

# Seen From the Saddle

## A Long Rider Eyewitness to Climate Change

by  
Sabine Keller



*In a special report created for the Guild's environmental investigation, German Long Rider Sabine Keller described the many alarming changes she witnessed during her latest equestrian journey across Europe in the summer of 2022.*

Being on the road with horses has always fascinated me, and I am also very close to nature. For me, the most important thing about riding is the close relationship I have developed with the horses, observing nature and the wonderful experiences I have with the people I meet along the way. The horse opens the door to people's hearts. You see many little things along the way that other people don't even notice. You leave everyday problems at home. Your head is free. The journey is so slow (in contrast to bike or car tours) that your soul can still follow along. In the tent you can enjoy the singing of the nightingale or the full moon and the beautiful, calm evening mood.

For more than 35 years I have been out and about with my horses in Western Europe (Belgium, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and my home country of Germany). During that time I have ridden about 40,000 miles. As a person who is very close to nature and an attentive observer, I perceive a lot. My latest journey has taught me that dealing with changing environmental conditions is becoming more and more important for a Long Rider. Good preparation, including knowledge of poisonous plants, pays off and can be vital.

Not only are hay and concentrate (grain) prices rising, it is increasingly difficult to find good hay. This is important because there is a diminishing amount of grass to be found. Everything withers or is sprayed dead next to the fields by the farmers. Long periods of drought result in the meadows being all eaten up by summer. As a result it is increasingly difficult to find a good place to stay with the horses.

The remaining meadows, which offer very little fodder, are often occupied by large herds of cattle. This includes dangerous bulls that frequently react very aggressively and will not tolerate horses in their meadow. Even if you just approach the watering trough in a meadow by yourself without a horse, it is very dangerous with a bull nearby. This means that much more time needs to be spent to let the horses graze during the day when nice grass is found along the way.

Because of drought, heat and reduced grazing the earth now has many bare spots. In this new environment people need to remember that not everything that is green is safe for a horse to eat. In unfamiliar country hungry horses may eat an unfamiliar plant they have not previously encountered or would reject if regular food was plentiful. A major problem is the increase in poisonous plants due to overgrazing. As a result, ragwort (*Jacobaea vulgaris*) has multiplied invasively here in Western Europe. It accumulates permanently in the liver and leads to a gradual death of the horses. That is why having knowledge of poisonous plants is becoming increasingly important.

The scarcity of water is also becoming more noticeable. In July during my ride through Belgium and northern France even small ponds in the forest, 1 ½ to 2 metres deep, were completely dried up. Normally this region is usually very green due to the moderate climate and the large amount of precipitation. Yet as is the case now, if there are no watering opportunities from small puddles, streams, etc., then you can ask for water in the villages. This is important not only for the horses but also the rider needs a water supply of at least 2.5 liters on the go. Because of the diminishing water supply you should use every drinking opportunity!

However, there is also the other extreme. We are also enduring unimaginable floods. Five years ago we survived the "flood of the century." But in 2021 the water was twice as high and the destruction was called the "millennium flood." When that flood hit my region large houses were swept away, almost all the bridges were destroyed, and the lives of many people and animals were lost.

An equestrian traveller should also realise that storms are also constantly increasing in both strength and frequency. This brings new dangers. For example the wind can be so strong that it is no longer so easy to set up a tent and mobile electric fence for the horses at night.

In addition to drought and flood, we must now be aware of the danger of deadly fires. Because of this year's record high temperatures, this year I saw burned fields and tractors that must have burned the day before!

Even during the day you have a queasy feeling, especially when riding through coniferous forest. The terrain is so dry that even a spark from the horseshoes could ignite the forest. In addition, there are many dead spruces in the forest and the ground is densely covered with dry spruce needles. Because of the danger of a sudden wildfire, it is good if you have informed yourself beforehand and found an escape route.

Hotter weather has created another severe problem for horses and humans. Harmful insects are also increasing in number. This year I had twice as many flies as usual on the horses. Even at 10 o'clock in the morning the horses' eyes were already densely surrounded by flies (like on an embroidered buttonhole). The thick infestation of flies caused eye infections.

Another new problem is that insects are now found in cooler areas where they previously did not exist. Tiger mosquitoes, riparian ticks and others are transmitting diseases (e.g. West Nile virus) that were previously unknown here. The horseflies (Tabanus sudeticus) are now tormenting people and animals not only in the south of France but further north. The swarms of insects not only carry disease, they torment the horses so constantly that the animals lose their appetite – they just want to keep running, as fast as possible and to a place with fewer pests. Even as a human being you are constantly being bitten like never before and should take precautions if you have any allergies.

My prediction is that it will not get better!

*German Long Rider Sabine Keller became a Member of the Long Riders' Guild in 2013 when she completed her first journey across Europe. Sabine has ridden Isis (right) more than 19,000 kilometers. Marenga has accompanied them as the pack horse for more than 16,000 kilometres.*

*"I think it's a pity that the so-called sports riders live in a world which is about fame and money and comes at the expense of the horses. But the beautiful world I discovered with the help of my horses remains hidden from them. I do not do these journeys to impress anyone. My wish is to encourage other people to leave their comfort zone, to be brave and to jump over their shadow. It doesn't have to be a big trip and it doesn't take much to start small, except courage. And you will be richly rewarded!!!"*

