

Equine Vision Insights That Will Open Your Eyes

#1 Relatable incident: You have endured endless hours of flatwork, grueling lessons and early mornings at the gym for this moment...a local horse show. Trailering in two days ahead of schedule, hours were spent in the arena where your events will be held. Your horse is both mentally and physically prepared.

Finally, on Saturday afternoon, it's time for the class. When your number is called, you enter the ring confident you've done all your homework. As you make your courtesy circle, your horse passes the lunch crowd calmly.

Jumping the first two fences smoothly, you canter the diagonal line in perfect fashion. The next turn passes the crowd again, and your horse spooks suddenly. Your left stirrup is dislodged and the lovely rhythm you had established is disrupted.

You fumble for the reins, end up circling and your horse is suddenly wide-awake. He refuses to canter any closer than twenty feet away from the corner. You want to *kill* him. He's eyeing a woman in the crowd with a pink parasol. He *just* went by her TWICE.

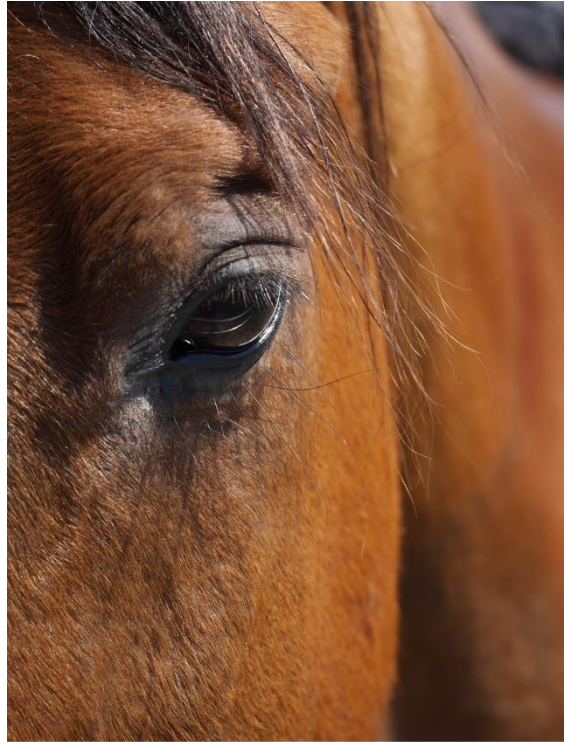


Photo by Mackenzie Taylor on Unsplash

#2 Can you believe it trail ride: While enjoying a Sunday stroll in the woods, you come upon a bevy of quail. As they scatter, your horse retains his calm demeanor and strolls by. On the way home, you pass a rabbit that takes one hop. Your horse goes berserk like he's seen a ghost.

#3 You gotta be kiddin' me: While ambling out to the ring for your lesson, your horse is alert and responsive. You walk through the flat ring to the jumping ring where all the local dilettantes are chatting. You know your horse is groomed impeccably, and your Ralph Lauren designer sweatshirt sparkles in the sunshine as you smile hello and start buckling your chinstrap. Suddenly your horse throws his head up, knocking off your hat as he stares wide-eyed somewhere into the hills above. You jerk his head down and he starts to prance. You jump off in disgust to pick up your hat as he wheels in terror. He's been in this ring a thousand times...what in the world does he see now??

What gives? The horses described above are simply responding to external stimuli based on the way they see, which is vastly different than the way humans see. Let's see how the world looks through a horse's eye and you'll why the horses above reacted.

First and foremost, a horse has the ability to see two different images, one from each eye. Picture yourself in the passenger seat of a car traveling down the road at the speed of a trot. One eye sees the left side roadside passing by and the other eye sees objects on the right side passing by, but both these pictures are somehow in the brain at the same time.

If the horse passes the lady with the parasol and spooks at it going in a clockwise direction and he finally relaxes enough to go calm down, he will probably eye it warily again when the direction is reversed. That scary object looks a little different from the other eye.

A horse has to move his head up and down to focus. A horse's retina is similar to wearing bifocals. We humans can move the glasses when we want to read or watch TV. A horse cannot move his lens, he must tilt his head up and down.

If those glasses changed gradually throughout the whole lens (without a distinct partition), the glasses would be moved up and down all the time. To see far into the distance, or over a hill, or up over the other side of a fence, a horse brings his head up to focus the object (the image on his retina).

Horses see things that we cannot. Just because WE don't see a predator doesn't mean a horse won't detect it. A horse uses his natural instincts - vision, hearing and smell, to protect himself and YOU. If nature tells him there's a bobcat sitting on a hill, he's going to want to send out an alert and probably jump away from it.

A horse has funky depth perception. Landscapes gel into one picture plane like a Bev Doolittle painting. Sometimes objects become distinct only by moving. The horse that passed the scattering quail family absorbed it in stride. However, the horse never saw the camouflaged rabbit that hopped suddenly as he came upon it, so he startled.

Try seeing your ride through a horse's eyes and you'll be amazed at how the world appears. Learn to understand his vision and you'll anticipate his anxieties. He in turn will warn you of predators ahead that would have completely escaped your awareness.