



Crossing Water

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Water crossings can turn a wonderful trail ride into a nightmare. You and your riding friends come out of the timber and see a water crossing. Your mule spots the water and raises his head. As you get closer you feel him tighten his muscles in his body.

What do you do now? Stay on? Get off?

You ride him to the edge of the water, and then he stops. When you cue him to move forward he does not move, instead he backs up and tries to turn around.

One of your friends has a solution, he will pony your mule across the water. He grabs the lead rope and starts across. Your mule stops at the water's edge and locks up his feet, pulling your friend off the back of his mule.

Another friend has a better idea. He rides in to the back of the mule and takes his lead rope and starts hitting the mule from behind. Your mule locks his feet until he has had enough of the hitting. He kicks out at the other mule.

Now, everyone is getting frustrated and losing their temper. We must get this mule across the water NOW. As this unfolds, a bigger and bigger wreck is being created. If you put pressure on a mule he will resist. The more pressure you put on your mule in this situation, the more resistance the mule will have.

When you find yourself in this situation, the most important thing to remember is, it is not the end of the world if the mule does not cross the water today. By thinking this way, you can step back, examine the situation, and come up with a training lesson that will help your mule feel comfortable with crossing the water.

First, look at the crossing. A mule will not hurt himself so make sure it is a safe place to cross. If it is not a safe place to cross, you will be fighting your mule's instinct as well as the water. If you see that the crossing is safe, teach the mule to cross the water. Forcing him will get you nowhere.

Pick a spot on the bank of the water crossing, no larger than one foot wide. This is where you will cross the water with your mule. Keep the mule's nose pointed at the spot no matter which way his body is positioned. This spot will help keep your mule focused and help you direct him more effectively.

Ask the mule to walk up to the spot. The mule will walk up to the water and stop where he is comfortable – that is OK. If he stops three feet from the water, let him stop. This is your starting point to teach the mule to cross water.

After your mule is relaxed at your "Starting Point," use the "Go Forward Cue" from the saddle. Squeeze both legs applying pressure to the sides of your mule - and ask your mule to take one step forward. If the mule does not respond, lightly bump the

sides of your mule with your legs. Start lightly and increase the pressure of the bumps until your mule takes one step forward.

Remember the mule will learn from the release, so do not stop bumping until your mule takes a step forward. If your mule moves any other direction but forward, keep bumping. So if the mule takes five steps backward, keep bumping until he takes one step forward.

When the mule takes a step forward, stop bumping and praise your mule. Now, let your mule stand until you believe he is calm. Do not ask him to take another step forward until you are sure he will try. Be sure you are still keeping your mule's head pointed at your spot. Ask your mule, one step at a time, to move closer to the water's edge.

Once at the water, your mule may want to put his head down to smell the water, he may paw or look at the water. Let him do this. For any equine, this is their way of making sure it is safe for them to cross. At this point, your mule is thinking forward. You are teaching the mule to cross the water, just as you taught your mule to load into a trailer.

Have the mule step into the water with one foot, then two feet, and so on. Your mule may back up a few times when he feels the water on his feet. If so, just ask him to take a step forward again. Be patient. Give your mule plenty of time between requests.

Remember, you do not have to teach the mule the complete lesson at one time. Anytime you ask the mule to respond to a cue and your mule responds calmly and correctly, you can stop and continue the lessons later.

The first time your mule crosses the water, he may cross quickly or try to jump part of it. In this case, ask him to cross again until your mule crosses calmly. By going slowly and keeping your mule clam, you will actually get your mule to cross the water quicker.

But remember, if he will not cross the water today, it is not the end of the world. With practice and patience you will have a mule that will not only cross water, but any obstacle you ask him to cross.

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(top) The mule will walk up to the water and stop. This is your starting point (middle) Keep the mule's nose pointed at the spot on the bank, no matter which way his body is positioned (bottom) Have the mule step into the water with one foot, then two feet, and so on

