

Keep Em Close

Hold your Stock

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One of the great things about the U.S. is the amount of public lands that we have open to trail riding. From coast to coast there are outstanding places to ride and camp with your mule. Along with the wonderful opportunities that these wide open spaces hold for us is the chance that our mounts or pack stock can wander off if not securely contained.

Unfortunately, every year there are stories about missing horses and mules. Some of these tales are second and third hand and some have a more immediate impact on us. I, for one, have learned the hard way to make sure that I'm using an effective technique to hold these magnificent and powerful creatures. Fortunately for me recovering a lost animal has never taken more than a few hours and blisters on my part. For other riders the outcomes have been less positive. With that in mind let's take a look at a one method of containing our stock while we're away from the home front.



In camp (either at the trailhead or in the backcountry) [highlines](#) are both a simple and lightweight means of ensuring that your mule is still nearby in the morning. A [highline](#) is at its most basic a length of rope stretched between two trees to which you have tied your stock.

Leave No Trace (LNT) is a key concern with highlines as a rope alone can rub through the bark and damage or kill a tree. To prevent this you should distribute the rope's pressure with [tree saver straps](#) which are essentially lengths of wide polyester webbing that wrap around the tree. If you don't have dedicated [tree saver](#) straps an old cinch will do the job as well. When setup correctly and responsibly, a highline will leave very little evidence that you have been there.

To set up a highline simply find two stout trees (or two trailers, or a combination thereof) in a location that is relatively level, free of hazards, and has good footing.

The distance between the trees (or trailers, or big rocks) should allow enough room to keep the mules from rubbing or chewing on the tree as well as being far enough from each other that they cannot make mischief with one another.

As you already know a mule is incredibly strong and can make short work of an object that seems to you and I to be plenty solid. Before you hang your [tree savers](#) take a good look to ensure that the tree is at least a foot in diameter as well as strong and alive. A widow maker can appear fine at ground level but a quick glance up will reveal the true danger to you and your mule. Many thanks to Maggie and Piper; two fine mules who showed me what can happen when tied to a weak tree, and that they were level headed enough to stand still during the aftermath.



Setting up the [highline](#) itself can be as easy or as complicated as you wish. The easiest and least expensive method involves learning to tie a few handy knots instead of purchasing expensive single purpose gadgets. The [Bowline](#),

[Half Hitch](#), [Alpine Butterfly](#), and [Prusik](#) are camp staples and easy to learn. Look online or find a Boy Scout to help you. Regardless of how you learn these camp skills you'll be glad you took the time to do so.

The rope you use for a [highline](#) must be strong and easy to handle when wet or cold. I find that 3/8 inch polyester rope works well for me. My [highline](#) rope is bright pink which helps to keep me from losing it as well as keeping others from borrowing it.

You'll have several options when securing your mules to the [highline](#). You can opt to use hardware such as a metal ring or a knot eliminator, or you can use a prussic knot which has the benefit of being much cheaper and lighter, while still being strong.

Regardless of how you connect the mule's lead to the [highline](#), be diligent about not having the lead too long. If I'm going to be watching them very closely I will sometimes make the lead long enough that they can just barely reach the ground with their noses. Generally I opt for the safer choice of tying the lead so that they can drop their heads to rest but not touch the ground. I'd rather they lose a little rest than get tangled in a rope.



Now that you've read through 761 words on the why's and how's of a [highline](#) let's look at the 7 easy steps of setting up a [highline](#):

The steps:

- Wrap [tree savers](#) around each tree. Higher is better. I like them about 7 feet high.
- Secure one end of the rope to one [tree saver](#) with a quick release [Bowline](#) knot.
- Create a loop in the rope between the two tree savers with an [Alpine Butterfly](#) knot.
- Run remainder of your rope through the other [tree saver](#) and bring it through the loop. You've just created a pulley with a 2 to 1 mechanical advantage that will make tightening the line an easy proposition.
- Pull very tight and secure with two [Half Hitches](#).
- Secure tie points to the highline with [Prusik](#) knots. Keep the tie points at least 7 feet from the nearest tree.
- Rest easy through the night.

As always for more information on this, including a "[how to" highline video](#), and many other trail riding topics as well as the largest riding area directory in the U.S. please visit www.TrailMeister.com . Enjoy your mule camping adventures!

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