

POLICY STATEMENT FOR USE OF HORSES
CRATER LAKE NATIONAL PARK
July 30, 1980

Horses have been a traditional part of the National Park Service and serve many useful functions such as patrolling front and backcountry areas, packing into remote areas and uses in historical programs. The horses used at Crater Lake are highly trained and picked for steadiness, endurance, and compatibility with large crowds and noises.

It must be remembered that no matter how well trained a horse may be, it is still no better than the rider controlling the horse. No one can learn to ride a horse in one day any more than they could learn to fly an airplane or alpine ski by simply reading a book. Because many untrained people will be using horses in the course of their duties at Crater Lake, it is necessary to formulate general guidelines to be followed by all. Safety especially, is essential for the park visitor, the rider, and the horse at all times.

When handling even the best trained, gentle, well-mannered horse, it is always best to ask, "What can possibly go wrong in this situation?" and proceed as though you were handling the wildest, unbroken horse ever known to man. Do not assume at any time that the horse is entirely predictable under all conditions.

The first step in horsemanship is, of course, to catch the horse. Do not chase the horse, because it will become a game it will play at every opportunity. If the horse will not come to you or allow you to approach, take a handful of oats or hay and wait for him to come to you. After approaching the horse, place the lead rope around the neck, then put the halter on.

When entering or leaving the corral, be sure the corral gate is open wide enough to allow the horse to enter or leave. It is especially dangerous to lead a horse through a closing gate, since it could swing shut on the horse.

Grooming the horse is done with a curry comb and both soft and hard brushes. Follow the lay or grain of the hair at all times. When brushing in the hind-quarters region, always keep one hand free and against the horse. It may just kick at a fly, but it will hurt you just as much as if it were intended for you. Also, at any time you are handling horses, remember to wear boots or heavy shoes. An 1100 pound horse standing on your toe when you are wearing running shoes or thongs can be a painful reinforcement of the above statement.

The saddles in use in the park are supplied with buckle cinches and require no knots. The saddles have quick-change stirrups to be lengthened or shortened for the individual rider. Familiarize yourself with how and why they work the way they do. A general rule for western riding is to have the stirrups long enough to be able to stand with about one inch of daylight between the seat and the saddle. Be sure the blanket is square under the saddle with no wrinkles and about two inches of blanket extending to the front of the saddle, since this is where most of the weight is carried by the horse. The saddle should be cinched until snug. You should be able to slip your hand between the cinch buckle and the horse. The horses in use all have high withers and it is not necessary to "cut the horse in two" to keep the saddle from slipping sideways as you mount. Cinches pulled too tight produce saddle gall and you may notice a rapid "blister" rise when the saddle is removed if it is too tight.

Mount the horse with the left hand holding the reins and saddle horn and the right hand on the rear of the saddle. Mount, keeping your body as close to the horse as possible. Ever wonder why western style shirts have snaps instead of buttons? If you catch a badge or pop an occasional button you will know you're mounting the horse correctly. The same holds true for dismounting. If you get sloppy, the horse is going to be pulled sideways and may step on you or someone nearby. It takes practice, but so does anything else worth doing right.

When riding, the heel should be directly in line with your hips, heels dropped slightly. The back should always be held straight to absorb shock. If you feel pain in the lower back or between the shoulders after an hour of riding, you are not keeping the back straight and shoulders square. A common error is to ride with one shoulder ahead of the other - keep them square and back straight. Keep your weight evenly distributed in both stirrups at all times. To do otherwise may mean a sore back for you and the horse both.

Keep the reins in the left hand just in front of the saddle horn and low. The reins used on the front and backcountry horse are joined with a romal. The horses are trained to work with a loose rein, but if the reins must be tightened quickly you may take up slack with the right hand, allowing them to slide through the left hand.

The horses have been trained to voice command. Remember "Whoa" means exactly that and nothing else - a complete stop. If the horse does not stop at the voice command, tighten the reins and set the bit. Do not continue pulling after the horse stops. Relax on the reins and if the horse again starts to move, give the voice command and again set the bit. Be consistent in commands at all times.

When riding frontcountry, remember at all times to keep the rear of the horse in a place or position to prevent anyone from approaching from the rear as much as possible. Do not tie the horse and leave it unattended anywhere visible to the public. Hitching posts have been placed near the cafeteria and west of the lodge. Use these areas for tying.

When tying the horse to a tree or post with the reins, always tie the reins at eye level or higher with the horse. Allow enough slack to permit the horse to stand in a normal position. Tying the reins too low may allow the horse to step on or over the reins and there goes another \$20 headstall or reins and you may be walking.

Never allow the horses to eat at any time while being ridden. Set the bit gently but firmly if the horse tries to grab a bite. The horses in frontcountry should be watered twice daily. Use the bucket in the snow tunnel in the closest comfort station to the cafeteria in the picnic area. Standpipes are available there also. While in backcountry, allow the horse to drink as often as he appears to be thirsty.

As a general rule, the horses should never be ridden faster than a trot. The trot or jog covers more ground faster than a gallop/walk period and is easier on the horse. In frontcountry the horses should be walked while on the pavement, especially on slopes which become slippery when warm. Unless you are a good rider, the trot will only display to the public that you are an inept rider, anyway.

The horses are trained to respond to the leg pressure and heel pressure more than the reins. When turning the horse to the left, for example, push the horse with the right calf of the leg, then lay the right rein across the horse's neck. The horse's natural instinct is to turn away from pain or pressure. For this reason it is important not to ride with legs flapping and slapping the sides of the horse. You are possibly giving him three different commands at once and he doesn't know what you expect him to do, and the result is a hyper or sullen horse.

Do not feed the horses after returning them to the corral. They are fed only at 0600 hours and 1800 hours each day. Feeding a horse directly after use is a reward which encourages them to return to the corral in a hurry. The result is a "barn sour" horse which is dangerous to himself and his rider. For this reason also, they should always be walked home in frontcountry.

When in frontcountry, people will want to touch the horse. This is permissible, but caution them to touch only the neck or shoulder. The tendency is to touch the nose or face. How would you feel after six hours of having people thump you on the head? If the horse begins to display displeasure by shaking the head or trying to turn away, this is a sign to move to another area. Fifteen minutes is about long enough. Again try to avoid getting trapped by picture takers in an area where the horse can be approached from the rear, or in a place where the horse may inadvertently step on someone. A horse may kick at a fly on his stomach and accidentally kick a bystander. While riding the horse, you should always be alert and in complete control. If you cannot maintain this posture and control, don't ride.

When trailering the horses, follow these general rules in this order:

1. Check the hitch, then double check. Be sure the lights, brake lights, and turn signals work, and the safety chain is fastened.
2. Place oats or hay in the manger.
3. Hold the door open from the side you are loading. Do not allow the door to swing shut on the horse.
4. Latch the door, then latch the safety chain at the horse's tail.
5. Fasten the front safety release rope to the horse's halter: Never trailer a horse without a halter and without fastening the front tie.
6. Drive at slower than normal speeds at all times. The Park Service trailer is wider than the pickup, so turns must be wide and slow. Be sure rear view mirrors are adjusted to enable you to see the sides of the trailer.
7. Avoid quick stops and starts. You may have a combined weight of two tons behind you and it is harder to start and stop, especially stop.
8. When unloading, first release the safety chain at the horse's tail, then the head tie. Return to the rear of the trailer and open the door, holding it open as the horse backs out. The horses have been trained to load and unload quickly and you should have no problems in this respect if you follow the listed steps.

Who Uses the Horses?

The horses are on contract to the National Park Service 24 hours a day and the same rules apply to them as they do to a GSA vehicle. Only authorized employees on official business will ride the horses. The Supervisory Seasonal Patrol Ranger is assigned direct day-to-day operational supervision of the horses. Supervisors needing horse service should arrange through this person for horse use. The Supervisory Seasonal Patrol Ranger will be responsible for training riders and horses so that they and the public will be safe at all times.

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Chief Ranger

8-1-80