

Plan the Packing Adventure of a Lifetime
Contributed by Ryan T. Bell
Photography by Lynn Donaldson

A spur-of-the-moment decision to go is often enough to carry a horseman out on a simple trail ride, but a pack trip calls for much more planning. Montana guides Kipp Saile and Kail Mantle offer tips on how to prep for a safe and unforgettable backcountry adventure.

The wilderness has a magnetic effect on most of us. Fishermen dream of setting out for an alpine stream, where naïve trout line up for their turn on a hook. Hunters imagine themselves in splendid isolation, stalking elusive game through rugged country.

Photography buffs aspire to document hidden canyons and valleys. And plenty of riders yearn to explore the wilderness on horseback, with a string of pack animals in tow.

If a pack-trip fantasy is to become reality, though, you need a plan, and a detailed one at that, given the logistics of taking saddle stock, pack stock, people and gear into the wild for days on end. Here, veteran guides Kipp Saile of Rockin's HK Outfitters, based in Montana's Paradise Valley, and Kail Mantle, of Montana Horses, a Three Forks-based supplier of pack and saddle stock, share their insight on how to plan a successful, safe and satisfying pack-trip adventure.

1) Pick a Destination

When choosing a dream destination, you need look no farther than Uncle Sam's backyard. Covering millions of acres of public land, U.S. national parks (nps.gov) and national forests (fs.fed.us) offer plenty of ground to explore. When researching a particular locale, pay close attention to park and forest regulations, as rules and fees vary by location.

2) Learn the Rules

National forests and parks offer the same opportunities for getting into the backcountry; Saile explains, but there are a couple of differences to keep in mind. For instance, in national parks, packers must buy overnight permits and make camp in designated campsites, which must be reserved ahead of time (recreation.gov). National forests, in comparison, don't require backcountry permits although some require day-use fees and packers are often allowed to make camp wherever they see fit. Because reservations are not required, forest campsites are first-come, first-served.

3) Hold Your Horses

The Park Service prefers that animals roam when they graze so that they don't overly impact one area, Saile says. The Forest Service, on the other hand, allows you to tie a horse to a tree or from a highline overnight. Rather than change out his pack gear, Saile takes a ribbon of electric wire and a charger unit to fence off a meadow Pasture, a solution that works in both forests and parkland. For insurance, he hobbles animals that might wander in the night or be difficult to catch in the morning.

Hobbling is a viable option for keeping horses in camp, but Mantle warns against using stakes or pickets, two restraint methods losing favor with professional outfitters. Two horses in my career have had their shoulders yanked out because something went wrong, Mantle says. A bear or a wolf spooked them, and they ran until they hit the ends of their pickets.

4) Get Local Knowledge

Part of the allure of packing is exploring new terrain, but it's best to thoroughly research the lay of the land before you embark. Local outfitters are your best source of information, Saile says. If you're unfamiliar with a trail, ask locals for good recommendations. They know where the best trails are, where the wildlife is, and what the weather will be like.

Other good resources include topographical maps, aerial photography (maps.google.com), and weather resources that provide radar images of storm movements (weather.com). Finally, nothing beats the firsthand experience of a reconnaissance trip. A rider can gain insight into grass quality and water sources within the first couple of miles of a trailhead.

5) Make an Itinerary

Saile recommends first-time packers get their feet wet with a three- or four-day trip. You can quickly get in over your head on a longer trip, he explains. For experienced packers, five or six-day trips are great. That'll enable you to cover more ground and get that much farther into the backcountry.

When mapping out an itinerary, consider if a trip will follow an out-and-back or a circular route. An out-and-back route is best for a trip with a specific destination, a lake, for instance - where you establish one base camp for the duration of your stay. Packers looking to cover more ground should plan a circular route, making multiple camps along the way. If you do that, put together as light a camp outfit as possible, something you can set up and take down quickly, Mantle advises. You don't have much free time if you're constantly setting up camp. You want to have time to sit back and enjoy the experience.

6) Let the Grass be Your Guide

Saile chooses his camp based on what's best for his horses. I camp wherever the grass is best, he explains. Horses search out the best grass, and if that's a mile down the trail, you'll be walking in the morning to fetch your stock, guaranteed. Mantle suggests organizing a camp's layout to prevent being stranded in the night by a runaway herd. I set up camp on the down-trail side of the grazing pasture, says Mantle. That way, if my horses spook, they have to run past my tent on their way back to the trailhead. Hopefully, I have a chance to catch at least one or two hobbled horses before they get away.

7) Estimate Your Stock Needs

To calculate how many pack animals are needed for a trip, use the ratio of one pack animal per rider. This allows for camp gear, tack and personal items necessary for an extended trip. Add extra pack animals if you plan to bring camp chairs, extra food and drinks, and fishing gear.

A pack animal can carry about 150 pounds, notes Mantle. Granted, most riders weigh more than that, but a pack load is dead weight, which is tougher to carry because, unlike a rider, it can't adjust itself in the saddle. Saile points out that a horse's load sways from side to side as it walks down a trail, requiring packers to stop and reset the load over the course of a trip. Mules, however, carry their loads more steadily and have what Saile calls a sixth sense for the trail. When you come to a tree that's close to the trail, a mule has the common sense to step around it, he explains. A horse, however, might bang his load against the tree a dozen times before it learns to step around.

8) Go with the Right Gear

Saile considers the following gear essential on any backcountry trip:

Packsaddles and Panniers.

Saile uses both Decker and Sawbuck packsaddles in his operation. Deckers, he says, work best for sling-loads, and Sawbucks are best for hanging loads. Pack a minimum of large tools: an ax for cutting firewood and clearing trail, a shovel for digging latrines (avoid collapsible Army shovels), and a rake for camp clean up. Don't forget replacement horseshoes and nails, a clincher, nippers and a small hammer.

Sleeping Gear.

Always pack with the worst weather conditions in mind. That means bringing quality, three-season tents and sleeping bags. Saile recommends sleeping gear be stored in wet bags when packed inside of panniers to protect against rain and snow. Be sure to bring a fold-up rain fly that can be strung between trees to give shelter in camp.

Make sure your saddle fits properly and double-pad every horse to prevent sores. Check that all tie strings are in good working order and long enough to tie on extra gear, like rain jackets. It's also a good idea to keep a pack saw on your saddle for cutting firewood and removing snags that might block the trail.

Cooking Gear.

Bring two propane cook stoves, with a total of four burners for cooking and heating water. The extra cook space is a luxury worth having in the wilderness.

Food.

Saile recommends portioning out food ahead of time by making a menu and calculating how much each person will eat. Remember that packs lose weight as food supplies

diminish over the course of a trip. Take this into account and redistribute weight evenly among pack animals. Inside camp, be aware that predators might be nearby; store food in a bag hung by a rope from a tree branch.

Water.

Liquids are the heaviest items to pack and should be kept to a minimum. Collect water from flowing streams and rivers (avoid standing water sources) and double filter all drinking water by passing it through a ceramic filter, then a commercial water-pitcher filter.

Ryan T. Bell is a Montana-based writer. To learn more about Rockin's HK Outfitters' pack trips into Yellowstone National Park, visit www.rockinhk.com . For information on leasing pack and saddle horses from Montana Horses, visit montanahorses.com.