

How to Cross Troubled Waters

Sooner or later on the trail, you're going to have to cross water. Here's a way to teach your horse to do it safely and on command.
By Stephanie Ostrowski, DVM

If you ride in difficult terrain, you need to know how to safely negotiate difficult water crossings. Here, I'll give you my step-by-step strategies for dealing with: 1) swiftly moving water over a visible, solid bottom; 2) a shallow stream with a slippery, rocky bottom; and 3) a steep, crumbling bank leading into and/or out of the stream. Your goal is to identify a safe path and proceed, at a walk, in a controlled manner.

Before you begin:

Before you attempt a difficult passage, you should be a veteran of simple crossings and know how to execute half-halts on the trail. Your horse should also know a caution cue--such as "careful"--that tells him to proceed slowly.

Tip: If you're riding with one or more people on experienced horses, let them lead the way. When your horse sees other horses crossing the water safely, he'll start to believe that he can, too. In this case, his "herd mentality" works to your advantage. (Note: Follow one or two horse-lengths behind to avoid crowding the horse ahead or prompting a kick.)

Troubled water #1: Swiftly moving water over a visible, solid bottom.

1. Before crossing, settle your horse with light half-halts. Use your caution cue to alert him to proceed calmly and choose his footing with care.
2. Expect your horse to snort and blow at the swiftly running water--even step in and out a few times before entering it all the way. Allow him to do so, then encourage forward motion with leg and verbal cues. Let him drink if he wants to. This will assure him the water is part of his natural, known world, and not a threat.
3. Proceed cautiously, supporting your horse's head equally with both reins to keep him straight. However, allow him to put his head down to look carefully at the footing. As his trust in the footing grows, so will his confidence and willingness to proceed. Give him time to gain confidence. If you rush him, you may increase his nervousness, which may result in resistance.

Troubled water #2: A shallow stream with slippery, rocky bottom.

1. Execute steps one through three, above.
2. Carefully direct your horse away from the worst rocks (which could trip him), asking him to walk very slowly so he keeps his balance. (Note: If you come upon slanting rock slabs, ask your horse to cross in the middle of each one, not on the edge. Surface area is greatest mid-slab, giving him more room to maneuver. There's also less chance the slab will wobble.)
3. Expect your horse to slip at least once. Reassure him immediately, allow him to regain his composure, then ask for forward progress.

Troubled water #3: A steep, crumbling bank leading into or out of stream.

A steep bank is really two obstacles--a downhill and an uphill--added to a stream crossing. For both, follow the established path, if possible. On a well-used route, previous riders will have cleared most hazards (roots, holes, etc.), or will have made them obvious by stomping down the surrounding vegetation.

Downhill.

1. Balance yourself in your saddle to help your horse maintain his balance. To do so, position your center of gravity directly over your horse's spine, and kick your feet a little ahead of you. (Note: You'll be able to do this easily if you're riding in an endurance or Australian stock saddle with free-swinging stirrup leathers. However, if you're in a Western saddle, you'll need to place your feet ahead of the girth, free of the fenders, to stay balanced.)
2. Stand in your stirrups, then sit deep to align your feet under your center of gravity.
3. Ask your horse to go slowly downhill. To slow him down, use repeated light half-halts and your caution cue.
4. Cross the stream.

Uphill.

1. Once you reach the other side of the stream, put your reins in one hand, and grab a big handful of mane with the other, for balance.
2. Quickly scan the bank for the safest route up the bank.
3. Stand in your stirrups just enough so your seat clears your saddle's seat. This will help you to stay in sync with your horse's motion, rather than behind it.
4. Guide your horse onto the route you established in step two. Ask him to walk up the bank, giving him all the slack he needs to balance himself. Use his mane to steady yourself, rather than your reins. Otherwise, you could inadvertently pull him over backward.

When not to cross water

Sometimes, a stream or river may just be too dangerous to cross. Don't be embarrassed to turn back. After all, "Those who turn and ride away, will live to ride another day." If you find yourself in any of the following three situations, find an alternate route, or go back home.

- Your horse is wearing a tie-down, and there's any chance of deep pools where you'll be crossing. If your horse's head goes under water and he can't lift it up to breathe, he'll drown in 60 seconds. You'll have no chance to correct this in deep water, as your drowning, flailing horse will literally be fighting for his life. (Note: For safety's sake, always unsnap your horse's tie-down before crossing water of any depth, and reattach it on the other side.)
- When water hazards include treacherous bottoms and/or strong currents, or when you can't see an unfamiliar bottom. You really don't need to drown yourself or your horse today, do you? Return another day, when the water is lower and there's an obvious, safe path across.

- You're riding alone, and your horse is extremely anxious and resistant. If he panics, he could throw himself over backward, or spook so radically that you lose your balance and fall off. If you get hurt, you'll have no one to help you get to safety. Ride smart. Pay attention to those not-so-subtle warning signals--and quit before you create a dangerous situation.

The Half-Halt

The Half-Halt asks your horse to shift his weight onto his hindquarters. Although used most often to prepare a horse for transitions, you can also use it to settle your horse on the trail. Here's a brief explanation. However, it's not as easy as it may sound. If you've never before executed the Half-Halt, ask your trainer or riding instructor to help you.

1. Think subtle. Your goal isn't to stop your horse, it's to shift his weight back on his hindquarters so he'll slow down and pay attention to your cues.
2. Drive your horse forward with your seat and legs. Without controlled forward motion, you won't get results.
3. At the same time, briefly apply bit pressure. (A light Half-Halt means light pressure.) This should cause your horse to put his weight onto his hindquarters. (If he doesn't, don't fight him--ask a professional horseperson to help you.)
4. The instant you feel your horse's weight shift back, release the bit pressure.
5. Repeat the entire sequence until your horse slows down and pays attention. Then reward him with rubs and praise.

The Caution Cue

The Caution Cue teaches your horse to slow down at your verbal request. It's especially helpful while going downhill, as it curbs his natural tendency to give into the pull of gravity and rush down. But you can use the cue anytime he's traveling too fast for safety or comfort. Here's how to teach it.

1. Ride your horse up a small, steep hill. (A steep grade will tempt him to travel down quickly, giving you an opportunity to teach your Caution Cue.)
2. At the top of the hill, stop, then head back down, asking your horse to walk. As you do so, say "careful, careful" in a steady, reassuring tone.
3. After your horse takes a couple of steps, execute a light Half-Halt. Then proceed, saying "careful, careful."
4. Continue walking downhill in a slow, controlled manner while alternately giving him your Caution Cue and executing light Half-Halts until you reach the bottom.
5. Safely there, give your horse a rub and some words of praise. Repeat the exercise until he associates your caution cue with going slow. Reward every small effort, and stop each lesson on a positive note.

Stephanie Ostrowski, DVM, a veterinary judge for the North American Trail Ride Conference, recently completed a 3-year term on that association's national board of directors. She's ridden her Arabian gelding, TC Hossar, to national honors in competitive trail riding with NATRC and the International Arabian Horse Association. Her mare, Raja Fire Ruby, retired from NATRC to raise two sons, both now ready to launch their own competitive trail careers. Dr. Ostrowski raises Arabians at her home near Atlanta, Georgia. When she's not riding or judging, she works as a veterinary epidemiologist in public health for the Centers for Disease Control. This article first appeared in the July, 2000 issue of Horse & Rider magazine.