

Mounted SAR: A Viable Winter Resource

by Jorene Downs

Photo: Sarah Nowacki

Winter weather can offer challenges to search and rescue. Most regions are vulnerable to storms bringing anything from heavy rain to snow, with potential for flooding. What many don't realize is Mounted Search And Rescue (MSAR) can be a viable resource in winter response. The key issues are the rider (and horse or mule) needing experience in those conditions, knowing when the situation is safe to use the animal and being appropriately trained for that kind of response. As with any SAR responder, attire and survival gear must be appropriate for the weather. Also, the search area must be accessible to the vehicles towing horse trailers.

Snow

Mounted SAR has several contributions to make in the snow environment, including the ability to pull a litter, sled or sleigh across the surface of the snow or ice. The elevated position of the rider is often an advantageous angle for tracking in the snow, coupled with the potential to follow the more obvious trail more quickly than searchers on foot. Even in windy blizzard conditions and limited visibility, the horse has potential to air scent or hear something and communicate that information to the alert rider. This can help guide the mounted searcher to the missing person. Mounted SAR units prepared for packing can also carry gear for other responders. If extra saddled horses are available, SAR personnel or subjects can be transported.



There are several issues for MSAR related to snow. The rider must be aware of possible hazards - avalanches or ice - and know how to deal with those situations. Riders need to remain alert to their mounts' physical condition and address any problems. Safe footing for the horse is always a concern. Riders may choose to use special horseshoes appropriate to that environment. Hazards can also be hidden under the snow, rendering the terrain unsafe for vulnerable horse feet and legs. In terrain where safe footing is likely - for example, an open field or known trails - MSAR can be a viable resource. The issue to watch here is the stamina of the. The deeper the snow before reaching solid footing, the harder the horse has to work. As the snow's depth approaches the horse's knees, assignments should account for the mount's fatigue.

Flooding

Winter weather also has potential to cause flooding and problems with mud. Riders need to be alert to the potential for deep mud sucking horseshoes off the horse's hooves. Some mud bogs are not suitable for safely supporting a horse's weight without endangering the horse's legs and possibly even getting that horse stuck. In some locations, the mud may be too deep for the horse to safely cross. But in many soil conditions the horse is quite capable of maneuvering through mud, even where ground personnel can't easily access. Again, as the mud gets deeper, the horse works harder. Mounted assignments should attend to the horse's needs here, as well.

In a water environment with suitable terrain, MSAR can make an effective contribution if it has appropriate training and gear, including potable water for the horse to drink, as local floodwater may be contaminated.

Horses can carry a searcher through still or moving water when it is safe to do so. Hazards in or near the water may include extremely rocky footing, debris, dangerously deep mud or even other animals. The horse has potential to wade in water with a weak current as deep as the horse can still walk, provided the rider is prepared to get wet. Horses can swim if necessary, but unless there are other complications a SAR horse should be able to safely walk in water as deep as the horse's belly. As the water moves faster, toward swiftwater status, shallower water would be preferred to increase the safety margin.

Even if the water cannot be searched or crossed, MSAR can still perform various assignments from the edge of the water. Coupled with shore-based training common to swiftwater rescue, riders have potential to wear suitable safety gear and assist in water rescue. A rider might carry one end of a rescue rope to the far side of a flooded area to create a safety line. A spare saddled horse can provide transportation for the evacuation of a stranded person. Riders can use throwbags and perform a rescue from the shore or even while riding in the water. Mounted SAR might be upstream spotters or downstream safety personnel. In the absence of another anchor point, a rope can be dallied (wrapped) around a saddle horn. In some situations the considerable strength of the horse might be useful to pull something - or someone - to shore, or as a mobile anchor to help control the position of a boat in the water. In the right circumstances, MSAR can also use a horse to drag a lightweight rescue boat across land like a sled. Again, mounted SAR units prepared for packing can also carry gear for other responders or supplies to stranded people. Extra saddled horses can transport subjects or SAR personnel.

If the winter incident isn't suitable for horses, Mounted SAR teams can still contribute. Personnel might respond as ground searchers, or use their vehicles to support the incident by carrying supplies or transporting personnel. Horse trailers might haul supplies or equipment. Many riders have four-wheel drive vehicles or ATVs that may be a good alternative in that environment.

There are many ways that MSAR units can participate as a viable resource in winter. SAR Management and local Mounted SAR units should communicate with one another to identify what options are currently available and what potential exists with additional training and gear.

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