

IN THE BLEAK MIDWINTER

Photograph © Your Horse Adventures

Whilst winter can be an ordeal for some, Karen Roberts and Medina Brock have found a way to enjoy the break from the routine of the rest of the year

Winter can be a challenging time for horse owners. Short, dark days can mean hardly ever seeing their horses in daylight. Riding for many is limited to weekends. Whether it's snow and ice or lashing rain and wind, riding can be more of an ordeal than fun for horse or human. We keep our horses as naturally as we can within the limits of our lifestyles. We have evolved systems that allow them to be horses and enable us to get through the winter. In fact we see it as an opportunity, a change of routine from the rest of the year.

Our horses work hard over

the summer months. They are trail horses with jobs to do guiding riders and horses, or out route finding and checking in the Radnorshire hills and across Wales for up to six days, sometimes more, at a time. We ride between 12 and 20 miles a day on average.

Between us we have four horses, well five actually if we include Gem, a rescue pony who is not yet ready to be ridden but will make a great little trail pony one day. He's setting the timeline though and we are in no rush. So our first horses are Mac, a 16hh Irish cob gelding, and Dusty, a 15.1hh Arab Welsh gelding.

Medina has Shukki, a 15hh 'Heinz 57' cob mare, and Karen has George, a 15.2hh Welsh section D gelding. We live about eight miles from each other and keep our horses similarly but differently too to fit in with life. We both work and have families! The horses are all barefoot and live out in hill country and they are all on a track system which we vary according to the ground. They are all rugged, although this is the first year that Medina has rugged hers due in part to the weather but also increased work commitments.

When the weather allows we do let our horses play together without rugs so they can mutually groom and have a good roll.

This year will be our fourth season. Initially we used to worry about keeping the horses going over the winter and having them ready for their first ride in spring, which is usually a recce ride just after the clocks have changed in

March. We never felt able to do enough to really keep them fit. It's surprising though how much they move about on the track system and keep themselves in reasonably good shape. George is a four year old who is easily bored and has lots of exuberance. He will amuse himself by running, spinning, kicking, rearing and bucking. He doesn't give up until he has succeeded in getting Mac to pay attention and reward him with a return sprint. They can be themselves and we find that we can bring them back to fitness in time for the spring without too much difficulty. So we decided to stop pressurising ourselves and our horses and give us all a little down time over winter.

We didn't want to completely ignore them to the point where they only saw us at feed time. Winter can be a time to work in more depth on some of those little issues that we don't always address in summer, such as helping Mac to be more comfortable with having his head brushed and letting us touch him around his mouth, which he's a bit sensitive about. He's always been a bit sticky with lifting up his feet and then laughing at us as he leans heavily. We worked together on Mac gaining confidence enough to lift and hold up his feet lightly and politely. We worked on excellence in bridling and now Mac lowers his head to where we can reach to put his bridle over his ears whilst we're sitting on a step. We practiced stretching exercises, though nothing new or too strenuous due to his muscles being cold.

George had trouble with paste worming, so Karen spent time in the barn with him getting him to accept the syringe touching his face and mouth until he chose to take it into his mouth himself.

Honey and molasses helped him make that decision. George is a horse who loves to explore with his mouth. He will pick up his own bucket and throw it at you. Karen exploited this whilst getting him to accept the bridle. Now he will chase the bridle around the barn as a game of catch the bit!

Winter is a perfect opportunity to improve on the game of catching and haltering your horse. Think of it from the horse's point of view; what's in it for him? What happened last time he allowed himself to be haltered and taken from his field and companions? Horses are often more pleased to see their human in winter than in summer. After all, we are likely to be taking them from a cold wet field to a warm dry area where they will be then given plenty to eat regardless of what else we do with them. This is a good opportunity to set it up so that they think it's good to see us any time of year. Things we may do include going to see them but not catching them, just giving them a carrot, stroking them, scratching them and leaving. Then maybe next time we might halter them, give them a carrot and then remove the halter and leave. Medina has found that this pattern is really helping Gem be friendly with his halter and deal with his claustrophobia.

So whilst neither of us may be fully fit, we enjoy the riding we do through the winter and the time will come for getting fit when the weather improves. Very soon we will be building those miles again and the horses will be donning saddle bags, map and compass for our first of the year across Wales ride to route check in preparation for the coming season with Your Horse Adventures. In the meantime there's still lots of fun to be had, stuff to do and things to learn.



Winter is a great opportunity to develop leadership and communication

THINGS TO DO IN WINTER

- Encourage your horse to lift and hold his feet without leaning
- Practice touching and handling areas your horse may find particularly sensitive such as ears, mouth, underbelly
- Can your horse catch his bridle?
- If you use paste wormer, honey and molasses can help make this a palatable treat
- Hang out in the barn with your horse and see what they could do to earn a carrot
- Now is the time to train your horse to WANT to be with you
- Play games to help your horse overcome his claustrophobia
- Feed time is an opportunity to maintain your leadership. Make sure your horse does not barge, bully or invade your personal space to get food
- Go for a walk just fifty yards up the track then let your horse munch grass for twenty minutes before returning home
- Take the pressure off yourself and your horse, there will be time for getting fit in the spring
- Discover his itchy spots, the ones that cause his lips to curl in ecstasy when scratched!

Karen Roberts and Medina Brock run holidays for riders with their own horses exploring the fabulous countryside of Wales
www.yourhorseadventures.co.uk