



When the lights go out

If you go out and about with your horse in winter you are likely to be loading and unloading in the dark. How can you do this safely and what systems are on offer to help? Stephanie Bateman finds out

TRAVELLING with horses in the dark can present certain challenges, but anticipating these and thinking ahead can ensure that both you and your horse stay safe," says British Horse Society director of safety, Alan Hiscox.

"Before going out on any journey, always ensure that all lights on the trailer, towing vehicle or horsebox are working correctly. You should tell someone where you are going, and what time you expect to be back."

Alan also advises being prepared in the event of a breakdown.

"Ensure you have suitable breakdown cover and equine rescue in case of emergencies. Always carry a torch and keep hi-viz in your vehicle, for both you and your horse. This can be used if you break down and need to transfer your horse to a different vehicle."

Lights on or off?

IT'S common knowledge that horses see better in the dark than we do, but how well do they need to see when they are travelling?

"Lots of people make simple mistakes when travelling their horses in the dark; they either have their lights fully on in the back, or they have the horses in total darkness — neither of which is correct, in my opinion," says showjumper Tim Stockdale.

"When you are travelling at night, you should have a light on, but it shouldn't be a bright light. We've got soft, ambient red lights that automatically come on in the horse section when I turn my headlights on. It means that the streetlights and passing car headlights don't affect the horses so much. The sudden flash of light can frighten some horses so a nice ambient light lessens that."

Dressage rider Spencer Wilton agrees.

Horses see better in the dark than we do, however parking in a safe place and where the ramp can be as flat as possible for unloading is key, especially if your horse is unsteady on his legs

Picture by www.trevor-meeks-photography.co.uk

“A lot of my horses are very sensitive, so I always make sure there is a light on in the back when travelling with them at night,” he says. “It also means that when you eventually stop to unload them, they aren’t suddenly thrown into bright light when you pull the ramp down.”

Spencer also ensures he has everything to hand in an easy to reach place in case lighting is limited when he reaches his destination.

“If you get to the stables late at night, the last thing you want to be doing is hunting through the lorry in the dark trying to find stuff, so have an idea of where everything is.”

Safe landing spot

LOADING and unloading in the dark poses its own risks, but by thinking ahead, you can make the experience less stressful.

“If you load in the dark often, think about getting a portable light to aid loading and unloading if you have no lighting facilities at your yard or destination,” advises Alan.

Parking the lorry or trailer in a suitable place is also key, as Tim explains.

“Park up in a safe area so that if your horse plays up, he won’t injure himself on any objects nearby, especially if it’s dark, and, if possible, don’t load or unload on concrete. Try and unload onto a surface that has purchase, especially if the horses are tired and unsteady on their legs.”

Lessening the angle of the ramp will also help weary horses.

“I’m always very conscious of where to park so that the ramp is as flat as possible, making it easier for the horse to walk down it,” says dressage rider Becky Moody. “We have a big light at the top of the ramp which lights up the area at the back of the lorry and helps the horse see where he is putting his feet when walking up and down the ramp. I also make sure the inside of the lorry is well-lit when loading so they aren’t walking into a dark box.”

Technical lighting

WHAT lighting systems are manufacturers employing in their lorries and trailers to help iron out the challenges of travelling in the dark?

“All our horse trailers have interior lights fitted as standard and they are available for use at the user’s discretion,” explains Ceidiog Hughes at Ifor Williams trailers. “They are simply switched on and off manually as and when required.”

As is becoming standard in most modern lorries, Equicruiser use red LEDs in the horse section.

“When travelling at night, we use red LEDs inside the horse section, also known as passive lighting, rather than the stark white lights,” says Cliff Evans of the company. “On our larger horseboxes, we fit a loading light to the rear spoiler to assist in loading in the dark, and externally, we fit outside lights over the jockey doors and tack lockers. All external lockers have LED lighting inside for ease of use.”

Bloomfields also use red lights in the horse section.

“We have a red calming light for the horses while travelling which is connected to the headlights, so should you be driving in the day and forget to switch on the lights in the horse section, the red light will come on automatically when you switch on the headlights,” says Helen Moody of Bloomfields horseboxes.

GADGETS TO HELP YOU OUT IN THE DARK

LED Lenser H7.2 Head Torch

THIS LED head torch beams strong white light up to 160m away. Boasts five light functions, up to 60 hours run time, a rear red LED that makes the wearer more visible, and a battery pack and light head compartment that are contoured to fit any head shape. Water and dust resistant with corrosion-resistant contacts.

£59.95

www.ledlenser-store.co.uk



LED Lenser K1 LED Torch

DON'T get caught out at night with this handy lightweight key-ring torch. Not much bigger than a matchstick, this torch boasts a simple on/off twist switch and a tough aircraft-grade aluminium casing.

£7.95

www.ledlenser-store.co.uk



Harry Hall Hi-viz headcollar and lead rope

IDEAL for leading a horse in the dark, this bright, neon-yellow headcollar features reflective strips on the cheekpieces and noseband to make your horse or pony more visible, plus an adjustable noseband and headpiece, and a cheek trigger clip.

Sizes: pony, cob and full

£32

www.harryhall.co.uk

VENTUS My Magic Torch

THIS compact torch boasts five hours of constant light, a USB port for charging mobile phones and, best of all, it doesn't require any electricity – you simply wind it up.

£14.99

www.ventusfreeenergy.com



“We also use strong LED lights externally to make loading and unloading safer.”

As well as automatic red LED lights, Whittaker lorries have strip lights in the horse section.

“If we stop somewhere and we’re loading and unloading horses in the dark, we simply flip them on and they turn into a really bright LED light so the horses can see where they are going,” says Jayne Whittaker. “We also have a ramp light, plus outside lights all around the outside so the entire truck is well-lit.

“We have docking lights which are controlled from the cab; they are helpful when reversing as you can see the skirts and objects on the floor. The tack lockers all have 12v lights which run off the generator, and all the cameras run through infra-red, so even if the lights are off in the back of the lorry, we can still see the horses via the infra-red lights.” **H&H**