



## SHARE THE TRAIL

*By: Bunny Joseph, Connecticut Horse Council, Inc.*

Like to ride? Who doesn't? There's more to it than hopping on your horse and galloping off across hill and dale, or slaloming through the woods. There are hikers, mountain bikers, cross-country skiers, dirt bikes, snowmobiles, 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.

### **BASICS**

Before we worry about the other guy. Let's make sure you and your horse are trail savvy. You should be a skilled enough rider to manage your horse at different speeds, be able to negotiate a variety of terrains, and deal with unexpected situations. 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 tell someone or leave a note.

Pay attention to the weather; some horses tend to get spooky just before or after a storm, or during cold or very windy weather. Never ride out in thunderstorms. It's dangerous!

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!

## **HORSE TRAINING**

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.

Treat the trail with respect; discourage your horse from snacking. Some plants may be toxic to horses; others could be endangered species. Eating and trampling vegetation leads to bare dirt, which leads to destroyed vegetation and polluted streams. Minimize impact by staying on designated trails and avoiding muddy conditions.

Many horses will move slightly to the side to relieve themselves, the responsible trail user will try to keep his horse's end products away from high traffic multiple-use areas. If a horse is trained to keep moving while defecating, the material will biodegrade within days (because equines are herbivores), and with less environmental impact. Deep hoof prints and manure are the two biggest concerns of other trail users.

Don't smoke on the trail, don't litter, and keep the trail head clear of manure and trash. Be environmentally responsible, and trail-train your horse. Your goal is to leave no trace...

***"RIDE WITH A SMILE, A LIGHT HAND, AND LIGHTLY UPON  
THE LAND"***

## **DOGS**

Common sense also means leaving your dog at home. Even the best trained dog accompanying an equestrian is not physically on a leash, and can cause problems with other trail users, especially hikers with their own dogs or small children, mountain bikers, private property owners, and even other horseback riders. Dogs may also chase wildlife or livestock, and the hazards of traffic are very real. Having to deal with an extra animal brain is taking an unnecessary risk.

## **ROAD SAFETY**

Sometimes sharing the trail means sharing or crossing roads. Long sight lines and generally great visibility on a quiet dirt road makes nearly everyone want to move out. Here again, courtesy, common sense, and motor vehicle laws rule.

Connecticut State law groups equestrians and carriage drivers in the same category as vehicles; and subject to the same rules as cars. This means riding on the right side of the road (author's note: if the left side is wider and safer, especially on curves, it makes sense to err for safety's sake.)

Riders and cyclists must observe all traffic directions, stop at stop signs, and signal turns if there are motorists behind you. The law requires riders and carriage drivers to carry a light visible at least 200 feet to the front and rear, from a half-hour after sunset to a half-hour before sunrise. The laws also require the state DMV to print in its manual warnings that drivers must slow down, and stop if necessary to avoid endangering an equestrian or frightening or striking a horse. Drivers should slow to 25 - 30 mph or less, and be careful of noisy brakes, which could send a slightly nervous horse over the edge. Give a wide berth, or let oncoming traffic pass first if following, on a bridge or culvert, or near any off-road distraction that may spook him. Drivers should never beep their horn!

Equestrians should ride single file on roads they are sharing, and listen for the sound of approaching cars. A hand out and down is the universal warning to cars and other trail users to slow down or stop. Riders should have the courtesy to control the situation in a calm and expeditious manner.

When crossing roads, pick a place where there is good visibility, look both ways, listen for oncoming traffic, move briskly, and don't dawdle in the middle of the road.

When riding in a group, cross the road at the same time. This prevents horses from fretting about being left behind, creating a dangerous situation with horses on both sides of the road, confusing to drivers. Large groups often send two of their most experienced riders about 100 feet down a road with long sight lines to stop traffic long enough to get the group across safely. Drivers should always be thanked with a smile and a wave for their courtesy.

## **RIGHT OF WAY**

Horses have highly tuned senses, whose instinct is to run away from danger. The inherent unpredictability of the horse is why the standard multiple-use trail regulations give equestrians the right of way. Mountain bikes yield to hikers, and both cyclists and hikers yield to horses. As the privileged user, this means it's up to the equestrian to think safety at all times, take control of encounters with others, and be diplomatic and polite. You should communicate your needs tactfully, and whenever possible, educate non-equestrians about horse behavior, so that the encounter can be a positive experience.

Every user should know the local trail rules and stay on designated trails. Multiple use trails are generally wide enough for user groups to pass each other with adequate visibility to avoid collisions. However, it is important to ride at a safe and controlled speed and single file when someone is approaching.

Stay alert, you can often hear others before you see them. Watch for people who may startle your horse because he can't see them until they're close.

Announce yourself, say hello, or otherwise make polite voice contact; don't wait for the other person to notice you. Make eye contact, you want the other person to know where you are and can see your hand signals. Then use the universal hand and palm out to stop or slow down movement, as you plan the safest way to direct the situation.

Although horses always have the right of way, if you hear mountain bikes, motorbikes, or snowmobiles approaching fast around a bend with limited visibility, get off the trail as quickly and calmly as possible. Safety is the most important issue.

Ask the other person to say something. Often horses tense up, or can't identify the other person as a human - a helmeted cyclist, a backpacker, a hunter wearing camouflage. A polite verbal exchange - "Hello! There are more horses behind us. Are there others in your group?" or "My horse doesn't recognize what you are. Could you please say something so he knows you're a friendly human" - will help a horse relax.

Communicate your needs tactfully, and take every opportunity to educate non-equestrians about horse behavior. Ask others to move to the same side of the trail while you pass, so your horse won't feel claustrophobic. When the trail is too narrow to allow safe passing, show them where you want them to stand off the trail while you go by. If you must ask someone to backtrack, apologize and explain how much room your horse needs to feel comfortable.

On high traffic trails with multiple surfaces, stay to the right except when passing. Try to stay off blacktop. It may be safer to dismount and lead your horse across some bridges and viaducts, since footing may be slippery.

When encountering children or hikers with dogs, it is important to be especially alert and diplomatic. Make sure the adult has the child or dog physically under control before proceeding. If others ask to pet your horse, use your judgment about the safety of the situation, and try to take advantage of these public relations opportunity.

## **HUNTERS**

Hunters have every right to be in the woods during designated hunting seasons. Dates of various game seasons are available from the Department of Energy & Environmental Protection (DEEP). It's wisest for equestrians to not ride where hunters will be, especially during the first several weeks of deer season. Why risk you're own and your horse's safety for those few weeks, when there are 52 weeks in a year?

If you must ride in areas where hunting is allowed, be aware that hunters may be wearing bright orange or camouflage, depending on the season. They may be hunting with a dog or from a boat or blind. Gunshots are to be expected, and WILL spook a horse. Be cautious when riding on dirt roads or in fields.

In Connecticut hunting is not allowed on Sundays, but many gun clubs sponsor fun shoots on their property then. Regulated hunting grounds owned by private clubs do have hunting on their property on Sundays. Target shooting is also allowed. If you ride in Rhode Island, wearing blaze orange is mandatory for anyone in the woods, since hunting is allowed seven days a week.

Riders, cyclists, hikers, and joggers should wear bright or blaze orange clothing, never white, carry bells; be seen and heard. Every year, in every state, tragic mistakes are made. For safety's sake, find an alternative to hunting areas.

## **STEWARDSHIP**

Every trail user needs to find time for protecting trails. It's in your own interest to do so if trails are to remain open. Trail maintenance is an ongoing necessity and enthusiastic manpower is always needed. Contact the Connecticut Horse Council, The CT Forest & Park Association, DEEP, CT NEMBA (mountain bike association) for organized workdays. The first Saturday in June is always National Trails Day, dedicated to trails awareness and maintenance. Be a vocal advocate, lend some muscle, and let others know that equestrians share common goals with hikers, bikers, and other user groups. Share the Trail!

## **SUGGESTED EQUIPMENT**

Helmet; well fitting tack, in good repair; "Leatherman" multi-tool or knife; first-aid kit; vetwrap; halter and lead rope; saddle bag; bailing 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.

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