Faculty Research Summary

Dr. Katrina Merkies

Dr. Katrina Merkies' research focuses primarily on equine behaviour, exploring various aspects of horse behaviour and, more recently, equitation science — the study of interactions between humans and horses.

One ongoing project in the Merkies lab examines the affective state of horses and their reaction to human touch. Inspired by therapy horses, this work asks not only how people benefit from interacting with horses, but how the horses themselves are affected. Her team has investigated whether horses enjoy being in proximity of humans and found that, when given the choice, they spend less than half their time near enough to be touched. Elevated heart rates and signs of stress were also observed when horses were around people. Merkies emphasizes the importance of considering the animal's welfare in animal-assisted therapy, ensuring it remains a positive experience for all.

The Merkies lab has also investigated horse behaviour in emergency situations, such as a barn fire. Popularized by the movie Black Betty, it's thought that blind folding a horse could reduce their stress and ease in evacuation. The Merkies lab tested this theory by having horses cross a tarp on the ground either blind folded or seeing. They found that blindfolded horses were more difficult to lead and often startled when crossing the tarp them in comparison to seeing horses. This study debunks the Black Betty theory, and horses should not be blindfolded in emergency situations.

Sharing research beyond academia can be challenging. Dr. Merkies credits Equine Guelph — a hub for equine knowledge on campus — for translating research into practice. Equine Guelph publishes articles and distributes a monthly newsletter featuring equine research from the University, helping ensure this knowledge reaches, and benefits, a broader community.