

Search & Rescue



A hiker is lost in the woods. A mounted search-and-rescue team is called on to aid the search. As you watch events unfold, you think, *that could be me and my horse.*

If you're an adventurous, skilled trail rider, you might be right. Here, we'll first explain what makes horses ideal search partners. Then we'll tell you what skills you and your horse need to become an effective search-and-rescue team.

Horses as Searchers

Some believe the detection capabilities of prey animals are superior to that of a predator's. In the wild, horses can detect threats that may be downwind, using their eyes and ears, and even by sensing ground vibration. On a search, the horse listens, sees, and feels. He expresses himself to his rider and the world.

The horse also has olfactory equipment as good as or better than most dogs. He can vary his sensing level from the ground to seven feet high or more. He can also aim his nose over a greater angle than a dog can without moving his body.

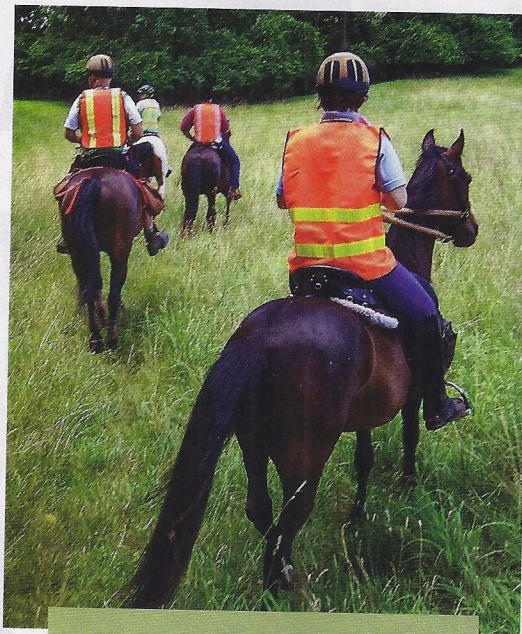
Plus, a horse can learn which scents are what, and will ignore scents identified as not of interest. Thus, a horse will ignore other horses known to him and their riders if so instructed.

And — unlike a dog that often appears as a threatening, barking monster that chases after the search subject — horses, while huge, usually aren't seen as threatening.

Develop Your Skills

If you'd like to be part of a mounted search-and-rescue team, you'll first need to do your homework. Here are the skills you'll need to develop.

- **Horse camping.** Gain experience in trailering, and camping with and caring for your horse in the field.
- **Trail-riding safety.** If you or your horse is injured on the job, you become a detri-



Learn how you and your horse can become an effective search-and-rescue team with experienced mounted searcher Irvin Lichtenstein.

BY IRVIN LICHTENSTEIN

ment. Your duty is to keep yourself and your horse out of trouble so you remain an active resource for the search team.

- **In-saddle conditioning.** You don't need to be a perfect rider, but you do need to be able to endure long work hours while remaining alert and effective. Also, learn how to select safe, comfortable, protective clothing and gear.
- **First-aid.** Take classes in first-aid for both humans and horses.
- **Organization.** Gather like-minded riders to form an effective organization. A broad range of resources increases the chances for success.
- **Communications.** Familiarize yourself with the latest communications and incident-command systems.

An alert, intelligent horse makes an ideal search partner when you learn to tune into his body language.

- **Navigational skills.** Develop navigational expertise, including how to use a global positioning system, a compass, and a map in the field.
- **Tracking.** Take courses in tracking and clue identification, and practice these skills in the field.

Select the Right Horse

Becoming an effective searcher starts when you select a sensible horse to become your partner. Perhaps it's his conformation that attracts you. To be sure, you'll need a sturdy horse, just the right size and stride for you, and one that's capable of handling the local terrain.

But the horse will need something more. There should be something in his eye, his movement, his wariness that says he's smart, that he can take care of himself. He'll need to be bold, but not reckless.

You and your horse will learn each other's habits, reactions, and moods. This isn't training, this is partnering. You'll develop communication with your mount — you won't demand absolute obedience. The horse's inherent intelligence is a key factor, and you have to accept his input.

This means that your horse can't be bombproof. He has to remain aware of his environment and not be trained out of his basic sense of self-preservation. He must be encouraged to communicate his view of the world to his rider. This can be very subtle movements of the head or ears, or even just muscle tension.

You'll need your horse to be willing to go where you point him — even when where you want to go isn't known to be safe. You and your horse must develop a certain type of synergy. You want a horse

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that's sensible and obedient, but not numb to his surroundings.

Cultivate Your Horse


Search horses are cultivated, not trained. Here are five ways you can help your horse become a good search partner.

- **Select the right tack.** Avoid using a tie-down or heavy bridle that restricts movement. If you ride bitless, continue to do so. Your horse needs to be comfortable and allowed to move freely. Any type of saddle is fine, but a saddle is essential. You need to maintain a relaxed-but-secure seat, so if your horse reacts to something on the trail, you'll be able to stay with him.
- **Pack up.** Whether you're on a training mission or a real search, pack all your gear, so your horse knows this isn't simply a recreational outing. Your serious approach will cue your horse that this is serious business.
- **Ride for miles.** Ride trails, ride fields, ride miles at the walk. Let your horse pick his footing. Teach him that you'll trust him to follow a trail without direction. Don't interfere if he puts his head down to smell or taste the ground, or raises his head to take an exaggerated breath to smell the air. Let him watch the trail so that on a search you can better look for clues.
- **Develop trust.** When a horse and rider partner in search and rescue, it is a one-on-one relationship. Riding search is unpredictable. Your horse is in a strange environment. You and your mount are tense and looking for clues. Mutual trust is essential. Trust changes your horse into your partner.
- **Listen to your horse.** Your horse will tell you about the world he lives in; you only need to learn how to listen. He'll point out unusual sights and sounds, and observe changes from when he last was there. He'll find birds, game, and other trail users.

Key into your horse's body language, and note what he's paying attention to. Acknowledge the message, and encourage

Your search-and-rescue training will likely include large-animal-rescue exercises. Shown is a trailer exercise with a horse mannequin.

him to continue with a "good boy" and a light stroke on his neck.

When you can read your horse's smallest reactions, you'll be on your way to becoming an effective mounted searcher. 

Irvin Lichtenstein is chief of operations for the Southeast Pennsylvania Search and Rescue unit (www.sepasar.net). He's been involved in mounted search efforts since 1986.

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