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- Tools
- Open Forum
- FAQs
- Donate



Home > [Blogs, Developing Intelligence](#) > White horses are less attractive to horseflies [Not Exactly Rocket Science]

## White horses are less attractive to horseflies [Not Exactly Rocket Science]

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“That is Shadowfax. He is chief of the Maeras, lords of all horses, and not even Theoden, King of Rohan, has ever looked on a better. Does he not shine like silver, and run as smoothly as a swift stream?” – Gandalf In the Lord of the Rings, Gandalf rides upon a magnificent white stallion called Shadowfax. White horses have been greatly prized in human societies as a sign of wealth and dignity, largely because their bright coats are both pretty and rare. There are reasons for that. In the wild, the same conspicuousness that inspires legendary tales also makes white horses vulnerable to predators and sensitive to skin cancer. But they have an unexpected benefit – they make horses less attractive to horseflies. Anyone who has been bitten by a horsefly (formally, a tabanid) knows that they’re much more irritating than your average midge or mosquito. Rather than puncturing skin, their mandibles are designed to rip and shear. As a result, their bites hurt and they can drive grazing animals to distraction. They can also transfer serious diseases, including Equine Infectious Anaemia , parasitic worms, and even anthrax. Now, Gabor Horvath from Eotvos University, Hungary, has found that white coats are more horsefly-proof than darker ones. They reflect very little polarised light – light vibrating on a single plane – and it’s this light that horseflies use to track down their next blood meal. On a sunny June day, Horvath watched two horses – one brown and one white – as they grazed in a local field. Both were almost continuously attacked by horseflies and had to defend themselves by tail-swishing, kicking, shuddering, head-swinging, biting, licking and even rolling on the group. But the white horse had the better time of it – photographs revealed that, on average, the brown horse had 3.7 times more horseflies on or near it. Eventually, the attacks were so irritating that the horses were driven into a nearby shady forest, where they gained a temporary respite. Again, the brown horse was always the first to cave and spent longer in the shade. Read the rest of this post... | Read the comments on this post...



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