

The Trail Less Trashed

Contributed by Ryan T. Bell

Use these 32 strategies to reduce your impact on the environment—and help guarantee backcountry access in the future.

I go to the backcountry because I want to get out there and feel like I'm the first person to see this land," says Jim Culver of the National Outdoor Leadership School. "I want my kids and grandkids to have that same experience.

"If we want future generations to see the backcountry, then we need to follow a leave-no-trace ethic to minimize our impact." The National Outdoor Leadership School is a Wyoming-based operation that has been at the forefront of Leave No Trace education since the movement's inception in 1993. Culver is the ranch manager of NOLS's Three Peaks Ranch in Boulder, where he directs a two-week horse-packing course that teaches LNT horsemanship in the backcountry.

Follow along as our expert details 32 easy strategies to both plan an enjoyable horse-camping trip and preserve the backcountry for others.

1. Plan ahead

Wandering aimlessly not only damages existing trails, but it causes new ones to form in untouched areas. Think through your backcountry route and travel logistics to minimize your impact.

2. Pack light

Cut the weight of pack loads by taking things that perform multiple functions. For example, leave folding chairs at home and use a sleeping pad as a cushion while sitting around the campfire.

3. Limit your stock numbers

"The greatest impact stock-users have," Culver notes, "is the number of animals we bring." The amount of weight you pack equates to the number of horses and/or mules you will need. Minimize the number of hoofprints on the trail by maintaining a ratio of one pack animal per two riders.

4. Weed-free

According to Culver, horses bring invasive and non-native plants into the backcountry because of what they are fed at home. Prevent seeds from "hitchhiking" by feeding certified weed-free hay for three days prior to your departure. This allows a horse's digestive system to cycle out invasive and non-native seeds.

5. Leave "fancy-footed horses" home

"There are horses that don't like to get their feet wet or muddy and will try to walk on the dry ground at the sides of the trail," Culver explains. "That only leads to widening the trail." And because a hoof-sore horse will also seek the soft ground of a trail's shoulder, have farrier work done prior to the trip, and pack a selection of tools to make trailside repairs (hammer, nails, clincher, nippers).

6. Ride on durable trail surfaces

A trail is "dead" ground, sacrificed for the sake of a route into the wilderness. Examine the hard pack of any trail and you will see that it is void of plant life. With a horse and rider weighing upwards of 1,400 pounds, a single step is lethal to plant species.

7. Follow the designated trail

It doesn't take many horses to widen a trail or change its course, Culver stresses. Ride single-file and use basic trail-riding skills to minimize your impact. If a single-track branches into multiple trails, follow the most heavily trafficked option.

8. Use switchbacks

"There's a tendency for backcountry users to cut across switchbacks," Culver says. "They should be used, though, because switchbacks help prevent erosion." Keep an eye on pack stock to make sure they do not cut switchbacks behind you.

9. Clear snags

Culver suggests a rider carry an ax and saw to clear a trail of snags and obstructions. "If you don't," he says, "people will go around the obstruction and create a new trail." Note, however, that the U.S. Forest

Service sometimes uses downed trees to block undesignted trails. Respect their trail management by leaving the obstruction in place.

10. Split up cross-country

If you're passing through an area that doesn't have a trail, your group should spread out so a new trail is not created. In virgin territory, ford a stream at the flattest point of entry, where there is the least amount of vegetation to disturb.

11. Use durable surfaces for your camp

Not all ground surfaces are resilient to the pressure of human foot traffic, a tent or the impact of a horse's hoof. Learn to identify durable surfaces, such as "duff," the deadfall of organic matter like leaves and pine needles, on a forest floor.

12. Thwart pawing horses

A horse that paws can damage plant life and the underground root structures of trees. Tether pawing horses over duff-covered ground to buffer their digging action.

13. Pick a low-impact tent site

Avoid areas with small trees, plants or any living organism that could break if you slept on it. Use lightweight "backpacker" tents that are compact and easy to assemble, rather than hefty canvas wall tents that suffocate the ground.

14. Avoid the shoreline

A human presence next to a body of water deters wildlife from drinking at a source they would otherwise rely on. Make camp 200 feet from a shoreline. Pack a small bucket for transporting cooking- and drinking water to and from camp.

15. Don't "trench"

Digging a trench around a tent is an antiquated method of water management that leaves long-lasting scars in the ground. Forego a trench by choosing a site with good drainage, and bring a tent with a waterproof rain fly.

16. Eliminate the kitchen crowd

Campers tend to gather where food is prepared. Select a kitchen area that can handle the increased traffic. Eliminate the need for cooking around a fire by packing a propane or liquid-fuel stove.

17. Dispose of waste properly

According to Culver, the LNT movement has awakened backcountry users to the idea of planning a trip in reverse. Begin by considering how to dispose of the trash you will create and the waste you will produce while on the trail.

18. Kick a manure pile

"Manure piles make a huge visual and environmental impact on a camp," he says. "They take a long time to break down, sometimes even years. Scattering piles helps the manure break down and decompose into the soil." Pack a rake to make spreading easier.

19. Scat like a cat

Human waste can threaten a camp's sanitation and unnecessarily attract animals. When nature calls, travel 200 feet from the nearest water source. Dig a "cathole" six to eight inches into the ground, and fill it in when finished.

20. Ditch the packaging

Food is often packaged in multiple layers of plastic, foil and cardboard. Reduce potential trash ahead of time by removing all but the last layer of wrapping. Store dry goods in reusable containers like glass jars, or sealable plastic bags or containers.

21. Leave what you find

If everyone takes something with them—a shedded antler, an arrowhead, or even too much grazing grass for their stock," explains Culver, "then there won't be anything left to share." Take steps to preserve the joy of discovery for future travelers.

22. Cut the doughnuts

A "doughnut" is created when a tethered horse grazes around the base of a tree. Carry a set of hobbles in your saddlebag to "free graze" your horse during mid-day breaks.

23. Rotate grazing areas

Prevent overgrazing by moving stock every eight to 12 hours. Control your stock's grazing patterns by using 30-foot pickets, or stringing a temporary electric fence.

24. Preserve the archeology

Do not disturb human artifacts—unless it's trash. In that case, pick it up.

25. Minimize campfire impact

There's a misconception that LNT principles are anti-campfire. Culver notes that is not the case. "I like campfires, and when the conditions are right, I enjoy having one," he says. "For safety, never hesitate to build a fire if someone is cold or hypothermic."

26. Use readily available firewood

Collect wood that is already on the ground, and don't chop it into fire-size pieces until it is ready to be burned. If you're camping where there isn't enough wood for a fire, then don't have one. If you don't use all the wood you collect, scatter it to make the campsite appear the way you found it.

27. Use a fire ring

The heat from a campfire penetrates deep into the soil, killing roots and sterilizing nutrients. If an existing fire ring is not available, build your own by spreading a fire-retardant cloth over non-organic ground (rock, gravel, a dry ravine) and covering it with dirt.

28. Burn paper trash

"It's fine to burn paper and cardboard trash in a campfire," Culver notes, "so long as it gets burned down to ash." Do not burn plastics, as they emit harmful toxins into the air and soil.

29. Avoid game trails

"I don't mind using a game trail to explore," says Culver, "but if I encounter an obstruction, I don't clear it." Once a game trail is cleared, it will catch the attention of future riders and become a people trail. Wildlife won't use it anymore. Check to see if game trails pass near or through your campsite and, if so, don't block them with a tent or grazing pasture.

30. Don't feed the bears

It's important not to habituate animals to human food or presence. Keep cooking areas free of scraps and crumbs. Use animal-proof containers for overnight food storage. If traveling in bear country, store food in an animal-proof bag hung from a tree.

31. Respect endangered wildlife

Some of the nation's most endangered flora and fauna are found in the backcountry. Pack a field guide to help recognize endangered species that need to be treated with special care.

32. Be considerate of others

Stock-users have the right of way on most trails, Culver says, but that doesn't mean they have priority over hikers or mountain-bikers. It is important to be a courteous trailside neighbor. Unfortunately, there is a negative stereotype that horses and mules ruin trails, that riders are discourteous and that saddle stock overgrazes backcountry grasslands. A little effort on the part of each backcountry rider can help erase those negative stereotypes, set a standard for others to follow and help protect public lands for future outings.

Ryan T. Bell is a Montana-based writer. To learn more about the Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics, visit lnt.org. For information on the National Outdoor Leadership School, visit nols.edu. Send comments on this story to edit@westernhorseman.com.