horse's neck, making a loop. Continue to hold on to the end of the lead with your right hand throughout the haltering process.

Facing the same direction as the horse and standing on the left side of the horse, place the buckle side of the halter strap in your left hand and the crown strap in your right.

Reaching under the horse's neck with your right hand, slip the nose band of the halter over the horse's nose. Remember to keep your movements slow and soothing. Bring the crown strap and buckle together over the horse's head (behind the ears) and connect the buckle. Be sure that the halter is not too tight or too loose and that it fits as comfortably as possible.

Take the lead rope from around the horse's neck and place it in your left hand. Keep your right hand on the lead, about six to twelve inches from the horse's halter. Hold the lead rope in front of your body. The excess lead

rope should be folded and carried in your left hand. Do not coil or wrap the rope around either hand. If the horse pulls away quickly, your hand will be trapped in the lead rope, causing rope burns or more serious injuries.

Congratulations!

You are now ready to lead the horse! Remain on the left side of the horse. Your right hand should be about six to twelve inches from the halter, with your thumb pointing up toward the horse's head.

Cluck softly to the horse and tug gently on the lead, to start the horse moving forward. To stop the horse, use the common command of "Whoa!" It's universal and most horses know it.

Great Job and Good Luck!

These halters, lead ropes and instructions are brought to you by the Ohlone Riders unit of the Backcountry Horsemen of California and the Friends of the Bay Area Equestrian Network.

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