

TRAIL ETIQUETTE & SAFETY

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Like to ride? Who doesn't? There's more to it than hopping on your horse and galloping off across the hills, or slaloming through the woods. There are hikers, mountain bikers, cross-country skiers, dirt bikes, snowmobiles, 4 wheelers, hunters and fishermen, and who knows who else out there. Many of the trails we use are designated multiple-use, which means everybody uses the same trail and has to get along, or risk losing those trails for a particular user group. With courtesy, responsibility, and common sense, we can share trails safely. If you are using the trails, you should be part of an organization such as the Back Country Horsemen, who help protect our right to ride and if possible you should be volunteering at least one weekend a year to help with trail care.

HORSE & RIDER TRAINING:

Before we worry about the other guy, let's make sure you and your horse are trail savvy. Good trail horses need just as much training to develop specific skills for their work as horses in other disciplines. Generally, a safe trail horse will be a sound, willing partner suited to his rider, and neither lagging far behind, nor charging out in front. When riding with a group, safety dictates that the group ride at a speed at which the least experienced rider is comfortable. This way the group stays together and can "sandwich" novices during encounters with other trail users or in difficult situations.

A courteous trail rider trains their horse to walk carefully through water or mud, stay on the trail (no shortcuts), and pick its way through rocks. Jumping or plunging through these areas is dangerous, and not environmentally sensitive. Encouraging a horse to drink is fine, but some like to paw exuberantly, defecate, or roll in water. Be polite; get a drink, move on to a less delicate part of the trail, and wait for the rest of the group.

Advise other trail users of your horse's temperament, e.g. a horse with a tendency to kick should always wear a red ribbon in the tail or a stallion should wear a yellow ribbon. Assume that not everyone will know what these ribbons mean, so be prepared to explain or take the necessary precautions to avoid trouble. Make sure your horse has the temperament and training for riding on congested public trails. Trails are not the proper place for schooling green horses. You should be a skilled enough rider to read your horse's and other horse's body language as well as manage your horse at different speeds, be able to negotiate a variety of terrains, and deal with unexpected situations. If a horse is really spooky (in which case he should have more work at home before hitting the trail), one can always dismount and walk. Never be too proud to get off and walk. Walking can save you and your horse a lot of misery. Even beginning riders can have a safe, happy trail ride if they know their limitations, are properly equipped, and are accompanied by other experienced trail riders.

Riders need to use common sense and follow basic safety rules when on the trail. Don't ride alone, have a general plan for which direction you're going and about how long you'll be out, and pay attention to the weather. Some horses tend to get spooky just before or after a storm, or during cold or very windy weather. Tell someone where you are going and how long you expect to be gone.

Everyone who uses trails should also keep track of the time, and make every effort to be back before dark. Most state forests and parks close at dusk anyway, and the risks of riding in the dark are great. You may not be able to avoid poor footing or holes, or you may encounter animals or cars that could cause your horse to spook. Worse yet, you could miss trail markers and warning signs and get lost. Think safety!

With the high demand for multiple trail use, be responsible for the passing of good will towards all that may come in contact with a horse and rider. On well used multiple use trails, consider both you and your horse's experience and ability. Green trail horses and inexperienced riders do not belong on trails where other user's safety may be at risk. It takes only one bad experience for people to concern themselves with encountering horses on the trails.

TRAIL ETIQUETTE:

There is a thing called trail etiquette. When riding any trail there are rules to follow for the safety of fellow riders and the environment. There are many unwritten rules that everyone is expected to follow, some call them common sense rules other say trail etiquette. If you've ever ridden near an inconsiderate rider you'll know what we are talking about. Be an educated participant. You need to consider your fellow rider when preparing for your ride.

How a person rides a trail can determine not only his own enjoyment but the safety of himself, his own horse and other trail users too. With the high demand for trails throughout the nation, there are very few trails dedicated for horse-only use. The right-of-way rule is that biker yields to hiker. And both biker and hiker yield to horsemen. Although this is considered a trail rule, common courtesy and common sense should prevail and apply on all trails and in all situations. Don't forget that some of the folks you will encounter on organized trail rides, believe it or not, only ride this one time per year. Sometimes horse folks bring friends that only get to ride once in a while, so not only are they inexperienced, these folks are excited to be there. This gives the old "Watch out for the other guy." new meaning.

For some strange reason there are a lot of equine trail riders who will hardly speak to another horseman much less utter a word to other trail users. Friendliness is the best avenue of acceptance on trails. The better the trail meeting or experience between other trails users and us horsemen the better chance for us horsemen to be accepted on present and future trails. And we need all the chances and acceptance we can find to stay on trails! So when meeting other trail users on the trail, be polite. SMILE. Say hello.

Most other trail users are intimidated by the size of a horse. And they just don't know what to do or where to go! So say "Hi" and tell them what they need to do. If the hiker is on a hill trail, have him move to the downhill side of the trail and stand there. Continue carrying on the conversation with him as you ride by. On flat trails, have him move to the left side of the trail so you can stay on the right side and continue carrying on a conversation.

Never have a hiker, biker, or other horseman or anybody step behind a rock, a tree, a bush or out of sight. If the horse has seen him, he's looking for him! And with the sudden disappearance the horse can become more nervous and upset. To a horse, that disappearing creature could suddenly jump out and eat them! Even if completely out of sight, a snapping twig or a rustling branch as a horse goes by can spook the animal. So keep the other trail user in open sight -- and TALK.

If a hiker happens to have a backpack, a talking backpacking hiker is going to spook a horse a lot less than a non-talking backpacking hiker. A horse knows what a normal person looks like but a person with a backpack can suddenly become a threatening tower of the unknown. So start a conversation with the backpacking hiker BEFORE reaching him and definitely when passing him. Let the horse know that this creature is actually a funny looking person with a huge hump on his back. And if it talks, it can't be all bad.

Have hikers or backpackers in groups, packs or families follow the same rules as above. Or better yet, move off the trail yourself and let them pass. Always pass in safe areas which may mean you, the horseman, may have to back track a few feet.

If someone wants to stop and pet the horse and the horse is agreeable, let them. It is good public relations. A lot of hikers may never have touched a horse before. And with groups of kids, they love talking to and petting a horse regardless of how dirty and sweaty the horse is! Cheerfully answer questions about your horse. You are an ambassador for the entire equestrian community.

Uphill traffic has the right-of-way regardless if its hiker, biker or horsemen! Downhill traffic should yield by waiting at the top of the climb or at the first safe spot to stop. If you are just starting down a hill and see another trail user starting up, you should wait at the top of the hill. After all, you are going down hill and the up hill user has his momentum going up hill. Why make him stop? This is especially true if on narrow trails where the passing could be tight and a safety problem. Wait at the top where it's safe for you, your horse and the other user to pass each other. And on wider trails (at least 10 feet wide), everyone can go down and up hill at the same time passing safely by staying on the right side.

Bikers are probably the most upon-you-all-at-once of any of the trail users. Bike riders often don't see other trail users until it's too late. They're busy watching the trail directly in front of their tire and don't look up to see what they're coming upon. Or they swoop around a corner. So, always trail read. Look ahead. Look above. Look beside. Look behind. Keep aware of what's on the trail and if you see a bike or hiker off in the distance, remember they are there. By being aware of what's around you, you won't be caught off guard!

Ride single file on a trail, one behind the other. Horses that are buddies should be kept together on rides. Buddies can be real problems if split up. So let buddies be together, in the front or the back. On wide firebreak or road type trails, riders can ride side by side as long as they don't interfere with other users or get off the main trail. It's nice to ride beside a friend and point out sights along the route. If one rider must pass another, they should do so on the left and only after confirming with the rider being passed that it is all right to proceed. The rider should then move to the right as far as is safe or simply stop their horse for the approaching rider to pass. If horses begin to match strides, just relax. One will soon tire of the 'keep up game' and fall back. Never pass at any gait faster than a slow trot. Just keep on walking and talking to your for-a-few-minutes riding companion.

Walking is the acceptable trail gait. After all, trail riding is a pleasure experience. One isn't out to cover a certain distance in a specific time. If you are, you should join competitive or endurance rides. With trail riding, one is out to enjoy the countryside. See the trees. Smell the flowers. Catch a glimpse of the local wildlife darting off into the tree shadows. Because that's what pleasure trail riding is all about, drifting along a trail while the rest of the world races out of control.....

At the walk, a distance of at least one horse length (about 10 feet) should be maintained between animals on all trails at all times! Don't tailgate!! This distance should increase at a trot or a canter! When going uphill, keep at least two lengths between horses. On downhill routes, maintain at least three horse lengths between animals. Look for changes in the trail and terrain. Increase following distances when traveling down a heavily wooded trail, so branches swept aside by one rider don't hit the next horse and rider. Keep to a safe pace over tricky footing and on difficult trails. You never want the horse in front to suddenly stop and you tailgate into the rider's saddle. Like driving a car, stay back and allow room for those sudden stops. If you can count the horse's tail hairs, you're too close!

When it comes to gates, bridges and crossings, the who-ever-gets-there-first rule prevails. But again, common sense and courtesy should apply. If one doesn't have to wait very long, hold the gate open for other trail users. That way you can close the gate and know it's been re-latched properly. If the gate was open when you came to it, leave it open.

At bridges and crossings, go on over if you get there first but if a hiker or biker arrives at the same time, let them go first. Wait about 10-20 feet back from a bridge so they have room to cross and move back over to the side of the trail. Some horses don't like bridges and it's a lot easier to work a horse over when you're alone than when three or four other trail users are waiting to cross in front or behind you.

When confronted by dogs, many horses will become frightened and their natural flight response will be triggered. There are a few things you can do to help the situation. First, and most importantly, try to remain calm and relaxed- your apprehension can easily feed the horse's instinct to flee. Even if you are frightened, you need to "fake" courage so your horse will have more confidence. Take deep breaths, keep your back and legs relaxed and try not to choke up on the reins. Sit deep in the saddle. Act like it is no big deal and your horse is less likely to panic.

Turn your horse to face the dogs as they approach. Use simple calming techniques such as stroking his neck, a crest massage or singing. Since what he probably wants to do is whirl and run, you need to give him something else to do. Some simple lateral work or disengagement of the hindquarters is good replacement behavior.

Treat the trail and trail head with respect. Keep the trail head clear of manure and trash, by putting all manure and trash back in your trailer before leaving the trail head. While on the trail, minimize impact by staying on designated trails and avoiding muddy conditions. Move horses slightly to the side to relieve themselves, and keep your horse moving while defecating, the material will biodegrade within days and with less environmental impact. Deep hoof

prints and manure are the two biggest concerns of other trail users. Be environmentally responsible. Your goal is to leave no trace...

GROUP TRAIL RIDES:

Who has ever been on a trail ride where the lead horse is moving too fast? Or they take off without any warning? Do you and your horse have good manners on the trail? So often we hear about trail etiquette when passing strange horses on the trail, but seldom do we hear about the trail etiquette amongst friends. Do you know your "job" when you are the leader of the group of riders? How a person rides a trail can determine not only his own enjoyment but the safety of himself, his own horse and other trail users too.

As a member or guest of our club, the opportunity for a group ride comes up often. A trail ride with your fellow horse lovers should be enjoyable. To make these rides as trouble free and fun as possible, there are some critical trail etiquette rules that need to be understood and observed during the ride. And even a small group on a casual outing will benefit from established guidelines and a sensible trail leader. If you're that leader, here are a few tips to help make your ride safe and fun.

Every large group ride should have a Trail Ride Leader, a Drag Rider, and everyone else in between. The Leader leads the group and makes the decisions on which trails to turn on and the speed at which to keep the group moving. At the beginning of the ride and after break stops, do not walk off until all riders are mounted and well situated in their saddles. If you have a green horse or rider in the group, be considerate of their skill level. Stick to the pace most comfortable for the least experienced horse and/or rider. If you don't want to go "that slow", save riding with the "greenies" for another day.

Before heading out, it must be determined which gait is acceptable to everyone on the ride. If you want to change gaits, check that everyone is okay doing so. Without this common courtesy, your group might be enjoying the scenery or chatting amongst themselves only to find that they are violently jerked backwards by the unexpected gait change. This is very dangerous to the riders and could lead to an unintentional jerk in the horse's mouth as riders grab the reins for balance. Besides, the horse should get its cue from his rider, not the horse in front of him. If the pace is too fast for anyone, slow down. Generally, the leader should travel no faster than the slowest horse in the group is comfortable going. Slower horses in the group should not have to continually trot to keep up with faster walking horses. Moreover, it's not wise for riders of slow movers to make a practice of trotting up behind the group to catch up. This can startle or stir up the other horses in the group. It is best to keep the group at a pace that's comfortable for everyone.

Establish a method (either a verbal or hand cue) for downward transitions. Horses can pile into each other during unannounced slowing or stops, just like a cartoon, but it's not so funny when it happens in real life. Convey your intentions to the rider behind you. That rider should, in turn, relay the message to the rider behind him or her, and so forth. Also as the leader, you should keep a sharp eye for upcoming obstacles, and warn others. If you must duck to avoid low branches, warn the other riders to be ready to duck, too. If you spot a hole in the trail, make sure the other riders see it, too. Just as your horse will be more alert in the lead, it's your job to scan for any hazards and warn the group. Make sure that everyone in your group has safely cleared any obstacles, including puddles, streams, jumps, ditches, paved roads and rocky areas. Wait for all the horses in your group to get a drink of water at streams before you move on. Although thirsty, many may not take the time to drink if everyone is leaving. Also, while your horse may be on safe footing, a follower may not be in the same position.

The Drag is the last rider in the group and is responsible for running the head count when regroupings occur. It is critical that the Drag rider knows their role and that there is no member of the group behind them. The rest of the group will work out positions based on speed. These positions will change during the ride as horses and riders warm-up and find a comfortable pace or burn out. If you are not sure of your level, etiquette suggests that starting in the back and waiting for an invitation to move up in line will never offend anyone. If a horse/rider is having trouble, stop. Do not just continue on in hopes that "they will work it out." A horse is a herd animal and may become anxious if all of his friends are leaving him. Start the ride with the understanding that if any one wishes to stop for any reason, they should say "stop" loudly and expect that all riders in the group will respond immediately. Passing a

stopped rider unless signaled to do so is also a bad practice as they may be needing help, waiting for dust to settle, waiting for oncoming trail users or other riders.

The Ride Leader should occasionally stop and wait for the entire group to collect. He can then judge the physical needs of the horses and riders behind him. We should not be stopping so often that it detracts from the ride but we do want to let horses air up, riders change riding sequence, or make needed tack adjustments if they have to.

LEAVE NO RIDER BEHIND – At a grouping, the Ride Leader should check with each rider before starting down the trail. Each rider should signal in return that they are ready to go. We don't want to be 5 miles down the trail wondering where Mike is and he is lost, wondering which way we went. Just waiting the extra moments to confirm that everyone is ready to go is a lot better than spending the afternoon looking for a separated rider.

SUGGESTED EQUIPMENT:

Helmet; proper fitting tack, in good repair; cell phone; "Leatherman" multi-tool or knife; first-aid kit; vet wrap; halter and lead rope; saddle bag; baling twine; hoof pick; easy boot; spare stirrup leather; lunch-don't litter! Water bottle; compass and map; rain gear; towel or sponge; mini mag light; fly repellent; sunscreen; jacket; matches, in waterproof container; space blanket; toilet paper or tissues, in zip-lock bag. Some trail riders also carry pepper spray.

Something to think about is that horses are herd animals so they generally feel safer in a group. This is one reason it might not be a good idea to ride on the trail by your self. Always use good trail riding precautions. Basic good "horse sense" is carrying an emergency kit, riding with a companion and letting someone know your travel plans.

EMERGENCY-RIDER DOWN:

- The first priority is the fallen rider. Let the horse go or let someone else catch him.
- If the rider is on the ground for more than 1 or 2 minutes, you must determine if the rider needs medical attention. If so, or if in doubt, call 911 immediately.
- Unless the rider has fallen into water do not move him. Do not remove his helmet.
- Even if the rider appears uninjured, ask a few simple questions to check for mental clarity. Confusion or short-term memory loss may indicate a concussion.
- If the rider seems dazed do not allow him back on the horse.
- If the rider is conscious, ask if he is able to move arms and legs. If not, help him stay calm while you wait for help. Provide shade from the sun or warmth if needed.
- If the rider is unconscious, make sure he is breathing with a clear airway and that he has a pulse. If necessary, start CPR.
- Do not leave an unconscious or dazed person alone while getting help-if he wakes up he could stumble off and get lost on top of being seriously injured.



SUMMARY:

- Train your horse for the trail & various obstacles.
- Ride your horse at a safe and controlled speed. Be especially careful when visibility is limited.
- Let other trail riders know when it is safe to pass your horse.
- Kicking horses – read their body language and correct before it is too late.
- Follow right-of-way rules. Biker yields to hiker, biker and hiker yield to horses. Uphill has right-of-way over downhill regardless if it's hiker, biker, or horse.
- Always speak when approaching other trail users. A horse's vision is restricted but its hearing is acute.
- Say hello. Tell other users how many are in your party. Pass with care. If uncertain, ask questions.
- Ride single file. No tail gaiting. Maintain at least 1 horse length between horses at all times.
- Know your horse's limitations.
- Trail leaders should pace the ride to the slowest horse. It's tiring for the horses that must continually trot to catch up and isn't a peaceful ride for the riders.
- Don't assume every rider or horse in the group is comfortable with changes of gait. If you're going to walk, then only walk at the pace of the slowest horse.
- Don't run up on other horses while on a trail ride, it can excite the younger horses. Don't forget there may be inexperienced riders and/or horses in the group.
- Give a verbal or hand signal to your group when you are slowing. Unless an emergency occurs, never stop abruptly since this can cause a pile-up with tragic results caused by a kick to a horse or its rider.
- Protect our environment.
- If you carry it in, please carry it out, this will eliminate litter.
- Be aware of what you may leave behind, that others will see. Clean up after yourself and your horse at your break or lunch stops and your horse trailer at the trailhead. If you trailered to a location, do not clean out your trailer in the parking area.
- Avoid using trails when harmful conditions exist (mud season)
- Protect water sources from contamination. Avoid bringing your horse in bodies of water for a "swim" Water crossings should be made where there is safe footing and avoid muddy bottom crossings whenever possible.
- When trail riding, stay on designated trails. Never cut switchbacks. Keep damage to vegetation to a minimum.
- Be aware and sensitive about "road apples". Train your horse to relieve himself off to the side of the trail. Keep your horse moving rather than leaving the whole load in one spot. In some cases, on well used multiple-use trails and Greenways, it's a good idea to dismount and move the manure over to the side, or go back & clean up.
- Highline your horse between trees to avoid damage caused by chewing, rubbing, and pawing.
- Do not cross private property without permission. Respect property owners. Make sure that "you" have their permission to ride on or cross over their land.
- Do not gallop across open fields, leaving hoof prints behind or destroying crops. Use common sense and stay to the edges. Leave gates as you find them.
- Obey gate closures and regulatory signs. Again, it only takes one bad experience to ruin it for everyone else.
- Learn basic first aid & CPR. You never know when you might need to use it.

Another lesson to be learned is that just because there is an accepted way of doing things and/or methods that we have been using for many years without incident, it doesn't mean it is the best way or that an accident can't happen. With horses, it pays to always assume the worst case scenario. If it is possible, a horse will find a way to turn it into a wreck. Whether it seems likely or not, we should always operate based on the worst case scenario and take the necessary actions to prevent the wreck from happening, no matter how remote the chances are. It pays to question everything that we do and consider all the possibilities, even if it seems like a remote chance. Horses have an incredible capacity to hurt themselves, their riders or others around them on a split second notice.