



# BACKCOUNTRY BOUND:

## Hobbles, Stakes and Highlines

These simple restraints can mean the difference between a restful camp stay and a long, impromptu search for livestock.

STORY BY HOLLY ENDERSBY  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DARRELL DODDS

**I**t happens every year. No matter where we go, our backcountry camps are visited by escapees from other outfits, usually causing a ruckus among our own stock. We dutifully gather up the animals, put them on a separate highline and wait for their owners to arrive.

Some folks have to walk a long way to retrieve their critters, and most of them arrive with a mixture of relief at finding their animals and frustration that they had to go on a search in the first place. Having gone on a few missions like that ourselves in the early years of our backcountry travels, we can sympathize. Today, our searches are kept to a minimum as our use of hobbles, stakes and highlines keeps our livestock safe and easily managed.



Remember to consider shelter for your horse when using a highline, and keep hobbles handy to prevent animals from pawing.

### Hobbles are Key

Hobbles are simple restraints that take the edge off mules eager to explore, put a crimp in most horses' wanderlust and keep animals from pawing on the highline at night, as well. Several types of hobbles are available, but we prefer grazing hobbles for backcountry use. These fit just above the hoof on the front legs, with a length of chain between them, and allow the animal to move and graze.

Grazing hobbles come in a variety of styles and materials, including neoprene and nylon combos, or traditional leather. The neoprene models are less expensive and are nice during cold weather as they don't get stiff and hard to manage like their leather counterparts can. However, neoprene hobbles don't last as long. One

way to avoid having to wrestle with stiff leather during cold weather is to keep leather hobbles inside your tent until you're ready to put them on stock.

Grazing hobbles can be permanently attached to each other with metal links or semi-permanently with metal links secured by a locking carabineer—allowing horsemen to turn the hobbles into a single hobble for use as a stake-out.

Getting a horse accustomed to hobbles isn't rocket science but does take preparation. Place hobbles on animals without any preparation, and the end result is often ugly. Some animals rear and flip over, while others frantically struggle and eventually fall down. Neither scenario needs to happen.

Hobble-training for one of our horses

or mules starts by running soft ropes all over his body—around his legs, behind his hooves and under his tail. Once the animal is used to the rope roaming all over his body, a handler picks up each front hoof with the rope while a partner holds the halter and lead rope. We don't tie the rope around the hoof, but simply drape it around the hoof, so we can let go if necessary.

We lift the hoof a couple of inches off the ground and set it back down immediately. The object is not to scare the animal or make him struggle. We want the horse to learn that a rope around his leg—or anyplace else on his body—is no reason to panic. Eventually, one person leads the horse while another walks alongside slightly behind the animal's shoulder, holding a rope passed around



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the front of a foot, providing some tension and resistance. Again, the rope is draped, not tied, around the foot.

An older horse is already used to having his feet handled for farrier work, so a rope around his hoof should not be frightening. But keep safety in mind at all times and be ready to release the rope if the horse starts to panic or kicks out.

The first time you hobble your horse, do so on ground that has soft footing and is free of hazards. Have a helper handy and be ready to move fast. The helper's job is to hold the lead rope close to the halter while you put the hobbles on the horse. Make sure you stay to the horse's side as you buckle on the hobbles. Don't reach across to fasten buckles on the opposite hobble; for safety's sake, walk around to the other side.

Hobbles shouldn't be too tight—just snug enough to make sure they can't slide over the hoof. Once the hobbles are on, have your helper unsnap the lead rope, and then both of you need to walk a safe distance away. Most animals stand still for a moment before they try to walk, and when they take that first

step, they generally stumble and look ungainly until they get the idea of either taking small steps or hopping forward. If your horse is bonded to you, give lots of verbal encouragement, as the sound of your voice will be comforting.

Within a couple of minutes, your horse should be moving easily with the grazing hobbles on.

While grazing hobbles take off the edge, don't think your animals are incapable of moving quickly or traveling long distances while wearing them—they can. We always stake out one mule because she can travel faster than a speeding bullet while hobbled and delights in leading off the other animals, as well.

We never let all our animals graze with hobbles on at the same time. If the herd were to run off, we want at least one good saddle animal at hand to go find them. Often, our herd is divided into two groups for grazing.

If you keep hobbles on your stock for long periods of time, check the flesh around the hoof to be sure the skin does not become irritated or rubbed raw. A little bit of bag balm applied to the area

rubbed by the hobbles will keep the skin in good condition.

### Stake Out for Ease of Mind

In addition to hobbles, we often stake our horses. This allows the animals to graze, but their movements are confined to smaller areas. This practice uses a heavy-duty steel stake with a strong rope attached, that is pounded into the ground at least a foot deep. Be certain to use a strong stake with a long shaft, because, should your horse pull the stake free and run, he will have a potentially deadly projectile trailing behind. The free end of the rope has a sturdy clip attached, which is secured to a single-leg hobble. Be sure to use one single piece of rope for the tether. Spliced ropes can come apart when an animal takes off at a run and hits the end, the force separating the two pieces.

The first time we stake an animal, or if we have a horse or mule prone to running on the stake line, before unclipping his lead rope we hand walk him to the end of the rope so he can feel the resistance.

If your horse is used to hobbles, his response to being staked should be uneventful. And, if you have done the exercise of walking the horse with a rope draped around his foot, the single-leg hobble will feel very familiar to him.

We often stake our horses while letting the mules graze with hobbles. We have found that mules rarely leave the horses they live with, especially if a mare is staked, and this keeps our entire herd close together. If the mules do start to wander, one of the horses invariably sounds the alarm, and we easily shoo the mules back where we want them.

### Highlines Control the Group

We often use highlines to tie horses and mules at night or when we leave part of the herd in camp during the day. This type of restraint ensures none of our critters wanders while we're getting some needed shut-eye, or follows when we ride out of camp.

When using a highline, think about shelter for your animals such as placing



If your animal is used to being hobbled, his response to being staked should be fairly uneventful. As part of his stake training, this mule learns to accept pressure on one foot with a cotton rope.



A bowline knot on a stake or highline is secure, will not pull tight and can easily be undone if an animal gets tangled.

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Horses or mules tied on a highline should have a safe distance between them.

them under trees. We try to hang the ropes so the animals have a bit of shelter from rain or snow, while still maintaining a safe distance between them. Ideally, horses or mules tied on a highline should not be able to touch one another. This translates into a lot of rope, so plan ahead for how much to bring on your backcountry adventure.

If you have an animal that pulls on the rope, put him on his own highline. That way, if he pulls the rope lower during the night or while you're gone during the day, he's the only animal involved. As another safety precaution, we use a bowline knot to attach our animals' lead ropes to the highline. A bowline, while secure, will not pull tight and can easily be undone if an animal gets tangled. Be sure to retighten your highline each evening and more often if it's raining or snowing, as moisture often allows cotton rope to stretch and sag dangerously.

When feeding on the highline, we lengthen the horses' lead ropes just enough for the animals to reach the ground. When they're done eating, we shorten their ropes again. This safety measure is important because an animal with a too-long lead rope can easily step over the rope and get in trouble if he struggles.

If you have a horse that paws while on the highline, leave his hobbles on. There's nothing more irritating than lying in your sleeping bag listening to an animal pawing all night long and, just as bad, it destroys the ground under the highline.

Teaching a horse to stand quietly for long periods of time is one of the most overlooked backcountry skills. To avoid problems on a highline, your horse or mule should be used to being tied for several hours. We begin tying our young horses and mules next to their mothers or next to a surrogate mother, such as one of our older geldings. By the time

the youngsters are 2, they are expected to stand quietly for up to six hours. Tied animals should be restrained in a hazard-free area and checked frequently, and the first time we tie a young or new horse, we stay with him to be sure he doesn't get into trouble.

By now it should be clear that much of our backcountry training is done at home. This preparation is a lot like that for showing horses—you don't teach your horse a new maneuver in the warm-up pen or during your class, you take care of that before entering the show.

Teach your horses backcountry skills at home, and then you can successfully apply them in the backcountry, making your adventure safer for both you and your animals. 🐾

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*Holly Endersby is an Idaho-based writer and avid backcountry rider. Send comments on this article to [edit@westernhorseman.com](mailto:edit@westernhorseman.com).*