

# Redwings Welfare Information

Redwings' Welfare Team is proactive in the promotion of equine care and welfare, believing that access to accurate and up-to-date information is vital if owners and carers are to meet the needs of their animal.

Redwings' welfare leaflets are designed to provide an overview of many important issues which are encountered regularly in welfare cases with which the Sanctuary is involved. The series includes information on the following topics:

- Laminitis
- Strangles
- Hoof Care and Farriery
- Worms and De-worming
- Food, Digestion and Energy
- Behaviour
- Veteran Horses and Retirement
- Horse Psychology
- Donkeys
- Cushings

To request copies of leaflets or to speak to one of the team about any equine welfare issues, please feel free to contact the department by post, phone or email.

## The Welfare Team

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Incorporating Ada Cole  
Memorial Stables

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# Redwings Welfare

## Equine Transport and Travel



*"Horses learn quickly and have excellent memories, so it is vital that travelling experiences are always as relaxed and comfortable as possible".*



**REDWINGS**  
HORSE SANCTUARY  
Registered Charity  
No.1068911

Incorporating Ada Cole  
Memorial Stables

*The Charity's purpose is to provide and promote the welfare, care and protection of horses, ponies, donkeys and mules.*

Being a happy, or at least tolerant traveller is key to a horse's health and wellbeing. Even if trips to events and competitions are not part of their usual routine, a horse needs to be transportable so that they can be taken for veterinary treatment if needed, relocate to a new home or be moved from a hazardous situation such as a flooded field.

Many horses are quite used to hopping on and off horseboxes at their owner's request. This can make it easy to forget how unnatural the travelling experience is for the equine species. Being shut in a small, dark box then swung and bumped around without being able to see what's happening outside goes completely against a horse's fundamental instincts. Flight animals like horses prefer a good view and a clear escape route.

Equine transportation has been the subject of many studies which show the physical stress of travel in virtually any circumstance. Even though many equines do not display obvious signs of anxiety, recordings of heart rates, hydration levels, hormone levels and body temperature show that travelling is a genuinely stressful experience for any horse and their body reacts accordingly.

The fact that so many horses do load and travel happily is testament to their ability to adapt and trust. Horses learn quickly and have excellent memories, so it is vital that travelling experiences are as relaxed as



*Travelling is a very unnatural activity for any equine*

possible. Events linked with pain, anxiety or fear will be remembered and similar situations avoided in the future. Sadly, bullying uncooperative horses to try and get them to load still seems common, whilst being unlikely to achieve anything more than affirming to the horse why horseboxes are to be feared and avoided.

### **First Steps**

A horse that is new to travelling should preferably be exposed to the idea gradually. Simply leading the horse around the vehicle and letting them see and sniff it is a good start. Humans often forget that smell is an important part of familiarisation to horses in new situations. The horse also needs to get used to the ramp being raised and lowered. Putting some food on the bottom of the lowered ramp that the horse can stand and eat will also contribute to the positive experience! Progress one step at a



*Smell and touch are an important part of familiarisation for equines*

time, making sure the horse is happy with each new experience before moving onto the next. As with any new lesson, only work with the horse for short periods at a time (not more than 20 minutes), be patient, reassuring and consistent and always try and finish on a good note. Taking time and trouble at this point may save a lot of frustration later on.

A trusted equine companion who is happy to load can be a useful asset when persuading a horse on board a box or trailer. The herding instinct will encourage them to stick together, meaning that if one leads, the other is very likely to follow.

Unloading is not usually an issue, but if an equine does decide to plant itself on a box or trailer, it can be really tricky to work out a safe way of persuading it to get off! Novice travellers may also be tempted to jump over the ramp or off the side as a quick route to the safety of the ground which has the potential to injure both

horse and handler. Even when a horse has become accustomed to loading and travelling, always try and allow plenty of time for getting everything ready on the day and loading the horse. Not being pressed for time helps people to stay calm and relaxed, which helps the horse stay relaxed too. Trying to get everything done in a rush virtually guarantees that something will go wrong.



*Always give an equine time at every stage of the travelling process*

### **Putting Things Right**

Horses that have had bad experiences and 'play up' when being loaded or travelled may need to be started from scratch in the same way as a novice. Again, time, patience, consistency and lots of encouragement are the key to progress.

A good relationship between horse and handler, based on trust and mutual respect



will make a big difference in overcoming issues such as loading. If there are handling concerns in basic ground work, try and avoid attempting to load until these have been ironed out. It may be worth asking for help from a recognised handling professional to ensure that problems are overcome smoothly and tactics do not in fact make the situation worse.

### On the Road

Getting the horse safely on board is only the start of the horse's travelling experience. Driving or towing equines safely and comfortably is a special skill that sadly does not always receive the attention it deserves. Drivers should always get used to the horse box or trailer before driving with horses on board so they are familiar and comfortable with the weight, dimensions, gears, brakes and reversing.

The height of the vehicle needs to be taken into account when planning routes. Use a road atlas that shows the heights and weight limits of all bridges to provide the extra information needed.

A vehicle with equines on board should be driven very differently from an empty vehicle. The speed will be very limited, braking distances should be significantly increased and bends, junctions and roundabouts should be approached and taken extremely slowly to minimise movement in the box or trailer as much as possible. The equine should not have to lean on partitions or shuffle its feet to balance itself during the journey. If someone in the cab of a horsebox can hear the bump of horse's hooves or the rattle of a partition every time the driver brakes or turns, then the driver is really not doing a good job.



*Whether an equine is travelling on a box or a trailer, specialist driving skills are required*



*Get the hang of reversing before driving on the main road or with horses on board*

Towing a trailer provides a smoother ride for people but this should not encourage them to drive with any less care than a box driver. A trailer is in fact much less comfortable for equines as there is relatively poor suspension. A trailer is not really suitable for long journeys for this reason. Trailers are practical: they are cheaper, flexible in their ability to be hitched and unhitched and offer a shallower ramp and user-friendly walk on/walk off loading system.

However, towing a trailer is a very specific skill in its own right. As well as driving in a way which ensures the safety and comfort of the horse or pony on board, the driver must know exactly how to negotiate corners and roundabouts and how much extra width and length the trailer needs. Reversing a trailer is a difficult skill and any driver should have mastered this skill with an empty vehicle before they consider towing an equine passenger. Trailer towing courses are highly recommended for anyone starting to use these vehicles.

Always allow plenty of time for any journey when travelling horses. Be considerate of other road users but don't worry about impatient drivers who are unhappy about being stuck behind a horsebox or trailer. Drivers of any slow moving vehicle should pull over and let people pass if they have been stuck behind them for some time or once there are several vehicles in a queue. Only use lay-bys and other suitable places for pulling over and make sure pulling out again can be done safely.



*Travelling equines loose gives them freedom to stand where they feel most comfortable*

### **To Tie or Not To Tie?**

Many people don't think about travelling their horse loose but it is worth considering. At Redwings we have always been obliged to travel a lot of our residents loose (as they are too small to tie up) and we now travel our horses loose as standard.

Redwings has rescued several hundred feral and unhandled equines over the years and it has been impossible to put a head collar on them, let alone tie them up in a vehicle. It allows the equines to choose how they position themselves during the journey, and to change position if they wish. Observing their behaviour has supported research showing that equines rarely choose to travel facing the way they are traditionally tied up.

Knowing exactly how much partition space to allow an individual equine or group of equines is one of the skills of an experienced driver. Partitions are not there to hold an individual horse up, but to offer support if they lose balance for any reason and stop them bumping into their neighbour. Groups travelling loose need space to find their own preferred travelling position, whilst being contained enough to keep the group together. Remember that small equines such as Shetlands and donkeys that are travelled loose can often squeeze through the gaps at the front of each partition to visit their neighbours during the journey. Horseboxes aren't generally designed with small equines in mind and a little extra planning may be required!

### **Travelling Companions**

Recent research has shown that physical stress indicators (such as heart rate and stress hormones) in travelling horses are significantly reduced when they are provided with the company of another equine. A stable mirror, carefully positioned in relation to the travelling horse, can also help alleviate stress, though not to the same extent as a real companion.



*Mirrors have been shown to have a notably calming effect on equines travelling alone*

Taking a companion with a horse going to a show is well worth considering. Many owners now have a non-ridden equine as company for a working horse, and taking the companion on journeys too will not only help reduce the stress of travelling, but may be an enjoyable change of scenery for the companion too! Sharing journeys with another horse and their owner where practical can also be a great way of providing company for both equines and shared costs for the owners.

### **Travel Sickness**

The travelling experience for a horse is very different to that of a human. It takes physical effort and mental concentration to constantly rebalance with the movement of the vehicle. Even horses that are used to travelling and not made anxious by the experience will have been tired to some extent by the journey.

Although horses don't suffer from motion sickness in the same way as humans and other animals with a vomit reflex, travel can certainly take its toll on their health. The travel environment is basically an unhealthy one for equines: if tied up, their heads are kept in an unnatural position which impedes the body's ability to deal with dust and ammonia fumes. Air circulation in horse boxes is notoriously poor and even on cold or wet days, windows should be opened fully to allow for maximum air movement - use rugs to warm a cold or sick horse rather than close windows.

Remember that if a person's feeble senses are aware of dust, ammonia or humidity build up, to a horse's sensitive nose the situation will be almost unbearable. A horse with RAO will be particularly susceptible to the effects of poor quality air and in the worst cases this can lead to 'shipping fever', which is an infection triggered in the horse's airways and which can cause permanent damage to the respiratory system, or even death.



### Accidental Damage

As well as illness, travelling carries a risk of accident and injury to the travelling horse. Horses are much more vulnerable than humans on the road as they are standing without support and there are no seatbelts or airbags to protect them. Driving smoothly and safely has a big part to play in minimising the risk of injury during transit, both by helping the horse stay relaxed and balanced and allowing time to avoid other problems on the road without the need for emergency braking and swerving. Having a horse that is a happy traveller is also absolutely key to everyone's safety during a journey. Physical expression of anxiety while travelling is dangerous and is a problem that needs addressing for the future. Asking a vet to sedate the equine may help for a single journey, but will not solve the underlying cause of the problem and may well increase the anxiety of the horse on the next occasion as being drugged becomes part of their negative experience.

There may be a time when an emergency stop or swerve is the only possible option to avoid a collision. Having a box or trailer that is fitted with padded partitions or breast bars and good flooring that helps with grip and is relatively soft should help reduce any injuries caused as a result. Again, experience helps the driver and groom to know the best action to take in each individual circumstance and to keep a clear head when it really matters. Having first aid

equipment and veterinary contact details will have been preparation time well spent if they become necessary.

Even people who are experienced in travelling horses should never be complacent and always prepared for the unexpected as far as possible. Carry plenty of spare food, forage and water and tools to clear up muck and sweep out urine. These can all help maintain good equine welfare in the event of long delays, a breakdown or an accident. Torches, fluorescent jackets and breakdown warning lights can make a tricky situation safer for everyone and a suitable fire extinguisher and first aid kits for equine and human passengers are essential.



*This mare got her foot caught under a partition while travelling and pulled the side of her hoof off. Thankfully she made a full recovery*



*Check and maintain vehicles vigilantly*

### Practical Stuff

In recent years, a variety of new legal requirements have been introduced to improve standards of safety and equine welfare during transportation. Anyone involved in horse transportation should know what the law expects of them as well as having practical experience and being prepared for unforeseen circumstances.

As with any vehicle, an MOT, tax and insurance are absolutely essential. Regular servicing and maintenance of horseboxes and trailers is also vital. Only use qualified and appropriately experienced mechanics

and never try and cut corners in this area to save a few pounds, it simply isn't worth the risk. When buying a box or trailer, always have it thoroughly checked over by an experienced mechanic before handing over your cash. Have the floor checked regularly: the consequences of travelling equines on a weak floor can be absolutely devastating and sadly does still happen.

Breakdown cover is another important consideration. Thankfully there are now recovery schemes set up to assist vehicles and their equine passengers which will provide alternative transport for horses if the original vehicle cannot be mended at the roadside and can include suitable overnight accommodation for people and equines if necessary. Read all the small print carefully, and when towing a trailer, make sure that insurance and breakdown cover for the towing vehicle still apply when it is being used to tow horses.



*A blown tyre can happen to any driver at any time*

## Legal Requirements

Anyone who passed their driving test after 1997 must take additional tests to legally drive a horse box or tow a trailer. The system is based on the weights of horses and vehicles involved, but the easiest way to interpret the regulation is to simply accept that if you passed your test after 1997 you must take an extra test if you want to transport horses. Even if someone new to horse transportation, or wanting to increase their confidence, passed their test before 1997, professional training is well worth considering. Not only will the training cover aspects of driving, basic vehicle maintenance and legalities, it will help prepare the trainee for unforeseen circumstances that can crop up during transit.

The wellbeing of animals during transportation is a specific welfare issue and has been supported by separate regulations for many years. The implementation of new European legislation now means that anyone transporting livestock, including horses, for commercial purposes must hold a 'Certificate of Competence'. These certificates are issued on behalf of the government and approved assessment centres will offer training courses towards gaining the qualification. The driver's attendant also needs to hold two units of the same certificate. Any horse owner

paying someone to transport their horse should always ask to see evidence of this qualification before they agree to use their services.



*Redwings uses a live video and camera system to monitor equines en route*

## Good Housekeeping

Horse transportation plays a key role in supporting good equine welfare, and looking after transport vehicles is part of looking after a horse. As well as structural maintenance and legal requirements such as servicing and MOT's, horseboxes and trailers should be kept clean and tidy at all times. Opening up the back of a vehicle and finding muck from the last journey is not a great start to an outing and has the potential to shorten the life of the vehicle considerably, or at least make it more expensive to maintain.

Cleaning boxes and trailers with a suitable disinfectant also has an important part to play in preventing the spread of disease



*Disinfecting horseboxes is a vital part of Redwings' strangles screening program*

between equines if different animals use the vehicles. At Redwings, vigilantly disinfecting the horsebox or trailer after any new equine is brought into the Sanctuary is a vital part of our strangles control program.

**Transportation of equines is an issue that is often overlooked by horse owners and enthusiasts. The skills involved in loading and transporting equines are widely undervalued and Redwings would like them to be promoted more widely as a key factor in good equine health and welfare.**

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