

## HORSE AND HERD BEHAVIOR INFORMATION SHEET

### SAFETY

The horse is a prey animal, meaning survives by running away from predators (animals that want to eat horses). Their natural predators are animals like cougars, wolves, or bears. As humans, we must remember we can look like a predator if we move too quickly, run, jump, or scream around horses.

Horses show dominance, who is in charge, by pushing or moving around other horses.

Horses are very social animals that like to live in groups called herds. They show their emotions and intents to herd mates through body language and noises such as whinnying. They also show affection through mutual grooming.

Because horses can be dangerous if we aren't careful, it is very important that riders and students always listen to their instructor. One way to stay safe near horses is to make sure they see you when you approach them. You can do this by approaching slowly from the shoulder to say hello! We should never run towards our horses and always wear a helmet when working with our horses. When we walk behind our horses, keep one hand on their back end, or hindquarters, so that they know we are behind them. We always want to stay close to them or VERY far away when walking behind them to avoid being in their "kick zone." A horse's "kick zone" is where they could accidentally kick and hurt you if they become scared.

### SOCIAL STRUCTURE

A herd of wild horses consists of one or two stallions, a group of mares, and their foals (babies). The leader of the herd is usually an older mare (the "alpha mare"), even though one stallion owns the herd. The stallion's group of mares is called a "harem". The stallion's job is to be the herd's protector. The stallion's harem usually consists of 2 to 21 horses, with up to 8 of those being mares and the rest are their foals. A stallion will own a herd for 2-10 years.

## BODY LANGUAGE

Horses are good at letting us know exactly how they are feeling; the only problem is most people don't know how to speak "horse". So here are some tips on reading a horse's body language.

### IF A HORSE'S TAIL IS:

HIGH: THEY ARE ALERT OR EXCITED

LOW: IT IS A SIGN OF EXHAUSTION, FEAR, PAIN OR SUBMISSION

HELD HIGH OVER ITS BACK: THEY ARE PLAYFUL OR VERY ALARMED

SWISHING: THEY ARE IRRITATED OR ANGRY

### THE HORSES' EARS:

NEUTRAL: IS WHEN THE EARS ARE HELD LOOSELY UPWARD, OPENINGS FACING FORWARD OR OUTWARD.

PRICKED: EARS HELD STIFF WITH OPENINGS POINTED DIRECTLY FORWARD MEANS THE HORSE IS ALERT.

AIRPLANE EARS: THE EARS FLOP OUT Laterally WITH OPENINGS FACING DOWN, USUALLY MEANING THE HORSE IS TIRED OR DEPRESSED.

DROOPED EARS: HANG DOWN LOOSELY TO THE SIDE, USUALLY MEANING TIREDNESS OR PAIN.

EARS ANGLED BACKWARD (WITH OPENINGS DIRECTED BACK TOWARDS A RIDER): USUALLY MEANS THE HORSE IS LISTENING TO THE RIDER.

EARS PINNED FLAT AGAINST THE NECK: THIS MEANS WATCH OUT! THE HORSE IS ANGRY.

### IF A HORSE'S LEGS ARE:

PAWING: THEY ARE FRUSTRATED

ONE FRONT-LEG LIFTED: CAN BE A MILD THREAT

A BACK-LEG LIFTED: IS OFTEN A THREAT

STOMPING: INDICATES A MILD THREAT OR PROTEST (OR THEY MAY BE GETTING RID OF INSECTS OR FLIES BITING THEIR LEGS).

### SOME HORSES' FACIAL EXPRESSIONS INCLUDE:

JAWS OPEN WITH TEETH EXPOSED: THIS SHOWS ANGER OR POSSIBLE ATTACK.

FLARED NOSTRILS: USUALLY MEANS THEY ARE EXCITED OR ALERT.

SHOWING WHITE AROUND THE EYES: USUALLY MEANS THEY ARE ANGRY OR SCARED.

(WHITE AROUND THE EYES IS A NORMAL CHARACTERISTIC OF THE APPALOOSA BREED.)

REFERENCE: [https://esc.rutgers.edu/fact\\_sheet/the-basics-of-equine-behavior/](https://esc.rutgers.edu/fact_sheet/the-basics-of-equine-behavior/)

## body language



**I want to get out of here or I have a bellyache.**  
Pawing with front feet.



**Hi, pal.** Ears tilted forward, head reaching toward you.



**I'm getting ready to buck, bite, or kick.** Ears pinned back flat against the head.



**I wonder what that is over there.** Ears forward, head high.



**Stay back or I'll bite you.** Ears pinned back, head reaching toward you.



**I'm really concentrating and listening to you.**  
Ears back when you are riding.



**Warning: I might kick you.** Lifting or stomping one hind leg (not at flies).



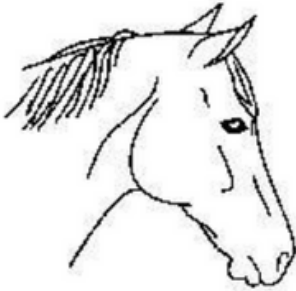
**I'm irritated or My stomach hurts.** Swishing tail (not at flies).



**I'm afraid or I don't respect you or I'm getting ready to kick you.** Swinging his hindquarters toward you.

## Reading a Horse's Ears

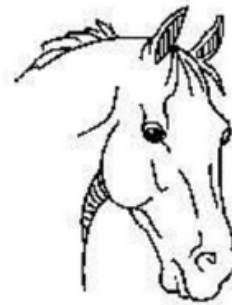
The horse's ears and actions are the key to his emotions. He can tell you what he is paying attention to and how he feels by the way he uses his ears and the way he acts. Following are some tips to his emotions.



**Ears forward but relaxed**  
interested in what's  
in front of him



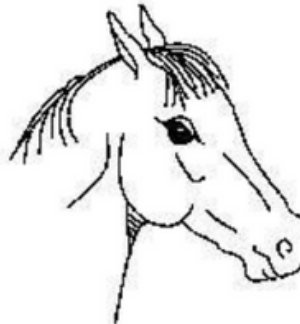
**Ears turned back but relaxed**  
listening to his rider  
or what's behind him



**Ears pointed stiffly forward**  
alarmed or nervous about what's  
ahead. Looking out for danger



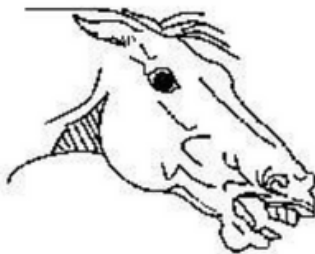
**Ears pointed left and right**  
relaxed, paying attention  
to the scenery on both sides.



**Ears stiffly back**  
annoyed or worried about what's  
behind him; might kick if annoyed.



**Droopy ears**  
calm and resting,  
horse may be dozing.



**Ears flattened against neck**  
violently angry, in a fighting mood.  
May fight, bite or kick.

### OTHER SIGNS YOU SHOULD NOTICE ARE:

- **Tucking the tail down tightly.**  
Danger to the rear.  
Horse may bolt, buck or kick.  
Watch out if ears are flattened too!
- **Switching the tail.**  
Annoyance and irritation:
  - at biting flies, stinging insects or tickling
  - bothersome actions of a rider or another horse.
- **Droopy ears and resting one hind leg on toe.**  
Calm and resting, horse may be dozing.  
Don't wake him up by startling him!
- **Wrinkling up the face and swinging the head.**  
Threatening gesture of an angry or bossy horse.  
Watch out for biting or kicking.