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**Happy Trails or Trail of Tears**

by Angela Kirby

All across the nation, people are hitting the trails with their horses. Whether an impromptu ride on local land or a weekend ride with camping and cookouts, horse people love to get together and just ride.

As mentioned in last month's article "When the Thrill is Gone," there is nothing worse than going home from an event with an empty trailer. Yet, it happens all of the time, and it can happen to you.



Photo courtesy of Nikki Sweet

Can you imagine taking a fall and the last thing you see is the trail of dust behind your horse as it charges ahead without you and with no sense of direction? Now what?

Well, hopefully, only your pride is injured. But how do you get your horse back? If you are fortunate enough to be riding with good trail buddies, they will head out after your horse or loan you a horse to search on. In the meantime, someone needs to get back to the trail head and

alert others of the missing horse. Time is of the essence, and the purpose of this article is so that you will be prepared before you hit the trail again.

Facing the Unexpected

There are numerous external forces that can abruptly end a peaceful trail ride and cause horse and rider to become separated. From a pack of dogs like those that scared Lightfoot in Virginia; to creepy crawlers like a snake thought to have frightened Sonny in North Carolina; to thunderstorms that terrified Vega and Keid in Indiana; to hikers suddenly appearing as in Rennie's case in

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Tennessee; to cows that spooked Chester in New Hampshire and JN Wonder in Massachusetts - horses are flight animals and will flee when overcome by fear.

Of those mentioned above, Lightfoot, JN Wonder, and Rennie have not yet been found. JN Wonder is now considered stolen as all efforts to locate the horse have been exhausted and his owner and law enforcement believe someone took this horse (fully tacked) and has failed to report him to authorities. In Rennie's case, she was declared stolen after a witness saw her being loaded onto a trailer before her owner



Keid (pictured before and after missing) and his companion Vega broke lose during a storm while penned at a trail ride. They were found in a field a month later, emaciated but alive.

Photo courtesy of NetPosse

could make it back down off the mountain. Could Lightfoot be stolen, as well?

Then there is Shotzee in Wyoming. She got loose on a camping trip and found her way back to the trailer. Her hoof prints were obvious in the fresh snow, but so were the signs that someone had loaded her onto their trailer and disappeared with her. She hasn't been seen since.

On another note, many trail rides are planned over holiday weekends due to the extended time off from work. Riders need to keep in mind that during these times, often those celebrating have less regard for horses, and even the most "bombproof" horses can be spooked.

Fireworks and horses just don't mix. Aside from possible injuries, the unexpected and loud noise can quickly send a horse into full charge - out from under a rider or through a temporary corral. Take Ben in Pennsylvania, for example. He was tied to his trailer when the loud noise of fireworks caused him to break his leadrope and bolt. Luckily, he was recovered four days later about a mile away. Remember, even the best riders or calmest horses can be victims of unexpected incidents.

#### Those Left Behind

Never did Karen Studeman imagine she would spend her endurance ride in Oregon, the weekend of June 16, 2006, searching for her horse, Sadie, who spooked when stung by bees. By the end of the weekend, Karen was left to find Sadie on her own. Fortunately, Karen's friend, Kathy, stuck with her all the way from their home state of Washington. While Karen looked for Sadie, Kathy jumped on the Internet and began getting the word out, even filing a report for Karen with NetPosse, the Web site for Stolen Horse International, a nonprofit organization. It took three days, but Sadie was spotted by a hiker, and Karen and those who had joined her search, found the mare safe and sound.



JN Wonder was spooked by cows while he was on the trail. He is now considered stolen by law enforcement. Photo courtesy of NetPosse

Upon finding Sadie, Kathy emailed the good news to Debi Metcalfe, founder of NetPosse: "Wow. The outpouring of concern is awesome. Debi, you are truly a force to reckon with. You don't know how much this means to me and I'm sure Kathy... Thank you again."

#### Against All Odds

The Cadman family had to return home from a camping trip without their child's pony, Possum. It was a difficult decision, but they had no choice. The little Arabian had spooked on the trail and disappeared. It was September in Washington, and as winter set in and the weeks then months passed with no sightings, the Cadman's lost hope of finding Possum. There was no way a horse could survive on his own that many months and in the rough, cold and snowy weather - or was there?

In January, an unexpected phone call came. The Cadman's were astounded to learn that someone had recently spotted Possum near where he had vanished. But there was a problem. The area where the pony was seen happened to be on government property behind a locked gate. However, the family moved forward with this renewed hope that just maybe it was Possum.

Upon locating the key to the gate, the Cadman's arrived and were able to find their beloved pony. Down on his weight and scraggly, he had survived the harsh winter and being alone for four months - at times standing in snow up to his belly.

#### The Clock is Ticking

Unfortunately, not all missing trail horses are as lucky as the ones mentioned above. Some actually become stolen horses, such as JN Wonder and Rennie, and others are not found alive. Again, time is always of the essence - it can work for you or against you.

Before ever heading out on the trail, there are many steps that can be taken to hopefully speed up the recovery process should your horse get spooked or become missing while on the trail. Be armed with information you can gather without leaving your home. Know the address where your ride begins. Research online the contact information for area agencies including law enforcement, forest rangers, riding clubs, and the like. Don't just dial 9-1-1. Program the numbers to these agencies in your phone. These numbers and resources could come in handy when you need to report the horse missing and disburse information.

One of the most important items you can take with you is a complete description of your horse and pictures. If you are injured or you ride off to search for your horse,



**This brave little Arab spent four months alone in the woods of Washington state before he was reunited with his family. Photo courtesy of NetPosse**



**Having a network of good trail riding buddies can be essential if your horse spooks on the trail. Photo courtesy of Nikki Sweet**

someone else can take this information and give it to local law enforcement or even file a report with NetPosse on your behalf.

Many times a horse is found nearby, but the finder would need to know how to contact the owner. Therefore, place id on the horse's halter, bridle or saddle with your information on it.

However, if the horse sheds his tack, then what? NetPosse has a solution for this - leg id bands. These are similar to the id bands used by hospitals. Another form of temporary id promoted by NetPosse is a hoof brand. By having your farrier brand your zip code on the hooves, the finder can contact law enforcement in your area and report your found horse.



**Hoof branding and id bands are temporary forms of identification recommended by NetPosse.com for trail horses. Photo courtesy of NetPosse**

Forming search teams, notifying local agencies and posting flyers are also all important steps in a successful recovery, but a key thing to remember is when a horse takes flight it can travel up to 10 miles in an hour. Thus your horse could wind up in another county or jurisdiction. Therefore, it is critical to contact agencies in surrounding counties.

Whenever a horse is lost, people are encouraged to file a report with NetPosse because this organization can be your link to members in the area who can offer support and resources. The volunteers can physically help search for your horse or simply notify area agencies so they are aware of the missing horse.

#### Coming Full Circle

Sometimes when looking for a lost horse, the owner needs to keep returning to the original place where the horse disappeared. Horses have their own built-in GPS. In the best case scenarios, horses utilize these senses and find their way back home or to the point of origin.

In April 2008, Gypsy, a Tennessee Walking Horse mare, took off when a rider attempted to mount and the saddle slipped. Her owner Ty Neal searched with friends, family and park rangers relentlessly for 17 days before Gypsy reappeared less than 2 miles from where she was lost in Cooper Black Jr. State Park in South Carolina.



**Gypsy bolted on a trail when her saddle slipped. She found her way back to civilization 17 days later. Photo courtesy of NetPosse**

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When the horse's brain switches to flight mode, not much can stop him. This can cause the horse to become disoriented. It also explains why it is often 10 days or more before the horse wanders back to the edge of civilization. He will search for food and water sources, but being a herd animal, he will also seek out other horses.

Lost horses have been found huddled in the woods close to home, in cow or horse pastures, or back at the trail where their flight originated.

#### Divine Intervention

If anyone wants to know how it feels to leave a horse behind and travel home to another state, just ask Marty Findley. When her 21-year-old Morgan mare, Wildflower, vanished in the middle of the night on Friday, May 16, Marty was panicked. She couldn't wrap her thoughts around the fact that the mare could have slipped her halter and left the other horses behind. She really believed Wildflower had been stolen. Despite the possibility, Marty knew she had to search for her horse.

A long way from her home in Tennessee, Marty was on a ride in the Jake Mountain Horse Camp in Lumpkin County, Georgia. Fortunately, her trail buddies rallied around her and immediately began looking for Wildflower. In the meantime, her friend Mary Lesley contacted Stolen Horse International and filed a report so that the organization could post Wildflower on its site and issue an alert, much like the Amber Alert, but for horses. Throughout the weekend, Marty and others searched the area, but to no avail.

By Sunday, Marty had no choice but to return home due to family obligations. The devastation she felt from leaving Wildflower behind was so overwhelming that Marty drove down the road with tears pouring down her face. Amazingly, her grief led her to Wildflower.

Marty was crying so hard that she missed her turn and ended up on the wrong road. When she finally found a place to turn around, the homeowner came outside to see who was in the drive. Marty stopped to inform him about her missing horse. The last thing she expected was for him to tell her he'd seen some fresh horse droppings near his property. Following her gut instinct, Marty and the gentleman hiked a little ways through the woods before Wildflower suddenly greeted them. She was unhurt and still wearing her plaid sheet.



**Wildflower - Possibly stolen from camp Georgia May 2008**  
**Wildflower was thought to be stolen when she vanished one night from a picket line. Divine intervention led her owner to find the mare while driving home to another state. Photo courtesy of NetPosse**

There is more to preparing for a trail ride than nailing on shoes, packing the gear, or loading the tack. It's nice to get away from the hectic world of technology including Internet, e-mail and cell phones, but these high-tech tools can be invaluable on the trail if you utilize them before leaving home.

Needless to say, Marty shed more tears when she caught sight of Wildflower. But this time of joy. While NetPosse wasn't directly involved in this recovery, Marty and Mary Leslie were amazed by the outpouring of support from the nonprofit's volunteer network. This incident will not keep Marty from the trails; in fact, she is on a mission to help NetPosse make the public aware of how this same thing can happen to anyone. Marty has already made plans to attend an organized ride in Tennessee this September and will join NetPosse founder Debi Metcalfe to share her story. We look forward to meeting her there.

In the meantime, we hope that all your trails this season are happy ones, but if not, NetPosse is here to help.

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**Reader comments for this article**

Name: Blaine Rankin Time: 2008-06-14 08:06:16

Comment: This was a very good article, but we need to remember that just because someone loads up a horse doesn't mean they are stealing the horse. I lost my horse in a similar incident, and the people who found him in the woods the next day took him home then found me. I was very thankful someone cared enough to take care of him. Luckily they found me through the grapevine but had I been in another state, I'm not sure they could have found me. From now on, I will have ID on my horse or his tack. I think most horsepeople have their heart in the right place. My heart goes out to those still looking. I will add if you are in this situation, alert the sheriff dept. in the surrounding counties.

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