

ADVICE ON

# Hill and Upland Riding

The  
British  
Horse  
Society



Riding over the wide open spaces, across the hills and moors of Britain, brings a special sense of exhilaration and freedom. These heather and grass covered uplands are home to sheep, grouse and wildlife and little else, so one may ride for hours without seeing human habitation.

These notes aim to guide those who have not yet ventured into the remoter parts of Britain on horseback and who wish to experience this freedom with confidence and in safety.

## Where and when to ride?

The National Parks of Exmoor, Northumberland and the North York Moors have extensive bridleway networks and some large areas of open access in Forestry Commission woodlands and forests. Dartmoor has 'right to roam' for riders. All these national parks have places where you can stay with your horse. The North Pennines, Central Wales and the Scottish Borders also have much to offer the rider who wishes to explore remote country. A less remote area is the South Pennines and Peak District where an increasing number of packhorse trails have been restored. Planning and local research are recommended in all areas as some upland bridleways may be very rocky or boggy.



The best months to ride in the uplands are June to September. In April and May you may disturb ground nesting birds which must be avoided, especially as some of the areas will have special conservation status and protected species.

In some areas hill lambing will not be over until the end of May so farmers may be too busy to provide accommodation. If you do ride in the lambing season you should take great care not to distress sheep, because if ewes are separated from their lambs, it may take a lot of work to reunite them and they may not recover. Always avoid making sheep run – if they appear disturbed, stop until they have accepted your presence and proceed slowly once they have settled.

## Will my horse be able to manage?

A horse from lowland Britain will have to be fit enough to cope with rough ground and steep slopes. Coming downhill is often more of a challenge than going up so you may prefer to get off and lead. Some of the tracks will be stony and a horse with sensitive feet may need to be shod with pads. The horse must be willing to ford rivers and cross bridges, so it is wise to practise



before you set off. There will be gates to open and close and some where you will have to get off and heave so a cooperative, well trained horse will be a great help.

## What are the bridleways like?

Many of the bridleways and traditional riding routes in the uplands are ancient tracks linking one valley with another. The best are green or sandy roads or stone tracks across the hills which are easy to follow, although in some places the rider should be prepared for a steep drop on one side. Some moorland bridleways may be no more than faint sheeptracks.

Ground can be very rocky, have sharp stones or be soft and potentially boggy. Some are suitable in August and September when they have dried

out but are not advisable earlier in the year. On peat uplands, some may be trods – historic routes where slabs were laid across the path to support packhorses or traffic, many laid by early monks on trade routes. Modern day equivalents have been used on some trails, especially National Trails such as the Pennine Bridleway and the Cleveland Way. Keep to the trods as you may sink in soft ground off the slabs.

You are advised to follow a promoted route or discuss your plans with a local rider who knows which bridleways should be avoided at certain times.

## Will they be waymarked?



The signing and waymarking of bridleways is improving all the time but the standard is very variable so it is important to be able to use an Ordnance Survey map for the area, preferably at 1:25,000 as this scale gives the detail needed for finding your way. It needs to be handy so that you can refer to it easily so folded to the right area in a map case slung across your shoulders by a short strap is often best. If you have studied the route the night before and highlighted it, you will find it much easier to follow.

A compass and whistle should always be carried. By checking your compass when you take a turning you can confirm that you have made the right decision. It is

better to prevent a mistake happening than to have to sort out where you are later when you realise you have gone adrift. Frequently check your location against the map, even if you think you know where you are, so that if you do realise you are off the route, it is easier to work out where you were went wrong. Check obvious features such as farms, ruins, woodland boundaries, streams and valleys, sheepfolds and walls. Remember that some of the tracks you see on the ground may not be on the map. Always be conscious that weather may change and don't rely on your sense of direction because this can mislead you, especially in reduced visibility. A

compass can be essential in forestry where you cannot see far and it is easy to lose your sense of direction.

## What is the main danger I might encounter?

Soft and boggy ground is the most widespread hazard to riders in these areas. If you are on a track the problem patches should be clear to see, so look out for areas of dark brown wet peat. These areas should be avoided by going carefully round the edge. If your horse is unwilling to go forward, get off and lead him or give him to your companion while you check the ground on foot. Remember if he is adamant, he may know best.



If you are riding on untracked ground (not advisable for visitors to an upland area) the vegetation is a useful guide as to safe and unsafe ground. On grass hills look for straw coloured grass and avoid areas with red tinged grass which grows on boggy ground. Follow sheep tracks through reeds as sheep know the best lines to follow. Avoid bright green mossy areas as they tend to be bottomless bog. Cotton grass is another good indicator of unsuitable ground.

Should your horse sink in, even a little, get off at once and encourage him to extricate himself. If he is in deep, he may lie still in shock. Loosen the girth if you can, wait and then encourage him again, very strongly if necessary.

Rocky ground and scree can be equally unpleasant and dangerous terrain.



## Other potential hazards

Many of the heather moors are managed for grouse and the shooting season lasts from 12 August to 10 December. There is no shooting on Sundays. While the bridleways must remain open and shoots take careful account of public access, you may find that gunfire is closer than you or your horse is comfortable with. If you come across a shoot, please behave with respect and tolerance for others and wait while a drive is in progress. The gamekeeper or whoever is in charge should return the courtesy and indicate when it is safe to move on. Horses may shy when a grouse rises close to their feet.

Some areas are used for military training. These are generally well signed, but there may be artillery firing in the distance and soldiers suddenly appearing from cover.



Remote areas are often flown over by the RAF at low altitude but it is usually the rider rather than the horse that is upset by their sudden noisy appearance.

Very stony ground, rock slabs and loose scree can be difficult to ride over. Remember it is much easier for a horse to keep his feet if you are leading him.

Lack of shelter means that high winds can make riding difficult and tiring but poor visibility is perhaps a greater hazard as it is easy to lose one's sense of direction and map reading becomes more difficult. Listen to the weather forecast and, if necessary, take a rest day or keep to roads and tracks in the valleys or forested areas if low cloud or high wind is expected. If you are caught out by deteriorating conditions, it is often better to return the way you came as the horses will be able to sense which way to turn even if you can't remember.

## What should I take with me?

- Hi-viz clothing for you and your horse. It makes either of you much easier to spot by rescue services in case of an accident and enables other people on the moor, especially a shooting party, to see you.
- A headcollar and long lead rope for leading over difficult terrain and at lunch stops. Wear the headcollar under the bridle for quick access and have the rope either knotted round the horse's neck or clipped on a D ring. In problem situations you need this equipment immediately, trying to use your bridle or put on a headcollar while your horse is distressed may lose vital time.
- A breast plate will prevent the risk of your saddle slipping back on steep climbs.
- Windproof and waterproof clothing. On uplands there is often a cool breeze even if it may be very warm in the valleys so a windproof you can put on and off easily is useful. Showers can blow up quickly even on a fine day.
- Sun protection for exposed skin (don't forget the back of your neck, especially if riding away from the sun). Protect any pink patches on your horse as well.
- A water bottle that is attached to the saddle will also be needed for warm weather. A sponge tied to the saddle can be used to cool the horse when fording streams.
- A saddle bag or waist bag with basic first aid for horse and rider such as antiseptic cream, insect repellent, sterilised dressings, plasters and bandages. Having a first aid kit in a waist bag or pocket is a good idea in case you are separated from your horse. Other essentials are a hoof pick, a penknife and binder twine.
- A saddle bag for food, spare clothing and maps.



- A temporary shoe replacement/sole protection (such as Equiboot®) can be tied to a D ring in case a shoe is lost. Practise with it at home so you can put it on easily. A spare set of shoes should be at your base.
- A mobile phone which includes an ICE (In Case of Emergency) contact number. Even if you have no reception, it may be useful for rescue workers when they find you.
- A whistle, bright torch with full batteries and foil survival blanket.

Never ride alone. A party of three is best in case something goes wrong.

Tell someone, preferably with a written note, where you are going each day. Be aware of the risk of no-one knowing your location if you change your route from your original intention.

Leave dogs at home. This is sheep rearing country and the habitat of many ground nesting birds which are easily disturbed by a dog. You cannot fully control a dog while mounted.

Close and secure all gates, however difficult, if they were closed when you reached them.



Allow plenty of time to complete your ride, it always takes longer than you expect on unfamiliar ground.

For more information on The British Horse Society's rights of way work contact:

08/2015

Access and Rights of Way Department,  
The British Horse Society, Abbey Park, Stareton, Kenilworth,  
Warwickshire CV8 2XZ  
Telephone: 02476 840581 Email: [access@bhs.org.uk](mailto:access@bhs.org.uk)

This advice note applies to England and Wales. For information on  
Scotland, contact Helene Mauchlen, BHS Director Scotland, Woodburn,  
Crieff, Perthshire PH7 3RG  
Telephone: 02476 840727 Email: [helene.mauchlen@bhs.org.uk](mailto:helene.mauchlen@bhs.org.uk)

For information on Northern Ireland please contact  
Susan Spratt, BHS Director Ireland, Grove Farm, 5 Quarry Road,  
Greyabbey, Newtownards, Co. Down BT22 2QF  
Telephone: 02476 840736 Mobile: 07808 141079 Email: [s.irwin@bhs.org.uk](mailto:s.irwin@bhs.org.uk)

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