

Understanding the “hard to catch” horse

By John Moore

Problem: Difficult to bring in from the pasture – hard to catch.

This is a common problem, and one that cannot be addressed with a quick-fix solution. There are many things an owner or handler may be doing to contribute to the problem, or something they may be missing in their analysis of the cause of the problem - both of which must be identified and corrected in order to arrive at a lasting solution. So, here is some general insight into why some horses become hard to catch, and also some possible solutions that horse owners may be able to use effectively on their own.

Possible Causes: There are various reasons horses have for avoiding being caught in the pasture or any other place, and various ways they learn to do it. It is always a possibility that the owner or others who handle or ride your horse may be doing something to contribute to the problem without realizing it. Is there something unpleasant about being bridled, ridden or otherwise handled by you that may make a horse not want to be caught? For instance:

1. **Heavy handed rider?:** Are you especially hard on the horse's mouth with the bit?
2. **Poor saddle fit?:** Does the saddle pinch or exert pressure that may be uncomfortable for the horse?
3. **Herd Bound?:** Are you taking the horse away from a friend whom it would rather stay with? How much fun are you, really, to be with?
4. **Over-work or poor rider?:** Do you cause the horse to become overly tired or sore in the muscles, feet or back when you ride?
5. **Did you buy a problem?:** Have you inherited a problem the horse had when you bought it?
6. **Old, bad habit?** Does your horse have a “conditioned reflex” to leave when you approach, or when you approach with a lead rope and halter?

It won't do any good to give you a solution to a catching problem if we don't also look at the cause of the problem so you can keep it from returning. So, let's take a look at each of these and see if any apply to you, and what sort of solution may be available.

1. **Heavy handed rider.** This is actually a very common cause for this type of problem. “Heavy handed” riders, meaning riders who use excessive force on a horse's mouth with a piece of steel (the bit) without there being any meaning associated with the pressure, are huge contributors to catching problems as well as many other types of problems. Jerking and pulling all the time with no release, can cause a horse to dread being caught because of the expectation of discomfort to the tender inside of its mouth. The problem is that most people who ride this way are unaware that they're pulling too much because they were taught to ride that way, or because they are riding the way everyone else they know is riding. But you should ask yourself for a moment how long you would put up with someone constantly pulling on your mouth with a piece of steel before you became hard to catch. Unfortunately, many riders don't understand the difference between “contact” and “excessive force”.

Solution: The solution here is to have a *qualified* professional take a look at the way you ride, and seek help if there's a problem. I emphasize the word “qualified” here very strongly – that word can mean different things to different people. Most unqualified people won't tell you they're unqualified, and many are unaware of it. Remember that the bit is for communicating with a horse, not something for him to lean into or be forced to react to because of pain. The mouth is one of the most tender areas of a horse's body. If you have to pull with more than a few grams to make something happen, it's time to re-evaluate your riding or your horse's past training.

2. **Poor saddle fit.** This is another area that can cause a horse to dread being ridden, and therefore dread being caught. A lot of people don't have a good idea about saddle fit and often ride with saddles that pinch at the withers or place excessive pressure on certain areas of the horse's back.

Solution: Watch for dry spots on the horse's back, which indicate excessive pressure at that location, and also white spots in the hair which indicate that there's been a pressure problem at that location for a long time. Also, apply pressure to your horse's back with your hand over the areas where the saddle makes contact to see if your horse reacts in pain to the pressure. And watch for galled spots (sore, rubbed areas) around cinches. Any sign of trouble in these areas should be corrected immediately. Seek advice from a qualified saddle fitter if needed.

3. **Herd bound.** This probably causes more "hard to catch" trouble for most people than any other. One of the strongest and most basic instincts a horse has is called "herd bound" – the desire for horses to be with other members of their species. One of the things owners of horses should be asking themselves is how they can become as desirable to be with for their horse as another horse. You may ride your horse for 2 hours each day, but the horse is spending the other 22 hours with its friend in the pasture. So, the thought of carrying you around with a poor fitting saddle and piece of cold steel in its mouth doesn't sound near as fun as hanging out with friends.

Solution: Make the time a horse spends with you as enjoyable as possible. Some people think this means allowing rude behavior from a horse for fear of making the horse not want to be with them if they correct it. The truth is the opposite. Horses crave the social structure of a herd, where the rules are known and are enforced, and where they know their standing in the herd. Letting a horse be pushy and rude only causes the horse to regard you as an inferior herd member whom it cannot feel safe and secure with. This destroys your respectability and can make you undesirable to be with. Spend a lot of time brushing, scratching and otherwise doing something comfortable that the horse enjoys, as long as it is done within the bounds of respectful interaction, and be sure you are not a heavy-handed rider.

The second part of the solution is to start training your horse to be alone without distress – "separation anxiety". This often means tying the horse away from friends until it relaxes before returning it to the pasture. This can be a difficult challenge, and is also a much bigger topic than we have space to cover as part of this article. So seek professional help with this if needed, and most of all don't avoid it just because it causes *you* anxiety.

4. **Over work or poor rider.** This not only addresses the saddle fit issue, but also how you ride, which may cause a sore back or other discomfort. Problems in the way a horse is shod or trimmed, or any number of foot disorders can cause a horse to have discomfort in the feet, causing it to dread being ridden, and therefore dread being caught. Another thought worth mentioning concerns people who go for long periods without riding a horse, then take it out and ride it hard and long enough to create muscle soreness due to the horse simply being out of shape.

Solution: We've already talked about checking your saddle fit and the way you ride. It is imperative that horse owners become at least educated enough to make an informed decision in their choice of farrier, whether to shoe the horse or leave him barefoot, and to detect signs of foot disorders or other causes of lameness. They should also learn how to condition a horse for work. Often we choose to remain uninformed on many of these important issues, and trust others to make decisions for us. Remember, *we* are ultimately responsible for the welfare of our horses.

5. **Did you buy a problem?** This is a big one. Very often this is the case with so many problems people have with horses. Always remember that every horse is for sale for a reason. And it may not always be what the seller tells you it is. At least where I live, buying horses is a "buyer beware" business unless intentional deception can be proved about the seller in court.

Solution: Check *everything* possible, including how easy the horse is to catch, before buying. And most importantly, honestly ask yourself if you are qualified to fix a problem before you knowingly purchase one.

6. **Old, bad habit.** I saved this one for last, since it is by far the most common situation surrounding a hard to catch horse. This situation is usually created by everything I talked about in numbers one through five above. Any type of behavior can become a habit, or "conditioned reflex". This means that a reaction like leaving when you approach with a rope and halter quickly becomes a reaction to a cue – the cue being the halter and lead rope in your hand. It gets started for a reason, like those mentioned above, but as with anything that is repeated over and over, it begins to take on a life of its own and becomes a reflexive behavior, no longer needing the original cause of the behavior to trigger it. Ask anyone who has ever tried to quit smoking how easily a bad habit is to change and you will get a realization of the difficulty of permanently correcting a horse with a severely ingrained bad habit. I was given a mare like this about a year ago by an owner who gave up on it, and it was honestly the worst case of this annoying behavior I've ever seen.

Solution: Fixing this horse was a long process that first required removing the reasons the horse had for wanting to avoid being caught. These reasons were many because she'd had a tough life with a lot of abuse. It took a combination of correct round pen work, correct ground schooling, patience, and making "being with me" a pleasant experience for the horse. Since this horse was also very spoiled it took several episodes of causing the experience of leaving me to be unsuccessful and not nearly as pleasant as being with me. This horse had been given up on by every other trainer, which meant she knew the antidote for every trick that every trainer knew, so far. So, I had to employ some creative ideas in changing her mind – ideas she hadn't seen before and so would not know how to subvert.

I kept the horse in a round pen, feeding and watering her there, for a couple of weeks while I worked on the problem so that she could not occasionally get away with leaving me when being approached, as would be the case in a large pasture. I needed her to never again be successful in avoiding being caught, but I also wanted her to start realizing that being caught could actually be a good thing. Every time I entered the round pen the horse was required to turn a face me, and to stand there while I approached. I would then pet her, and talk to her, then leave. I did this several times a day. Just doing this much requires a great deal of skill, using pressure and release in just the right way to teach the horse to "turn and face". It was important at this stage not to actually halter the horse and use her for anything – just walk up, pet her and walk away. You can't catch a horse if you can't walk up to it, so this came first.

When it came time to halter her, another bad habit revealed itself: she'd learned from past experience to stand there when she knew she had to, then bolt away when I stepped beside her in position to halter her. I knew this bolting was not caused by fear, since she had always stood quietly when being haltered when she was completely cornered and surrounded, and finally caught – the old owner's way of catching her. Bolting when being haltered was just another bad habit she'd learned. I changed her mind about this bolting habit by using my lasso one day instead of the halter. When she bolted away I quickly threw a loop over her head and stopped her - this was in a round pen so she couldn't drag me away. She wasn't sure how I accomplished this, and was big-eyed and amazed. It was the profound turning point in correcting her catching problem. This happened about two more times until she was convinced I was Superman with 45 ft. long arms (my rope was 45 feet long!). She still thinks I have super-human powers that she doesn't understand, and this is the thing that finally caused her to start *thinking* when I walked into the pen instead of just mindlessly reacting by running away.

Things gradually progressed to where she looked forward to my visits to the round pen. I would approach, halter her, brush her, then release her and walk away. I always require any horse I'm training to stand and face me when I walk away. Allowing them to leave before I do is asking for trouble. If she's not allowed to turn her back on me when I'm in the round pen, then that includes not turning her back when being released as well as when being caught and haltered. What to do if they leave is the subject of a round penning article, or better yet, a round penning clinic. It is important to remember that various people use round pens differently; some in ways that help fix a problem like this, and some in ways that make them worse. So be careful of the advice you get.

This mare is now a happy horse that's discovered that not all people need to be avoided. The change was a process, not a quick fix - and the process is still underway. It took awhile but she's now easy to catch. But it would only take one human she doesn't respect to cause her to go right back like she was. After all, you can't take away what they already know; you can only try to teach them to make another choice. This is why working with problem horses can be extremely challenging and sometimes dangerous. And, in many cases, should be undertaken only by experienced and skillful people.

There will be people who read this and think that ground schooling or round penning would have eventually done the trick with this horse, without the lasso. It might have, eventually. But there are also problem horses out there that not everyone has seen or dealt with. When you work with problem horses for a living you see things that would stun and confound a lot of people – problems that many people think they can handle until it's often too late. There are also people who would attempt to solve this problem by “buying” the horse off with carrots and treats to try to catch it. Horses aren't that dumb, and you can't buy love and respect – it must be earned and is easily lost. Since the lasso option was available to me it gave me an effective tool to use in changing her mind. The round pen and ground school were necessary but didn't impress her anymore - she was spoiled. This horse needed to be impressed by a human in a way she didn't fully understand. She needed to be a little “awed”, just as we all sometimes need in order to change our ways. She was much better at manipulating a situation than most people are at altering horse behavior – she knew how to handle people. What I did was one of many ways of non-violently changing a horse's mind. But it may not be within the capabilities of everyone out there. And this is the tough part of a problem like this, and is the reason you should honestly assess your own capabilities before knowingly buying a horse with a difficult problem.

Horses can sometimes be a complex creature to figure out, and it can require a great deal of skill to alter their thought patterns effectively. Just because we own a horse doesn't mean that training him is within our capabilities. You can truly have a problem that you are unqualified to correct. So, it's always best to seek *qualified* help *before* you get into something that could make things worse or dangerous. I hope this is helpful, and I invite you to one of my clinics sometime to explore ways to fix this problem if it persists.