

# *Who's the Boss?*

Contrary to popular myth, the stallion is not the leader of a herd, but rather serves in a role to defend and protect the herd from predators and other stallions. The leadership role is held by a mare, known as the "lead mare" or "boss mare." The mare determines the movement of the herd as it travels to obtain food, water, and shelter. She also determines the route the herd takes when fleeing from danger.

When the herd is in motion, the stallion brings up the rear of the herd, keeping straggling herd members in line and serving as a "rear guard" between the herd and a potential source of danger. When the herd is at rest, all herd members share the responsibility of keeping watch for danger. The stallion usually is positioned on the edge of the herd, in order to defend the herd if needed.

In a herd or a group of horses, there is usually only one mature herd stallion. Both sexes of young horses are tolerated while young, but once they become sexually mature, the stallion will drive both colts and fillies from the herd.

Colts may present competition for the stallion, but studies suggest that driving off young horses of both sexes may also be an instinctive behaviour that also minimizes the risk of inbreeding within the herd. In some cases, a single younger mature male may be tolerated on the fringes of the herd. One theory is that this young stallion is considered a potential successor, even though the younger horse will eventually drive out the older herd stallion.

Fillies usually soon join a different band, and colts or young stallions without mares of their own usually form "bachelor bands" in the wild. Living in a group gives these males the social and protective benefits of living in a herd. A bachelor herd may also contain older stallions that have lost their herd in a challenge.

Other stallions may directly challenge a herd stallion, or may simply attempt to "steal" mares and form a new, smaller herd. In either case, if the two stallions meet there rarely is a true fight, more often there will be bluffing behaviour and the weaker animal will back off. Even if a fight for dominance occurs, rarely do opponents hurt each other in the wild because the weaker animal has a chance to flee. However, fights between animals in captivity may result in serious injuries; fences and other forms of confinement make it more difficult for the weaker animal to safely escape.