

Hunting-Season Safety Guide

by Dan Aadland

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Fall trail riding can involve crisp weather and beautiful foliage, but safety must come first. Follow these hunting season guidelines to stay safe on the trail this fall.

In the fall, when Rocky Mountain aspens turn brilliant yellow, there's no place I'd rather be than in a snug hunting camp among stately spruce by a clear stream, my horses and mules picketed nearby, aromatic pine smoke curling from the pipe of the tent stove.

Contemplation of such a scene keeps me going during bitter winter and summer doldrums. Hunters in other parts of the country are similarly drawn, whether to crisp corn fields laden with pheasants, red maple groves holding deer, or deep southern woods, now finally free of summer's oppressive heat and humidity.

These same fall conditions draw those of us who ride for pure pleasure. There's nothing quite like a trail ride through autumn trees, the smell of fresh air and brilliant foliage, the enthusiasm of your good horse when there's a trace of bite in the breeze.

Riding during this time of year is too fine to be avoided simply because it coincides with hunting season.

Ready to saddle up and enjoy this spectacular season? Follow these five guidelines to help keep you and your horse safe.



In the fall, author Dan Aadland wears a bright-colored vest to be visible to hunters. His horse, Partner, wears a brightly colored cantle pack. Add color to your horse's tack and gear so he'll be visible even when you're separated from him.

Photo by Dan Aadland

1. Wear Bright Colors

Insurance companies, expert at analyzing risk, rate hunting as an extremely safe activity. The accident ratio with regard to the number of participants is very low compared with other outdoor activities, including horseback riding.

Still, potential for accidents exists. Visibility is your first consideration. To stand out, wear bright colors. A blaze-orange hunting vest (available at sporting-goods stores) works well. Choose one with lots of handy pockets. Some hunting vests are reversible, so you can wear a softer color other times of the year. Insulated models are also available, should you wish to add warmth.

But festooning your own body with bright colors doesn't protect your horse if you tie him and slip away to take a photograph. Invest in brightly colored saddlebags and/or cantle bags. Also consider placing a blaze-orange nylon halter under his bridle.

If you must tie your horse and leave him, choose an open place, such as the middle of a clearing, for greater visibility.

2. Choose Your Route

Find trails in areas where hunters will be less concentrated. Contact your state fish and game department, and ask for maps of hunting areas, dates of hunting seasons, what's hunted, and whether the season is open to anyone licensed, or is restricted by drawings or special permits. Such information will help you decide which state or federal land remains attractive for trail riding while the season is in progress.

In heavily populated states where hunting is popular and available habitat is scarce, hunting seasons are likely to be short and intense. Consider skipping opening day, especially if it falls on a weekend.

In Montana, where hunting seasons of one sort or another are in progress from early September until after Thanksgiving, most trail riders wouldn't consider putting their riding on hold that entire time. But in a populated eastern state where deer season lasts only a few days, postponing your ride until the end of the season may appeal to you.

The terrain and the species being hunted are factors, as well. Bird seasons mean that only shotguns with bird shot are in use, far less dangerous at long range than rifle fire.

And in the wide-open western terrain favored by antelope and mule deer, riders and hunters can usually see each other at long distances, a safety plus.

3. Train Your Horse

A hunting outfitter tells me that clients unfamiliar with horses often ask, "Can I shoot off this horse?"

His answer: "Yeah - once." If the hunter misses the point, the outfitter quickly explains. "After you shoot, you're likely to be on the ground, flat on your back."

Very few horses can stand up to the report of a high-powered rifle shot over their heads. Indeed, the muzzle blast of such rifles can damage a horse's ears, even if he's rock-steady. No good hunter ever discharges a high-powered rifle from the back of a horse, for safety and humane considerations.

But when you trail ride during hunting season, you'll likely hear rifle reports. While it's asking a bit much of your horse to expect complete coolness near gunfire, you can teach him some tolerance for gun shots.

At home, fire a simple cap pistol, then reward your horse with a treat or a nice rub on the withers. Then progress to a starting pistol (used for starting races, available at sporting-goods stores), which is considerably louder.

Safety warning: Fire a starting pistol only into the air, not toward a horse or a human; fragments of the wad holding the powder can be dangerous. And the sting of a fragment accompanying the loud report would be a major setback in your horse's training.

A bullwhip is another good training tool, if you can handle one. Its crack can be varied in intensity. Once your horse will tolerate a full-volume crack from a rider on his back, gunfire won't be intimidating. But don't use a bullwhip unless you're fully competent. It's easy to inadvertently strike your horse or yourself!

It's best to assume that no matter the training, gunshots carry the possibility of a spook from your horse. Use the one-rein stop to handle the unexpected.

4. Practice Trail Safety

Stay on well-traveled trails. Hunting season is no time to mimic the movements of game animals, to quietly ghost through deep woods, or to bushwack your way through thickets and deadfall.

Where horseback hunting is common, trails are often used for camp transport via pack train, so hunters expect to see horse traffic on them.

In areas where all-terrain vehicles are legal, expect an increase in traffic during hunting season. Indeed, ATVs have become so prolific where allowed that if your horse isn't accustomed to them, now might be the time to change that.

If you don't own an ATV, find a friend who does. Let your horse smell and hear it while it idles nearby, and practice gently meeting the machine on a safe lane or trail. Then have your friend rev things up a bit, coming at you faster and making a bit more noise.

Many years ago, before the machines were so popular, I was riding through a hayfield on a neighboring ranch. A new irrigator had recently been hired, and he came toward me very fast on a four-wheeler through timothy hay growing so tall that you could only see the man's head.

My mount, a big, black Tennessee Walking Horse named Marauder, took issue with the sight of a man's head zipping along the top of the timothy at 30 miles per hour while making a strange roar. Things were relatively lively for a while. Let's just say it took more than one 360 degree spin before Marauder was willing to stop, stare, and snort.

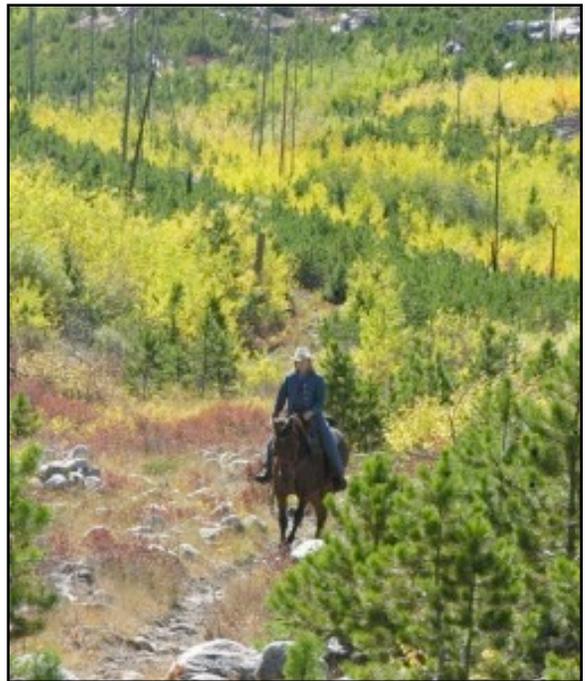
I've often mentioned my belief that it's best to leave your dog at home while trail riding. This is doubly true when riding during hunting season. You don't want your dog tangling with a bird hunter's English pointer. Nor do you want him snaking through the brush and surprising a hunter who might take him for a coyote or feral dog.

5. Be Courteous

Conflicts between hunters and trail riders seem to be relatively rare. Use simple courtesy to avoid conflict with other backcountry users. Recognize that each person has a right to be there.

Don't carry on an extended conversation with a person on foot while you're mounted. An exchange of pleasantries is fine, but for anything more extensive, dismount, and put yourself on footing equal with the other person's. You thus avoid an implication of superiority, a master/servant aura hinted at by your horse and your added height.

Don't ride into someone's camp without first announcing your presence. "Hello the camp!" was the traditional greeting. In addition to alerting people, the idea was to assure those in the camp or cabin that your intentions were open and above board.



*Don't just park your horse because hunting season is in progress. Follow these guidelines, then enjoy the trails during a glorious time of the year. Shown is author Dan Aadland's wife, Emily, enjoying a fall trail.
Photo by Dan Aadland*

Along the trail, greet people in camps in a friendly but quiet manner. If invited into the camp, don't ride your horse right into the central area. Think of that as the "living room." Dismount on the camp's fringes. Invariably, if you ride into the tent or cooking area your horse will choose that very moment to relieve himself, thus soiling the area the campers wish to keep clean.

When interacting with hunters, consider their purpose. Don't make extra noise in the interests of safety unless you're in grizzly country, or you'll scare game. Upon encountering a hunter, a quiet nod is greeting enough. Also, any appearance of intentional interference with a hunter may be illegal; check your state's "hunter harassment" laws.

Although hunting may not be your cup of tea, awareness of its place in nature and of hunters' contributions to the preservation of land and wildlife will tend to lead to respect and to easier relations with those you meet.

Hunter/naturalists of the past, such as John James Audubon, Aldo Leopold, and Theodore Roosevelt, furnished the primary drive for national parks, wildlife refuges, and the national forest system. Hunters (and fisherman) today still foot most of the bill for wildlife conservation through their purchases of licenses and the additional taxes they pay on equipment for those activities.

So don't just park your horse because hunting season is in progress. Follow these guidelines, then enjoy the trails during a glorious time of the year.



Dan Aadland (<http://my.montana.net/draa>) raises mountain bred Tennessee Walking Horses and gaited mules on his ranch in Montana. His most recent books are The Best of All Seasons, The Complete Trail Horse, and 101 Trail Riding Tips. Sketches from the Ranch: A Montana Memoir is now available in a new Bison Books edition.