

**HORSEBACK RIDING TIPS FOR THE COLORADO TRAIL  
CHECKLISTS FOR EQUIPMENT & FOOD**

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- As of this writing I have ridden approximately 2,700 miles on The Colorado Trail. Here are some thoughts for riding horses and mules on the CT. Mules are probably better adapted for use on the Trail but horses will do ok too.
- Shoe horses within a week of the trip. Use leather pads between shoe and hoof for protection from rocks. You can also fill the void with gel for added protection. Check for loose shoes periodically and tighten a loose shoe with a set of clinchers. Ask your farrier to leave the nails a little long so that you have something to clinch with. Loose shoes will make a hollow or tinny sound when they strike a rock. Always listen for that sound and stop as soon as possible to inspect the shoe.
- Have your farrier 4 nail the shoe on both sides and leave no tails on the shoes.
- Carry a couple of easy boots (or something similar) in case you lose a shoe.
- When riding the Trail end to end I have my horses reshod in Poncha Springs which is the midway point. There are a number of good farriers in the Buena Vista, Salida, Poncha Springs and Gunnison areas.
- Get an early start. Generally, you will want to ride high and camp low at night. Water can almost always be found at lower elevations and where there is water there is grass.
- My horses have always just foraged for themselves. I let them bulk up on weight before leaving on a trip.
- Worm your horses about a week before you leave on your trip and float their teeth if necessary.
- During the day stop 2 or 3 times for 20-30 minutes when you find good grass and let the horses eat.
- Travel in small groups for less environmental impact.
- Travel light. I pack only 60-80 pounds of food, water, equipment and clothing for a 2-week trip, depending on the season.
- If I am traveling solo, I take two horses with me. A horse to ride and a horse to pack. I generally ride one horse for the entire day and use him as a pack animal the next day. Most horses will follow along without being kept on a lead line when carrying a pack saddle. This gives them an opportunity to forage along the Trail for the duration of the ride that day. Some riders I have talked with take only one horse. They wear a back pack to carry their equipment, food and water and sometimes cache food ahead in trees for themselves and for their horse.
- I have experimented with many ways to hobble my horses at night. The best way I have come up with is to attach a 30-foot-long, one-inch cotton rope with a bull snap to each horse's halter at night. I prefer to use rope halters and wrap the knots on the side of each cheek with padding and athletic tape to reduce damage to the horse's face. I cut a log pole 6' to 8' in length and attach it to the other end of the rope of each horse and let

the horse pull the log around all night. Condition your horse to this way of being tied in a corral before the trip. Horses will learn very quickly how to pick up their feet to avoid getting tangled in their rope. This will cause the least amount of environmental damage to the area you are camping in for the night and the horse will find the best grass for himself. The size of the log will vary from horse to horse. Generally, you will start out with something 6" to 8" in diameter and then reduce it to 4" to 5" after a few days on the Trail. You can also hobble the front feet in addition to using the log if you have a horse that continues to want to leave. I have been told that three legged hobbles work quite well. I plan to try them out on my next trip. I have also talked with people who have successfully used a solar powered hot wire at night to contain their horses. The downside to using this method would be if a deer or an elk walked into the wire and knocked it down or if the charger quit working.

- I have never had any problems with bears on the Trail.
- If your horses leave during the middle of the night DON'T PANIC. Look for their tracks in the morning. In most cases they will get on the Trail and head back in the direction they came from. If they are dragging a log they won't go very far before they get hung up on a rock or tree. They will seldom go more than a mile.
- If your horses get loose and take off while stopped when you are riding on the Trail don't make the mistake of trying to run after them on foot. That will make them spook and drive them further away from you. Wait a few minutes before starting after them. Try to keep out their sight if you're in the woods. Move quietly and make a big ark in an attempt to get ahead of them. Once they have stopped to eat, approach them very slowly and talk to them with a quiet voice. If they start to move away give them some space. Have patience and approach them slowly. When the opportunity presents itself reach for a lead line, a rein or whatever is available. Try to hold them if they start to take off again but don't injure yourself in the process.
- Use panniers made of Kevlar. They are indestructible, easy to pack and load and don't require a canvas tarp. I have never tied a diamond hitch! Canvas panniers look nice but can rip and tear when going through the trees. Plastic/fiberglass panniers don't work well in tight places.
- Take all loose items – clothing, food and equipment and place them in gym bags before placing them in the panniers. This way you will have all of your stuff when you get to camp. I prefer gym bags about 30" in length. They can be purchased at Walmart for \$10 or \$15 bucks. The synthetic ones are semi water proof too. Place your sleeping bag in a waterproof bag for added protection. I have used heavy duty plastic trash bags and they work very well.
- I also like to use Kevlar saddle bags on my saddle horse.
- Decker iron and wood framed pack saddles are the best. The decker saddle will conform to the back of your horse. Wooden saw bucks work well too.
- All of these items can be purchased at Davis Tent & Awning in Denver.

- Always double-blanket any horse that is carrying a saddle or pack saddle.
- Carry gall salve (From Murdock's or Stock Yards Ranch Supply) to doctor any wounds. This stuff really works and heals most injuries very quickly.
- I cover between 16-18 miles on a typical day that is about the same as a seasoned hiker.
- After 2-3 days you will generally find that you and your horses will be working together as a team. Horses that are always nervous and don't eat when given the opportunity will not last on long trips. They wear themselves out in a very short period of time.
- When the weather is mild in July & August, I sometimes use a roll-a-cot and make a shelter out of 10' x 12' plastic tarp and 2 adjustable walking poles. I take my lariat and string it between 2 trees then drape the tarp over it attaching the rear of the corners of the tarp to the ground with tent stakes. I place the adjustable ski poles on the corners of the front of the tarp and attach guy wires to tent stakes. A little parachute cord works well for this. The whole shelter weighs less than a pound and can be put up or taken down in a couple of minutes. Over the years I've grown a little tired of sleeping on the ground.
- I carry both an axe and a folding saw & plastic wedge to clear away downed timber on steep sections of the Trail. They have come in very handy.
- Several years ago, a disease came through and killed the majority of the large spruce trees in the San Juan Mountains. Those trees are coming down now and present a danger to both horse and rider especially at night. Be careful where you place your tent.
- On the Trail where there are steep drop offs, untie your pack horse if he is tethered to your saddle horse. That way he won't pull you and your horse down the hill with him if he slips and falls.
- I recommend pulling your feet out of the stirrups or just barely placing your toes in the stirrups on sections of the Trail with steep drop offs. If your horse slips or falls you at least have a chance of getting away from him and not being crushed or dragged down the hill.
- ALWAYS THINK SAFETY FIRST, especially if you are traveling alone.
- The 83-mile Collegiate West route was added to The Colorado Trail in 2012. It consists of 5 segments and basically parallels the original Trail from Twin Lakes to Poncha Springs on the west side and over the top of the mountains. I have ridden this new Trail. THE CT COLLEGIATE WEST WAS EXTREMELY DIFFICULT! IT IS NOT TO BE ATTEMPTED BY A BEGINNER OR NOVICE HORSE OR RIDER. Every segment presents difficult challenges to both horse and rider. This is not a place to learn your horse skills, it is a place to practice them! My advice is to first ride the 28 traditional segments of The Colorado Trail following the Collegiate East. This should give you the skills necessary for a later attempt on the Collegiate West. It is important to pay particular attention to the weather when doing the Collegiate West in segments CW03 & CW05. You are above timberline for much of the time. Get an early start, be in the saddle by dawn! Storms come in quickly

in the afternoon and you can be in great peril with the lightning that accompanies these storms. The iron shoes and high exposure make you and your horse lightning rods.

- If I am going to ride the complete Trail, I do it in 4 sections going from north to south.
  - Section 1 – Waterton Canyon to Breckenridge ending at the Gold Hill Trailhead, Trail segments 1-6, 104 miles, 6 days required
  - Section 2 – Breckenridge to Poncha Springs ending at Highway 50, Trail segments 7-14, 152 miles, 8-9 days required
  - Section 3 – Poncha Springs to Spring Creek Pass, 108 miles, Trail segments 15-21, 7 days required
  - Section 4 – Spring Creek Pass to Durango, 127 miles, Trail segments 22-28, 9 days required
- Riding The Colorado Trail in this manner will give you and your horses an opportunity to take a day or two break between sections to rest up, resupply and replace horses if necessary. I would strongly suggest replacing your horse's shoes at the end of section 2 in the Arkansas Valley. Once you leave the Arkansas Valley it becomes very remote. Towns and people are few and far between. The San Juan Mountains are my personal favorite part of the entire Trail.
- Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions and would like to discuss this information in greater detail or if you have any suggestions to help improve this article.
- Good luck and good riding! You are about to undertake a great adventure!
- Have fun and be safe!

**Rich Johnson**

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## **Horse Equipment - Saddle Horse & Pack Horse**

saddle with breast collar & mohair cinch & rear tie down  
pack saddle with 2 kevlar panniers  
4 saddle blankets, 1" minimum thickness; double blanket all horses  
Kevlar saddlebags  
ez boots (1 for each size hoof)  
Tools – clinchers, small hammer & hoof pick  
2 rope halters  
2 – 5/8" cotton lead ropes (10' or 12')  
2 – 30' x 1" cotton ropes w/ bull snap  
2 leather hobbles  
head stall, bit, reins  
gall salve  
lariat & spurs

## **Personal Equipment**

Rain poncho  
Sunglasses  
4-season tent  
sleeping bag (rated to 0 degrees or below) & water proof bag  
sleeping mattress or paco pad  
survival blanket  
camp pillow  
head lamp with extra bulb & batteries  
GPS or compass  
phone & solar charger  
sunscreen (SPF 30)  
2 small stuff sacks  
sheath or folding knife & Leatherman (or similar) multitool  
first aid kit  
baby wipes (10-12 per day)  
antiseptic gel & deodorant  
tooth brush & tooth paste & dental floss  
antibacterial gel & deodorant  
shampoo  
eye drops  
waterproof matches w/ plastic case  
butane lighter  
athletic tape  
25' parachute cord  
stadium camp chair  
axe & folding saw w/ plastic wedge  
plastic spade for digging cat hole  
binoculars & elk call  
4 gym bags for packing food & equipment  
duct tape

## **Clothing**

2 pair non-cotton socks  
goretex hiking boots (waterproof them before you leave)  
gaiters  
1 pair jeans w/ belt  
padded bike shorts  
2 poly short sleeve Tee shirts  
2 poly long sleeve Tee shirts  
expedition weight long sleeve shirt (poly)  
vest (polar tec or wind stopper) light weight  
gortex jacket/ shell  
leather gloves & poly gloves  
hat

## **Cooking**

4 one-liter Nalgene water bottles  
Steripen or water filter pump  
2 – 440g or 15.5 oz butane bottles  
Primus back packing stove or jetboil  
1 cooking pot  
Plastic drinking cup, plate & bowl  
knife, fork, spoon & soup spoon  
can opener

## **Food**

Freeze dried meals (REI)  
Packaged tuna & salmon  
Canned tuna & salmon  
Canned chicken breast  
Instant mashed potatoes  
Mashed potatoes with salmon/tuna/chicken are a nice change from freeze dried meals  
Olive oil  
Cream of Wheat or oatmeal  
Powdered milk & sugar  
Granola  
Multi grain bread/ bagels  
Cream cheese  
Granola bars  
Power bars  
Peanuts, cashews, mixed nuts  
Dried fruit  
Tang orange drink  
Tea bags, instant coffee

Discard all unnecessary packaging and pack in gallon & quart freezer baggies

To: Dr. Jenifer Nadeau  
Associate Professor  
Equine Extension Specialist

January 29, 2018

Dear Jenifer,

I have finished my review of the Basic Packing Equipment: Types, Adjustment and Use article you sent me by Oliver C Hill and Jim Talbot. The article is very well written by two professionals who know their business. Honestly I do not think I can improve on what they have written.

I have ridden horseback over 2500 miles on the Colorado Trail using two horses, a saddle horse to ride and a pack horse to carry my food and gear. The CT is Colorado's premier long distance trail stretching almost 600 miles from Denver to Durango when you include the newly constructed Collegiate West section. The trail travels through the spectacular Colorado Rocky Mountains amongst tall peaks with lakes, creeks and diverse ecosystems. Trail users experience six wilderness areas and eight mountain ranges topping out at 13,271 feet, just below Coney summit. The average elevation is over 10,300 feet and it rises and falls dramatically. Users traveling from Denver to Durango will climb almost 100,000 vertical feet.

Over the years I have developed a system that works very well for me and I would like to share some of that information with you. When I started out I used a saw buck which worked fine but I now own a Decker pack saddle which is far superior and custom fits to almost any horse. The Decker saddle is used by the park service in the national parks. I double blanket both horses to help prevent saddle sores from occurring. The panniers I prefer are made of Kevlar, a nylon product used for jeep tops by the US Army. This product is indestructible and waterproof. You can purchase these items from Denver Tent & Awning here in Denver. I travel light on my trips and carry between 60 and 70 pounds on my pack horse. This allows me to stay out for at least two weeks at a time. Everything I take fits easily into my two panniers. I pack all loose items including food, equipment and clothing in nylon or canvas gym bags. This ensures that everything will be with me when I get into camp. It's a good idea to put your sleeping bag into something that is water proof. Heavy duty plastic garbage bags work quite well.

I have found that after traveling for a day or two it is unnecessary to keep a lead rope on my pack horse. Most pack horses will travel along with the lead horse on their own. They will stay very close the first day or two and then they will fall back a bit. If they get out of sight of the lead horse the horses will start calling to each other and the pack horse will run to catch up. Not all horses will do this but most of them will. Being untethered allows the pack horse to graze the entire day while we are traveling. I generally switch the horses out every other day so that the pack horse becomes the saddle horse and vice versa. If you are on a long trip this will help your horses last for a much longer time. In the mountains I can cover between 16 and 18 miles in an 8 hour day. That is about the same amount of distance as someone hiking. If I encounter excellent grass while we are traveling I will stop for 20 or 30 minutes and let the horses graze. When we get into camp I turn the horses out with a 30' one inch cotton lead line with a bull snap attached to their rope halters. I attach a 6 or 8 foot log 4 to 6 inches in diameter to the lead line. The horses will pull the lead line and log around all night. It allows the horses to move around and find the best grass to eat. It also prevents a lot of ecological damage to the surrounding area. If the horses decide to leave they won't go very far before getting wrapped around a tree or bush. I have never lost a horse in the mountains using this technique but I have had them leave a few times. You can train a horse to do this in an arena before you leave on your trip. Start with

something light, say a 4" wooden fence post. Horses will figure out very quickly how to keep their feet and legs from getting tangled in the rope. It also helps high strung or nervous horses to calm down. It's amazing to watch them figure things out. Horses can get a little bit of a rope burn at times but I always carry some gall salve with me and it heals them up very quickly. Electronic fencing is another method to contain your horses for the night.

I always worm my horses 4 or 5 days before leaving on a trip. I have never carried any type of supplemental feed for my horses. All of their nutrition comes from grazing. I let them bulk up a bit before we leave on a trip. I also take the time to get them in physical condition for the trip we will be taking.

Our mountains are very rocky which is very hard on horse's feet. I have my farrier shoe my horses within a week of leaving on the trip, four nailing them on each side of the shoe with little or no nails. Leather pads work very well in the rocky terrain to protect your horse's feet. You can also inject gel between the leather pad and hoof for added protection. In our mountains it's not unusual to wear out a set of shoes in 250 miles. Shoes will make a tinny sound when they strike a rock if they are loose. It's a good idea to carry a small hammer and set of clinchers to tighten up a loose shoe. I always carry easy boots, one for each shoe size. They come in very handy if you lose a shoe along the trail. I also carry along an axe or saw to cut away downed timber from the trail.

Over a period of time you and your horses will learn to work as a team. It's a wonderful feeling when this occurs. This is when you really bond with your horses and the experience becomes truly amazing. Most hikers are looking down at the trail when they are moving along so as not to fall or sprain an ankle. When you are horseback the horses look at the trail. This allows the rider to look at the mountains and beautiful scenery you are surrounded by day after day. It also permits you the luxury of taking along a few extra items to make your trip a little more comfortable. Most hikers will tell you "I sure wish I was doing what you were doing." That always makes me laugh.

I hope this information is helpful to you and to your students. Please feel free to contact me by email or phone if you have any questions or suggestions. I will close by saying this. The system I just described works for me but there are many ways to travel cross country with a pack horses and variations of what I just described my work better for some individuals.

I wish you all the best! Happy Trails!

Rich Johnson

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