

BACKCOUNTRY
INSIGHT

The Buddy System

BY RYAN T. BELL

Managing a large number of pack and saddle stock in the backcountry can be difficult, specially during critical moments like when arriving in or departing from camp. Matt Henningsen, a livestock outfitter in Yellowstone National Park, uses the "buddy system" for temporary stock restraint. This old-time outfitter trick enables stock animals to be tethered in groups of two and three without the need of pickets, hobbles or highlines.

"If you watch horses and mules in a pasture, they naturally buddy up and stand nose-to-tail," Henningsen says. "The buddy system takes advantage of that instinct."

For saddle mounts, position two horses so they face in opposite directions. Tie each horse's lead rope to the other's saddle horn, using a clove hitch (see sidebar). Leave about 16 inches of lead rope, enough for each horse to move its head freely, but short enough so that it can't get a hoof caught in the rope.

For pack stock, buddy them together in groups of three. Their wider loads require more space than what is needed for two saddle horses. Tie two of the mules in a string behind the third mule, using a pigtail knot (see sidebar).

Then, circle the front mule around and tie its lead to the back of the rear mule's pack saddle, in a pinwheel-like configuration. If one mule steps forward, it tugs on the next animal, and so on, causing the trio to walk in a circular motion. This stationary walking formation, sometimes referred to as a "mule-go-round," keeps stock from wandering far from camp.

"You must know your stock before using the buddy system in the backcountry," Henningsen says. "First, watch the herd to figure out what the horse and mule groupings should be. Then, train the animals by buddying them inside a round corral. It doesn't take long for them to learn to stand still."

The buddy system allows mules and horses to be temporarily restrained in most backcountry field and meadow environments, but it doesn't come without warnings.

"This is a short-term stock-retention technique," Henningsen cautions. "A packer shouldn't leave horses and mules buddyed up for longer than one or two hours. And a field needs to have adequate space so stock can move around without encountering obstacles, sharp drop-offs, or cliffs." 🐾

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Saddle stock can be temporarily restrained in pairs by tying each horse's lead rope to its partner's saddle horn.



Pack stock require more space and should be buddyed up in groups of three.



RYAN T. BELL/PHOTOS

Clove Hitch

How to tie: Circle the rope around an object, passing the running end over the body to create a friction bite. Use the running end to make a second wrap adjacent to the first. Tuck the tail under the loop created by the second wrap. Pull tight from the body to exert friction pressure and secure the rope to the object.



Pigtail Knot

How to tie: Double the lead rope and pass it through the breakaway attached to the next pack saddle. Collect the doubled and running ends together, and use the rope body to secure them with a half hitch. Pull on the rope body to tighten.