

The Importance of Trail Etiquette

by Sarah Gee

As most trail riders know, trails are used by a variety of outdoor enthusiasts not just horseback riders. Hikers, bicyclists, hunters, and all-terrain vehicle (ATV) riders all may travel any given trail. So, what do you do when you're on your horse and you encounter one or several of these other trail users? First and foremost you want to be safe. Additionally, you want to present a good image to your fellow trail users. This is important because although horse lovers see the presence of horses on the trail as a good thing, the other users may feel threatened, frightened, or just repulsed by horses they meet on the trail. Each encounter between a horseback rider and a non-rider leaves a ripple effect of feelings, positive or negative, that persist long afterward, and that can ultimately help decide whether horseback riders continue to have access to the trails. Fortunately, there are a number of guidelines that trail riders can follow that will help ensure safety and pleasant feelings between trail users.

First off, there are actually standard regulations for multi-use trails on public lands that apply everywhere. Those regulations state that ATV riders yield to bicyclists, ATV riders and bicyclists yield to hikers, and ATV riders, bicyclists, and hikers all yield to horseback riders. This right-of-way rule acknowledges that a horse has special needs and may react unpredictably, so the rider needs to call the shots. It also means that, as the privileged user, the rider has extra responsibilities – being alert to others, thinking ahead about keeping encounters safe, taking charge of matters when they occur, tactfully educating other users about horse behavior, and creating a positive overall feeling. That may sound like a tall order, but it's completely doable. Just follow these seven guidelines:

WATCH AND LISTEN FOR OTHERS. Listen for hikers talking to each other, for the squeak of bike brakes, and for ATV engine noise. Watch for people that may startle your horse because he can't see them clearly until their quite close. An example would be a hunter or hiker in camouflage clothing.

SPEAK FIRST. Don't wait for other users to notice you. As soon as you're aware of someone else on the trail, slow to a walk and call out a greeting. Repeat the greeting until you get a response.

LOOK THEM IN THE EYE. Eye contact is really the only way to be sure the other trail user sees you.

BE RESPONSIBLE. Because you have the right of way, you also have the responsibility to direct the situation and to keep it as safe as possible for everyone involved. You may

need to, in a non-confrontational manner, ask the other user(s) to stop and/or move to the side so that you can pass safely. You may also want to alert them of other folks that you have seen on the trail.

PAY ATTENTION TO YOUR HORSE'S BODY LANGUAGE. If your horse starts to act like he may spook because he can't figure out what the other users are, ask the other users to stop and speak. The confident tone of your voice along with the other user's answering voice will reassure and settle your horse and provide a quick moment of cooperation between trail users.

ANTICIPATE. Thinking about what could happen can prevent scary situations. For example, if you come upon a hiker with large frame backpack that frightens your horse you'll probably want to give him a large berth as you pass. However, you'll want to consider the surrounding terrain. If the wide berth around the hiker takes you through the bush where your horse could startle a bird or small animal that may in-turn spook your horse and cause him to jump toward or into the hiker, you may want to consider some alternative route.

EDUCATE. Always explain why when you ask another trail user to do something. If you ask a bicyclist to pull to the side and stop while you pass, explain that the noise from the bicycle and its appearance may spook your horse. Always assume that the other person knows nothing about horses' needs and behavior. If the other trail user asks to pet your horse, use the opportunity to further educate them about horses in general and your horse in particular. It's an excellent public relations opportunity.

Remember, when you take to the trail on horseback you represent all trail riders. How you behave will influence people's opinions of all horseback riders. Respect and be courteous to all other users and follow the rules of the area where you are riding. Leave gates as you find them and when you leave the trail, leave only hoofprints behind. Following the seven guidelines above will go a long way towards ensuring that your ride is both safe and enjoyable. It will also go a long way towards ensuring that horseback riders continue to have access to the trails. In the immortal words of mothers everywhere – "Mind Your Manners."

