

SHARING TRAILS SAFELY WITH HORSES

Trails on public lands are among Colorado's greatest assets. Population growth and new technologies mean that trails historically used by hikers and equestrians now have diverse users.

A positive trail experience requires cooperation, understanding and courtesy by all trail users. Our goal is to educate all trail users on how to share the trail safely with horseback riders and with horses being used as pack animals.

Tips for Encountering Equestrians

Trail safety with horses means understanding horses and knowing what makes them feel safe. They are animals with acute hearing, smell and the ability to see motion. Unlike our vision, horses do not see a clearly focused image with great depth perception. Instead, they rely on hearing a voice to identify someone approaching them as a non-threatening human.

As prey animals, horses instinctively protect themselves by running away from danger. Horses are quick to learn and slow to forget. A horse that has positive trail encounters becomes a calm horse on the trail. A bad experience can have a psychological impact from which the horse may be slow to recover.

Meeting a horse on the trail can be fun, but requires caution to avoid inadvertently setting up situations that can be dangerous.

Suggestions for approaching a horse safely:

- Speak to the horse in a normal tone of voice to identify yourself as a human.
- Make yourself visible.
- Keep calm and avoid sudden movements which could startle a horse.
- Allow the horse to be on the up hill side of you and the trail where it may feel safer. Something unfamiliar uphill of (above) a horse may trigger an instinctual fear of a predator jumping down on it.
- Be alert for instructions from the equestrian. Each horse is different and has its own personality. What spooks one horse may be "old hat" to another.

The most critical moment is when you approach the horse. When approaching from the front, stop and check with the rider, if necessary stepping off the trail on the downhill side to allow the horse to pass. The equestrian will often have the best suggestion about how to pass the horse. When overtaking from behind, call out to the rider and horse when you think they can hear you. Continue calling until you get a response.

Use caution when passing horses. Allow as much room as possible to avoid being kicked or spooking the horse. Proceed slowly and steadily while passing, continuing to talk to the horse to help it relax. If an equestrian gives you the right of way, wait until the rider gives you the signal that it is safe for you to pass.

On roads, foot traffic, including horses, should face oncoming traffic.

(Yield sign)

All trail users yield to equestrians.

Education is everyone's responsibility

Each user group needs to share responsibility for educating and monitoring its own members.

It is your responsibility as a trail user to know the rules of the trail and apply them with courtesy. Regulations may vary among land management agencies. Check at the trailhead before heading out, or call the agency for clarification if you have any questions.

Equestrians need to let others know if special care is needed to pass their horse safely. Slow to a walk when approaching other trail users, including other equestrians. Start a conversation as soon as possible.

It may be advisable for you to find a place to get off the trail, facing oncoming traffic. Although horses have the right of way, a horse leaving the trail briefly may have less impact on the terrain than another type of user doing so. Horses tend to feel safer on the high side of the trail.

Take responsibility for your horse's training. Expose your horse to a variety of situations to desensitize it to potential threats before you encounter them on the trail.

Off-Highway Vehicle operators must be alert to slower traffic, and need to understand that the noise and vibration of your vehicles can scare horses. It may be best to shut off your engine and let horses pass. Having the engine off also makes it easier to communicate with other trail users.

OHV's may require greater stopping distance than others on the trail. Drivers should slow down around blind corners and anticipate the presence of other trail users.

While your engine is running, be especially alert visually to compensate for your limited hearing ability.

OHV operators may find that removing your helmet helps calm horses by showing the horse that you are just a human in there.

Hikers can help calm a spooking horse by slowly removing your backpack, since the pack may disguise the fact that you are a person. When you encounter a horse, speak to the rider as soon as practical.

Having your dog along is fun, but dogs are not permitted on all trails. Never let your dog chase livestock or wildlife. Leash your dog, or have your dog under voice control, when you see a horse approaching.

If you are hiking with children, horses can be both interesting and scary. Check with the equestrian before approaching a horse. Ask permission for your child could pat the horse; most equestrians will be happy to oblige.

Bicyclists may not realize that bicycles are swift, silent, and low to the ground in ways that resemble natural predators to a horse. Thus, they can trigger a flight response in a horse which may override even years of excellent training.

For safety reasons, bicycles should yield to horses and foot traffic.

When approaching horses from any direction, make verbal contact by speaking calmly. Pass only when a rider has told you it is safe.

Stop your bike and do not advance until you get a definite signal from the equestrian.

If the right of way is yielded to you, pass slowly and cautiously. Resume speed only when you have passed safely.

It is your responsibility to be in control. Do not let your brakes cause skidding, as the sudden noise and dust may frighten a horse.

Safety Tips for All Trail Users

Taking time to check your equipment before starting out reduces accidents. Make sure that your gear is lashed down securely.

Equestrians need to check your horses' feet and tack.

Cyclists should check your tire pressure, brakes and chain tension.

Hikers please check your packs and footwear.

Off Highway Vehicle (OHV) operators are advised to check your tire pressure, chain tension, filters and fluid levels, frame and suspension, brakes and controls. Be sure your vehicle is in good mechanical shape.

Know your limitations

All trail users need to be prepared for difficult terrain if you are unfamiliar with the trail. OHV operators and cyclists need to keep your speed within safe stopping limits, especially going downhill. Equestrians must make sure you and your horses are in condition for the type of terrain the trail covers.

Allow adequate time to complete the route before dark.

Recognize and respect different levels of ability, even within a group.

General guidelines

- Downhill traffic yields to uphill traffic.
- Keep right, pass left.
- Stay on designated trails.
- Avoid muddy trails. Try to use an alternate trail. Otherwise, muddle through the middle of the puddle.
- Respect private property.
- Never ride alone. If you must do so, tell someone where you plan to go and when you think you will be back.
- Maintain a safe distance between riders.
- Leave gates as you find them.
- Carry out your trash and some others' as well.
- Volunteer for trail building and maintenance projects.
- Join a trail advocacy group. There is strength in numbers.
- Let the appropriate land manager know about any concerns you may have about the trail.
- Share your appreciation about good trail experiences as well.

Our goal is to help everyone be good trail citizens together.

It is in our mutual best interests to work together for successful multiple use trails. Be aware of each others' needs on the trail. Be courteous, be safe and have fun!

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