

Trail Etiquette 101—the Basics

Most wrecks and problems experienced on the trail can be avoided by using common sense and common courtesy. Make your ride, and your riding partner's rides, safer and more enjoyable by following these guidelines.

Before You Mount Up

Make sure your horse has the temperament and training for riding in a group or on congested public or private trails. Busy multi-use trails are not the proper place for schooling green horses, and group members may prefer that you school your horse elsewhere. Be sure to 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. Assume that not everyone will know what these ribbons mean, so be prepared to explain or take the necessary precautions to avoid trouble. If your horse likes to bolt, be sure that other riders are aware of this tendency and they are comfortable with you and your horse accompanying them on their ride.

Riding in a Group

Ask if you can join a group out for a ride before assuming that you and your horse will be welcomed. Then, before the group departs, determine amongst the group members what the ride will entail, where it is going, and what gaits will be acceptable. If the group asks that you and your horse not accompany them, respect their request and ride elsewhere.

If your horse experiences behavior problems, dismount and remove your horse from the trail. Work on these problems in an enclosed area where you can safely address these concerns.

In most cases, ride single file on a trail -- one behind the other. Stay to the right of the trail just like when you are driving a car to avoid collisions with other horses and riders. On wide firebreak or fire road trails, riders can ride side by side as long as they don't interfere with other riders and the horses get along. Horses can be competitive, and matching stride for stride can lead to an unwanted increase in speed.

If you are passing a horse on a trail moving in the same direction as you, let the rider and horse know you're approaching simply by saying, "Trail, please". The rider that is being passed should then move to the right as far as is safe or simply stop their horse for the approaching rider to pass. Like driving a car, pass on the left of the front rider or trail user, say "thanks" and keep on going. If horses begin to match strides, just relax. One will soon tire of the 'keep up game' and fall back. NEVER kick a horse into a gallop to get by. A gallop, lope, trot could upset the horse you're approaching. Just keep on walking -- and talking to your for-a-few-minutes riding companion.



On the Trail

Don't run up behind other riders. You don't know if their horses are unbroken, green-broke, or aggressive and you may be setting yourself or your horse up to be kicked, or you may set off a dangerous bucking or bolting incident. Running up behind others without warning is just plain rude and inconsiderate!

Don't pass other riders without warning. When passing a green horse, that horse may kick at your horse, or take off bucking as you pass, setting off a chain reaction and putting other horses and riders in the group at risk.

Don't ride too close or crowd other horses. You are too close to the horse in front of you if you can't see the rear feet of that horse while you are sitting normally in your saddle, or if you can't count to three (3) before reaching an obstacle that the horse in front of you just passed. Any closer than this lines you and your horse up in the kicking zone of the horse in front.

A distance of at least one horse length (about 10 feet) should be maintained between animals on all trails. Don't tailgate!! Crowding on the trail is the same as tailgating on the highway—it's very annoying to the horse and rider being crowded, and sudden stops can end in multi-horse pile-ups that often end in aggressive behavior.

Navigating Hills Safely

Walk your horse down hills. Use the hill as an opportunity to teach your horse to set his weight back over his hindquarters and pick his way slowly down the hill. A horse that rushes down the hill can crowd the horses in front of him, leading to aggressive behavior. On downhill routes, maintain at least three horse lengths between animals. 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 tail hairs on the horse in front of you, you're too close!

When going uphill, keep at least two lengths between horses. Don't allow your horse to bolt off up the hill as this could cause other horses to bolt or buck.

Controlling Speed

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, then join competitive or endurance rides.

With trail riding, one is out to enjoy the country. See the trees. Smell the flowers. Catch a glimpse of a doe and fawn 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....



Never take off from a group of horses without warning or consent from the group as this can spark a chain reaction with bolting and bucking horses. If you want to ride at a faster gait, let other horses and riders know well in advance what you plan to do. If the group does not want to join your faster gait, move to the front and after you have gone a safe distance from the group, then move your horse into a faster gait.

Respect the Land

Respect the land where you ride, and ride only along the edges of fields and on designated trails. Do not ride off onto adjacent land or farm fields or into areas that are closed to horses. Demonstrating respect and common courtesy to the land owners will ensure that you and your horse will be welcome to ride the trails for years to come.

In Summary

1. Make sure that your horse has the temperament and training for riding in a group or on congested public or private trails.
2. Obey posted or agreed upon speed or gait limits, and use common sense in crowded areas. Cantering or galloping on crowded trails endangers everyone. Walking is the preferred trail gait.
3. Maintain appropriate distance between your horse and the horse in front of you—don't tailgate!
4. Walk your horse up and down the hills, staying to the right of the trail.
5. As a courtesy to others in your group, give verbal warnings for dangers on the trail (e.g. holes, low branches, approaching horses).
6. Move to the right to allow faster trail users to pass.
7. Announce your intention to pass other trail users, and reduce speed in order to pass safely. Pass on the left only.
8. Remove your horse from the trail if you begin experiencing behavior problems.
9. Stay on the marked horse trails to avoid damaging crops or other sensitive natural features.
10. If you trailer to a location, do not clean out your trailer in the parking area. What you bring in, you must take out when you leave, and that includes droppings and shavings.
11. Remember that other trail users may not be familiar with horses or their reactions to new experiences. Your horse may be another trail user's introduction to horses; what you do is a reflection of the local horse community.

