

How To Keep You and Your Horse Safe in an Electrical Storm

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With summertime coming, one's thoughts carelessly leap to the idea of trekking across wild terrain with not a soul for miles, except for the beautiful beast beneath you.

But like hikers and golfers, when the black clouds start to roll in, and distant thunder is heard, the prudent horseback rider must take into account his or her safety, and that of their horse, when this situation arises. More riders are killed in local thunderstorms than in hurricanes or tornados. If you are planning a ride always keep an eye out for local weather forecasts.

As long as you are aware of the dangers, there are many things you can do to lessen the risk to the pair of you when caught out in the wilds in an electrical storm. Don't forget, the danger is not just of dangerous lighting strikes, but of flash floods, and even hail storms. Do not think that lighting is only apparent at the eye of the storm - if you are within 10 miles of it, lighting strikes can still occur. If there is a time lag of less than 50 seconds between seeing lighting and hearing thunder, you are probably in the danger zone. But beware of particularly violent storms - there may be so many strikes it's difficult to know which flash is associated with which peal of thunder.

If you are caught in the open and there is lighting, get off the high point of the terrain as quick as you can, but do not go into stream beds or low lying areas - that is tempting fate from other directions. The lower reaches of sloping land or rolling hills is probably the best to get to. Dismount, and tie your horse to a low bush, but do not tether him to a tree or fence, especially one with metal components. Move about 40 or 50 feet away, in case he is startled. Don't lie down, but squat down, balancing on your feet. Lightning safety experts have

invented a "lightning crouch" that is very important to know about if you are caught in a thunder storm and you can't find a shelter. If you think that this position looks hard to do, you are right. It is. So practice it until you can stay in it for several minutes, because it could save your life. There are several reasons for doing the lightning crouch. Remember, lightning usually hits the tallest thing around and this is one time that you don't want to be tall. Remember that it is not safe to lie flat on the ground. With your heels together, if lightning hits the ground, electricity goes through the closest foot, up to your heel and then transfers to the other heel and then goes back to the ground again. If you don't put your heels together, lightning could go through your heart and possibly kill you.

Once the storm has moved on and you have a 50 second gap between lightning strikes and hearing the thunder, you can mount up and get under way again.

If high winds are part of the storm as well, once again get to the lower reaches of the landscape. Get behind rocks or large boulders, but not trees. Get inside a sturdy building if at all possible.

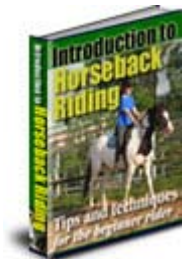
Another danger could well be a heavy hail storm. Once again seek lower land levels, but also try and find overhead shelter. If there is no shelter, dismount, and lead your horse. If you can, find a clump of bushes, not trees, and try to manoeuvre your way in the bushes, pulling your horse in with you. Leave the horse's saddle on and if you have anything else to hand, try to cover the horse's head. Also, try and get your horse to lower his head. Just as horses do, turn your back to the storm, keeping your hat on.

Don't forget also the danger of sudden rising water. Keep well away from gullies or depressions in the ground that lead from uphill. These could soon fill up with fast moving water in the event of a flash flood. Once again, stop and dismount, as lots of accidents happen when riders keep going in the rain and poor visibility. Ground current is one reason horses and cattle are especially susceptible to lightning strikes. Because they are four-footed, livestock are

killed by "step voltage," which occurs when lightning's ground current radiates out from a struck object. While ground current only affects the feet and legs of a standing person, it is a common cause of death among horses and cattle whose vital organs are in the current path. If you are at an outdoor event when a storm comes up, and there is no building cover, get your horse back in his trailer and close the ramp. Make sure that any safety chains are not connecting with the ground - they could conduct a strike up to your trailer, and its contents. You should get in the towing vehicle, making sure that once again nothing such as cables, ropes, chairs, chains, are touching the ground.

Once again, remember that the prudent rider, even if they are not worried about their own safety, should consider their horse's life, and be especially careful in these sorts of conditions.

If in doubt - stay at home.



Roger Bourdon is the author of "Introduction to Horseback Riding" and owner of the site www.anyhorsebackriding.com. If you are interested in horse riding, then sign up for Roger's free mini course and news letters at www.anyhorsebackriding.com