

# Communication: Ears to you

Spend some time hanging out on the pasture fence, just watching a herd graze, and you'll witness a wide range of equine communication—but you'll *hear* only a small part of the conversation. A lashed tail, a raised foot, a sudden swing of the head—all can be signals to other members of the herd: "You're getting too close!"

Horses rely on vision more than any other sense to detect trouble in their environment, and they have a complex system of visual cues—a body language—that keeps them in constant touch with their herdmates' varying moods. The more subtle cues are also a form of shorthand—a way to maintain the herd's dominance hierarchy without having to escalate to a fight over every decision.

In other words, it probably took some kicking or biting for the dominant horse to establish his right to drink first. The next day, a raised foot and an open mouth may have been the only warning needed to keep the rest of the herd at their distance. Before long, a signal as subtle as a turned-back ear will be enough to remind everyone who's in charge.

Most horses recognize this signal immediately and quickly yield the ground. But if a horse couldn't use his ears normally, others in the herd would be "deaf" to this communication, and he might be forced to continue to rely on "louder" forms of speech.

■ **Pinned ears**—turned flat back against the neck—are a sign of aggression and a well-known form of equine body language, but other ear positions also convey significant meaning:

■ **Pricked ears**, held still and pointed forward, indicate that the horse has turned his full attention to something. It could be fearful curiosity of some new sound or object, interest in a mare in heat or eagerness in response to a rattling grain bucket.

■ **Flicking ears**, quickly flitting back and forth, can indicate nervousness, frustration or uncertainty. A horse who has been startled but has not yet identified the source of the sound might flick his ears until he locates the threat.

■ **Drooping ears**, held downward or straight out to the side, can express boredom, fatigue or possibly pain.

■ **Erect ears angled backward**, especially toward the saddle, indicate that the horse is focusing his full attention on his rider.

■ **Neutral ears**, held at "half-mast," are a sign of relaxation and contentment. The horse may even be dozing.

**LEND ME YOUR EAR:** A complex system of visual cues—including ear movements—enable an equine herd to maintain its dominance hierarchy without every decision escalating into a fight.



preoccupation, discomfort



attention



pre-threat



surprise, fear

drowsiness

wariness

anger