

Working The Herd Instinct, To Your Advantage!

By Ed Haefliger

Every one of us that has spent any time with our horses or mules has had to deal with their behavior, known as the “herd instinct!” We have heard it described in many colorful terms such as “barn sour”, “herd bound”, or that blank-a-dee-blank critter will not move out. For me, it usually starts with, “Did I forget to lock up my truck?” That is about the last thing I want to think about on the trail while leading a pack string full of camping gear and tools. Following the hustle and bustle of getting under way, a memory lapse can happen sometimes way too often. Then I have to find a secure and safe set of trees to tie the string up and try to boot dear Maudie back down the trail, heading back to check on the security of my rig. “I don’t want to go!” Is the response I get from her all of the way back, along with a chorus of fog horn loud brays from her, meaning, “where are you guys?” “I am here and alone!” “I am not happy, Ed!”

I make every effort to get my riding animal that is so inclined to be joined at the hip with the others in her gang, to travel away with the least amount of negative effort as I can. In other words, I force the issue, but lightly, understanding what is going on in her head. If this is an old hand (experienced animal), I usually do not have too much of a problem, they just express their (apparently required) displeasure and grudgingly move out, but they know they will be back. However, if this is a youngster, this may be a different issue. They may just see a greater danger in leaving the string, which is safety in numbers, and offer a major storm brewing resistance. It is best to avoid this kind of situation at all costs. You have no way of knowing how they will store this kind of event in their memory library. Remember, try to never put a bad picture into



Maudie is free to roam, while she heads off to get a bite of grass, brush, or water, as I unload the pack string at Camp Pleasant, in the Olympic National Park.

This is a small privilege for packing my body around all day.

She is going nowhere without the rest of her herd!

their operator’s picture book if you can help it.

“Ok Ed, then what can I do to prevent this?” I hate to rely on the old statement, “Train For It”, but that is the answer. Riding out from anywhere will help to imprint that they are going to be safe with you alone and most importantly they will soon be reunited with their friends. Even after you have done this with success always be prepared to get some form of displeasure from your ride in these instances. I allow Maudie her minute of resistance and fame, and then I insist that we are going, using heels and keeping her head pointed in the direction I wish to travel. The next thing you know we are off. This is not exactly very fast at the be-

ginning of the away direction. In time, she will pick up the pace once we get some distance between us and the tied up string. I figure by now, she knows that the faster we get to wherever her idiot rider wishes to go, the faster she gets back. Note: This worried riding mule/horse will come back a whole lot faster than they ever went out.

This herd instinct business can apply directly to a pack string and how it operates. It does not matter if you are leading one pack animal or a dozen, they all will be a whole lot happier with more than one of their kind on the trail. They are more comfortable with more eyeballs looking for danger than just theirs. As an observation on occasion, I had my animal stop

in an attempt to get the next animal in line behind her to move up to take over the lead; her thought is, "I've had enough, now it's your turn!" In a rough or scary (to them) country, if the packers mount gets by an obstacle, normally the herd trust mindset will get them all by also. This is so important when one does not have the time or location to address each member of the pack string individually.

I have for several years now, turned my riding mule loose when I stop to adjust or correct a problem in the pack string's loads. I have had enough trouble finding a decent place to tie up the lead animal in the string, regardless of finding a spot for my ride. To date, I have never had a lone mule walk too far away from the string (herd). One day, Maudie did a wee walk-about, looking for a better blueberry bush. I listened to her bell tinkle around the bend and out of earshot. I finished my adjustments and plopped my tired backside down on a large convenient rock next to the trail and waited. I had just a couple of minutes to wait. Then the ting, ting of her bell was audible and back up the trail she came. Maudie stopped directly in front of me, looked me directly in the eyes, as if to ask, "Where have you been?" I have had some bad situations where I had to turn a pack critter loose to fend for itself and never had one not work hard to keep up with us. A good example of this was when we were pulling over the First Divide summit and within the string I had a horse (Moby), on his first trip over, flamed out on me and refused to take one



Pack string crossing the avalanche shoot in this next story, but without any snow or ice in it. The snow and ice covered this whole area and the drain route was next to the downed tree.

more step. We were almost over the top! I could see the summit, just around one more turn and up through that steep meadow; "Oh, Moby you knot head!" "Ok now what to do? You're right, you figured me out!" I broke him out of the pack string and left him standing next to the trail! We had just rattled around that visible next corner and here he came just a smokin'. I reckon he saw his name on a cougar's menu and found the energy to catch up for some protective company. There is another facet to this herd instinct dynamic that comes with one nasty big fly in its ointment. If more than one of these characters get loose at the same time and heads back to the trail head, all

bets are off and they may just have started a brand new herd from a common intention. I hope you wore your hiking boots instead of those pointy toed cowboy ones.

I was packing a trail crew into Home Sweet Home Meadow, over the First Divide, when I ran into a snow filled avalanche shoot. This was going to be a bit of a challenge, because I could not get across the deep and wide drain on the far side. The plan was to slip and slide to the bottom of the snow and ice above the debris piles it had formed and then go into the drain and climb back up to the trail. That was the purposed plan, but Moby changed it in the middle of its execution. We got to the drain just fine, but as I led Maudie into it with the rest of the gang tied to her, Moby took the rest of the string onto the ice above us. You know exactly what he was going to do. Yep, he jumped across and over the drain, onto the trail next to it. Goodness, Ms. Kitty's mule onboard computer program declared "dumb horse" and breaks away, going back across the ice scooting toward the trail head, fifteen miles away. She is the most independent critter in the bunch and I was not sure how this field change Moby had plugged into the schedule was going to play out. After I sorted out the

Ed Haefliger

"In every case, the goal of intellectual life was to understand in order to teach others, to enable the next generation to learn what you yourself have mastered and to build on it."(Quote: Unknown author)

Coauthor: "The Mountain Canary Company Packers Guide Book" and "The Mountain Canary Company Trail Skills and More"

www.mtcnaryco.com or Email: mtcanary@msn.com or 360-427-4297

Volunteer Packer: Olympic National Park, Olympic National Forest, Washington State Department of Natural Resources; Member: Back Country Horsemen of Washington, Western Washington Long Ears Club

loose packs and got everyone secured to a mountain willow bush, I was going to start hoofing it up hill, when I saw her shyly looking around from behind a big six foot across fir tree, about two hundred

yards on the trail above me; what a good girl, that afternoon she went directly to the front of my Christmas list!

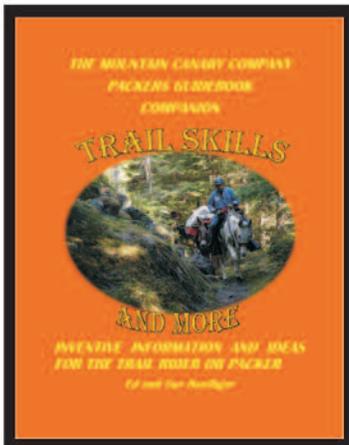
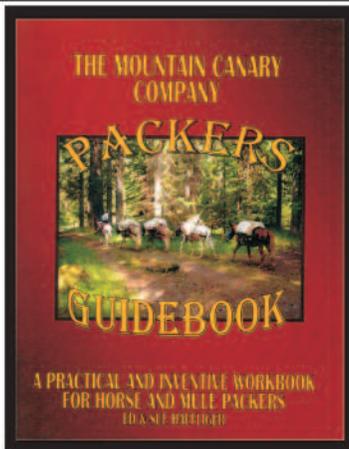
The buddy preference is at times, regarded as very important in placement, in

a string. Not to me, I save this preference only for the highline and then only for one or two critters. When I string them out, I will do so according to my needs, such as load types, size and drop off locations. I am not concerned with personality disagreements, because they all live in a small closed society, confined in smaller paddocks and pastures. They have learned long ago to get along together and rely on each other, in a somewhat different way.

Whenever anyone deals with a large animal, the herd instinct is the order of every day. To operate safely with these, you must be the herd leader, which means that you are never the playground bully or the pushed around snowflake. A true herd leader understands all of the ongoing herd dynamics that are maneuvering around. To learn and understand more about this, pull up a chair next to the fence to watch and learn. One can get an individual mule or horse to work outside of the herd, but remember the herd is never away from the critter's mind.

Mule Thoughts

Can't say I'm entirely pleased with my hip replacement!



Packers Guidebook

This book is a complete packing clinic between two covers. Ed and Sue Haefliger describe, in text and photo detail, how and why they use the packing system and methods that they have come to rely on. They take the reader systematically through the process of learning how to pack safely. Folks that have read it have commented not only on the great information within for any packer, but also the friendly and complete presentation.

The Packers Guidebook printed in black and white with color card stock covers is spiral bound for usefulness on a training site. There are 174 pages of instructions and information, including 328 photos, some with detailed instructions. The price is \$28.00 plus \$6.00 shipping and handling.

Trail Skills and More

“A companion book to the Packers Guidebook.”

It is not an extension to the original, but a separate book to offer information for the trail rider, back country stock camper, or packer. It consists of 76 essays on subjects of use and interest for folks participating in the above activities. It is written in an around the camp fire conversational presentation and laced with stories that explain why the authors offer the directions and information they do. It is printed and bound the same way as the original book and contains 166 pages of material, loaded with pertinent photos. It is not only an informative reference book but also just plain fun reading.

The price is also \$28.00 plus \$6.00 shipping and handling.

**Mountain Canary Company at: www.mtcanaryco.com
or 360-427-4297 or email: mtcanary@msn.com**