



Horse Instincts: Safety from the Ground

By Gerrie Barnes

One of the major reasons for emergency room care are accidents relating to horses. Much of this emergency room care could be avoided with an understanding of a horse's instincts.

Horses are animals of prey. They are not predators. Yet they have survived for 58 million years.

Why is this? Because they have a strong sense of survival. Instinctively they have known to flee when faced with danger. The organization of the herd has provided them with an early alert warning system and an organized plan for flight. In the wild a stallion is generally the lookout horse. This horse stays on the fringe of the herd and alerts the herd if he senses danger. The alpha mare in the group is generally the herd leader. If danger exists, she signals that it is time to flee and indicates the direction of flight. The herd then flees in the same direction.

Although people consider horses to be domesticated animals, they are domesticated only in that they are generally bred on ranches or breeding facilities. However, they have retained very real instincts. And even though they may be kept in stalls and there may never be a life-threatening situation occur in their natural lives, much of their behavior is still based on instincts.

Understanding these instincts is important to anticipating what a horse is going to do and how a horse is going to respond.

By understanding the flight instinct and the herd instinct you can more safely work around horses on the ground and anticipate horse behavior when you are riding.

When a horse encounters something new in his world, he reacts in a very specific order of survival: Will you kill or injure me? (Flight instinct) If not, then where are you in the pecking order of the herd? (Herd instinct).

The key to being safe around a horse is to understand the world from the horse's perspective. Whether or not the horse's behavior makes sense in human terms doesn't matter. You can be positive, for example, that the snow falling off the roof is not going to hurt the horse. However, you can finish your argument while you are picking yourself up off the ground while an 1100 pound animal runs over you.

Flight Instinct

The horse is very sensitive to danger and will flee at any indication of danger. Since the horse's eyesight and hearing are superior to humans, he can see objects and circumstances that he considers dangerous well before a human can.

Every minute you interact with a horse you must be on the alert for objects or circumstances that will activate the flight instinct.

Items or circumstances that a horse considers dangerous are not necessarily those you might consider dangerous.

- Plastic bags
- Jackets or rain slickers
- Blowing paper
- Motor vehicles
- Anything causing quick motion
- Anything making an unusual sound
- Anything appearing different in a visual pattern to which the horse has become accustomed

In addition to unfamiliar objects that can activate a horse's flight instinct, a horse's eyes operate independently. This can cause objects to "jump" at him, activating the flight instinct.

Some *safety* suggestions are:

- ✓ Watch where a horse's head and ears are positioned. If the head is dropped level with his shoulders and one or both of his ears are turned toward you, the horse is relaxed. If the horse suddenly lifts his head high and pricks his ears straight up and forward, he is focused intently on something other than you.
 1. Stop what you're doing.
 2. Make sure the horse has a flight path other than over you.
 3. Never put yourself between the horse and a fixed object.
- ✓ While standing near a horse, always keep your head to the side of the horse's head.
- ✓ Do not put your hand in the loop of any rope that is attached to the horse. Do not attach yourself in any way to the horse.
- ✓ Tie the horse to something secure. Don't tie the horse to a pen panel, a door handle, a log, etc.

Herd Instinct

Wildlife programs have provided information about why prey animals frequently travel in herds. Herds serve as protection from predators.

Within these herds there are herd leaders who fight to attain the position of herd leader and then continue to fight when challenged to maintain the position of herd leader.

Other herd members have different positions of dominance within the herd. The herd pecking order provides organization to the herd. The herd leader, for example, tells the herd when to move and where to move. Herd members higher on the pecking order get to eat and drink before members lower in the pecking order.

Horses are herd animals. A horse would rather be the lowest horse in the pecking order than be isolated from the herd. Isolation, to a herd animal, means being more vulnerable to predators and will likely result in death. What this means to you is that horses naturally accept and understand dominant behavior from other herd members.

Horses exhibit all sorts of aggressive behaviors to establish their level in the pecking order. The horse that controls the space is the one that is higher on the pecking order. (I want THAT piece of grass or drink of water... you move away...)

A horse's aggressive behavior will start in small, less-threatening ways and become progressively more insistent and aggressive. The more dominant horse does not want to injure another herd member. It is to the benefit of the entire herd that it stay strong and intact to protect the herd from predators.

Progressive behaviors to establish a more dominant herd position include:

- Pin their ears
- Block with their bodies
- Turn their hindquarters to another horse
- Raise their leg and act as though they are going to kick
- Kick
- Bare their teeth
- Act as though they are going to bite
- Nip
- Bite

The other horse will either back down or show more aggressive behavior. Maintaining the pecking order is a daily activity for herd animals.

The Human / Horse Relationship

Even if there are no other horses around to form a herd, the horse still has herd instincts. Since you are interacting with him on a regular basis, in his mind you become part of his herd.

Once your horse decides that he does not have to flee from you (flight instinct), his next question is where are you in the herd pecking order. In his mind this pecking order MUST be established. In his mind there MUST be a herd leader. This is a matter of 58 million years of survival instinct. Not having a herd leader makes the horse nervous. So, you are either higher than he is in the pecking order or lower. *Horses do not understand a democracy.* If you do not take the herd leader position, the horse must take the herd leader position . . . no matter how mild-mannered your horse was when you bought him.

If you allow your horse to take the herd leader position and be dominant over you, you can be pushed around, intimidated, kicked at or bitten. It is not because your horse does not like you. It is because that aggressive behavior is acceptable and expected herd behavior that reinforces the more dominant position.

For your own safety, you must be the more dominant herd member.

And, as we discussed before, maintaining the herd leader position is an ongoing activity among horses... and in your herd of two.

There are many ways for you to establish dominance in the herd. There are age-old horse philosophies that believe that you do not need to inflict pain or fear on your horse to establish dominance. These philosophies state that if you take control of your horse's space and your horse's movement it will establish your dominant position *naturally* in the herd. These philosophies are currently called *resistance-free training*, *non-confrontational training*, or *natural horsemanship training*.

Opportunities to take control of your horse's space and your horse's movement are:

- Not allowing your horse to move into your space.
- Not allowing your horse to push past you when you are leading him.
- Having your horse turn to face you when you are approaching him and releasing him back into the corral or pasture.
- Longeing your horse either on a longe line or at liberty in a round pen controlling his direction, speed, and gait.
- Doing ground work exercises including those exercises that have the horse circle you, move away from you, change directions, and change speed and gait.

There are many books and videos available from resistance-free, non-confrontational and natural horsemanship clinicians that demonstrate ground work exercises and other aspects of horse handling. Barnes Ranch also offers ground work and round pen training lessons and clinics.

Remember, that no matter how well broke, well trained, or mature your horse is, every time you interact with him you are re-defining the herd pecking order.

One final caution: A very common mistake that a horse owner unintentionally makes is treating a horse like a 1000 pound pet, much like a large dog. Horses can become disrespectful and be set up to believe that the horse is the more dominant herd mate by:

- Giving them treats using your hand and allowing the horse to put his mouth onto your hand.
- Allowing the horse to come into your space and allowing the horse to rub on you like a dog, lick you, "mouth" your clothing or hair or frisk you for treats.

Looking at these behaviors from the horse's point of view, these pet-like behaviors invade your space and cause a reaction or movement from you. Remembering our prior discussion, the one who controls space and movement is the more dominant herd member. So even if it is unintentional, you are creating in your horse a lack of respect for you and are establishing your horse as the more dominant herd member.

You need to view horses as their own separate species and appreciate them for their own qualities. Understanding how strong the flight and herd instinct is will allow you to have a safer, more respectful relationship.