

## TRAIL SHARING WITH EQUINES KEEPING TRAIL USERS SAFE

---

### **Introduction to trail sharing**

Responsible trail users, whether hiker, mountain bicyclist or equestrian have much in common. We all seem to have an appreciation for public lands and want to enjoy and experience what these special places have to offer. The McDowell Sonoran Preserve is no exception. It has many attributes that entice guests to visit and explore – a rich and colorful history, intriguing wildlife and vegetation, a well-maintained trail system with abundant access points – and all located within easy reach of a major metropolitan city, a vacation destination showcased for both local residents and those visiting from all over the world.

Most trails in the McDowell Sonoran Preserve are open to three trail user groups – hikers, mountain bicyclists, and equestrians. This is referred to as trail sharing and is a practice used by many public land managers throughout the United States. Trail sharing provides opportunities for a wide variety of individuals wanting to experience the outdoors. Limiting or prohibiting any one of these trail user groups, reduces the number individuals taking advantage of these lands and may inadvertently reduce the value the general public places on the Preserve.

Trail sharing can and does flourish when people respect each other and work cooperatively to keep each other safe. As users of these lands, it is our job to model safe trail sharing.

People worldwide are often familiar and comfortable interacting with hikers and their dogs and with bicyclists – both common in even the most urban of environments. That's not always the case when we interact with equestrians. Although horses were used as a major mode of transportation and necessity for Americans a century ago, today, it is common to find individuals who have never touched a horse or been around one. As a consequence, the purpose of this document is to provide more detailed information on trail sharing with equestrians in order to help you with these interactions out on the Preserve trails.

Sources for this document include information from the International Mountain Bike Association, AmericanTrails.org, the Connecticut Horse Council, the National Trails Training Partnership, the Montana Chapter of the Continental Divide Trail Alliance and McDowell Sonoran Conservancy Stewards who are long-time equestrian trail users.

### **Background – attributes of prey animals**

Horses are prey animals and revert to instinct when anxious. As the species developed, survival depended on a good flight response. In short, when frightened, a horse will try to escape. This may include a sudden spinning turn or rearing, which could unseat a rider. Although domesticated approximately 4,000 years ago, their natural tendency is to consider everything as a potential predator. Unless proven otherwise, a horse expects they are targeted to be tonight's dinner. Many a human finds this concept difficult to comprehend with such a huge, truly powerful creature.

Although the horse's instinct for self-preservation is to run, their sense of security comes from being part of a herd and getting direction from the herd leader. A competent rider can become the herd leader and is key to convincing the horse that the perceived predator is not a threat at all.

Horses have eyes located on the sides of their heads and have a range of vision of about 350°. They have the ability to use both eyes separately which provides the horse with the best chance

## TRAIL SHARING WITH EQUINES KEEPING TRAIL USERS SAFE

---

to spot predators and leave the area – fast! Even with this wide range of vision, a horse has two "blind spots" where the animal cannot see: directly in front and directly behind its head, which extends over his back and behind the tail. Where do many trail encounters occur? You guessed it, usually someone coming directly at or directly behind the horse. Additionally, horses are farsighted, so things up close are blurry. When a bicyclist comes around a blind corner and suddenly appears within 50 feet in front of the horse, the horse cannot readily identify what is heading towards it. Once the flight mode has been engaged it is almost impossible for the rider to control the horse's feet.

Another contributing factor is that a rider's anxiety can be easily transferred to the horse. Horses have a keen sensation to touch. They may be big and powerful, but they can also detect a small gnat landing on their body and have the ability to wiggle a small patch of skin in an attempt to encourage the bug to move on. Not hard to imagine a rider's tightening leg muscles can be felt by the horse – often well before the rider realizes he's contracting these muscles. If the rider is anxious about an approaching hiker and aggressive, barking dog, the rider's back muscles become tense, his/her breathing shortens, pressure on the reins intensify. All cues to the horse that the herd leader feels that danger is approaching and all the more reason for our prey animal to run. And run they can. Top speed of a horse is 20-30 miles per hour and at 1,000 pounds, damage to nearby objects, people, rider and the horse itself can easily occur.

One of the most difficult of scenarios for a horse to tolerate is when approached from the rear, especially at speed. No matter reality, even the most well-trained horse may believe it is being pursued by a mountain lion or worse. The horse may (out of fear) kick out, possibly injuring a hiker, mountain bicyclist, or off-leash dog; bolt and run off with the rider; or at a minimum, jump forward, spin and face the offending object (javelina, deer, dog, hiker, cyclist, etc.).

With such flighty, sensitive creatures why are some horses comfortable in extremely stressful situations (e.g., horses used by mounted police during Mardi Gras)? Like people, each horse is unique. Consider people you know – some are fearful of spiders; others uncomfortable and claustrophobic in an elevator or closed environment, or perhaps someone you know worries about what you consider minutia. People often develop these reactions through their personal experiences and horses are the same. The good news is that when not stressed, horses are innately curious and experienced riders use this curiosity to expand a horse's comfort zone.

But, how can we help improve safety for all trail users? It's not that tough and the remainder of this document will focus on steps that can be taken by various trail users to enhance safety for all.

### **Guidance for all trail users**

When equestrians on well-trained horses and other responsible trail enthusiasts meet each other on the trail the encounters can be enjoyable social exchanges, if the groups understand how to work together to keep the encounters safe. These basic guidelines will help ensure that meeting on the trail will be a safe and enjoyable experience.

#### Common Courtesy

- Follow trail restrictions and use only trails open to your mode of transportation.
- Be considerate of others. If you offer respect, you are more likely to receive it. Education with friendly respect will diminish negative encounters on the trail for all users.

## TRAIL SHARING WITH EQUINES KEEPING TRAIL USERS SAFE

- When traveling on shared use trails, continually watch for other types of recreationists.
- Slow down when sight lines are poor.
- Keep speeds low around other recreationists.
- Keep noise and dust to a minimum.
  - Keep your ears open – no ear buds for an iPod or MP3. Listening to headphones or ear buds can make it difficult to hear and communicate with other recreationists.
- Keep pets under control. Preserve trails require dogs to be leashed (for both the dog's safety, as well as the safety of other trail users). Be familiar with and follow these rules.
- Communicate – let folks know you're there – before you're there.
  - A simple "Howdy" works to get attention, ringing a bike bell on a blind corner, or cheerful set of sleigh bells can help alert others of your approach.
  - Advising other trail enthusiasts on how many are in your party is valuable information. Groups of mountain bicyclists or equestrians often give each other plenty of space between riders for safety reasons. (No need to inadvertently rear-end someone!) So, when passing others, letting them know you are a solo rider or the first of three equestrians is usually appreciated.

Most hikers, runners, and riders know that trail etiquette requires them to yield to horses, but how, exactly, does a runner or cyclist yield? What should a hiker or mountain cyclist do when they encounter equestrians on the trail? And what can equestrians do to ensure they pass others safely?



- 1) The rule of etiquette in the Preserve is that hikers and cyclists yield to horses. It will probably require a runner to slow his pace, or a cyclist to stop and give an equestrian time to respond – that is what “yielding to horses” means. For equestrians, just because others are to yield, doesn't mean they should not allow faster users to pass. The goal of yielding is to make the act of passing safe for all.
- 2) As a hiker or cyclist, when you see a horse and rider, stop and greet the rider in a calm voice. Speak in a soft manner, and keep talking. Horses will often identify you as a human, not something interested in doing them harm. Ask the rider what they would like for you to do. The rider knows their horse's training and behavior and is likely in the best position to guide others to a safe interaction. Depending on the size of the group and the speed of the various trail users, the equestrian may wish to move to the side of the trail, once space allows

## TRAIL SHARING WITH EQUINES KEEPING TRAIL USERS SAFE

---

and will ask others to pass them. Talking in a calm manner, giving a wide berth and passing each other in a slow and relaxed manner provide the best opportunity for a safe interaction.

- 3) For equestrians, when they see a hiker or biker, the same applies – greet them and let them know your preference to safely pass. If the hiker or cyclist is silent, engage the individual in a conversation. You may need to tell them to talk – so the horse can identify them as a human. Those with little or no equestrian interaction are often appreciative of a rider's knowledge and direction for safe passage. It is not uncommon for Preserve visitors to photograph equestrians out on the trail – they likely represent the “wild, wild West” and are indicative of the heritage and attraction of the Preserve.

With these basics in mind, we'll go in more depth and offer additional tips for the various trail user groups.

### Tips for equestrians

- Be sure you can control your horse and that it has been exposed to things you will commonly encounter in the Preserve – this includes other recreational trail users.
  - If your horse is new to shared trails, choose routes with wider trails, greater visibility and work to gradually expose the horse to new and different objects. (Bikes, backpacks, strollers, sun umbrellas, dogs, children are but a few of the “scary” things your horse may encounter.)
  - One of the best ways to first expose a horse to bicycles, is to do so at home – leading the horse while pushing the bike. Depending upon how reactive the horse, it may initially require two individuals – one pushing the bike at some distance from the horse, with the second individual leading the horse behind the bicycle being pushed. Eventually the space between horse and bike should be shortened and the horse given the opportunity to sniff/touch the bike with its nose.
  - When out on a shared trail for the first time, alert others of your horse's newness to the environment. With their permission, use the same technique you initiated at home – use your horse's sense of curiosity and these interactions as a training opportunity. (Many a mountain bicyclist has gleefully allowed a horse to sniff/touch their bike and still others have allowed the equestrian to have their horse “chase” the cyclist – building the horse's confidence such that the cyclist is perceived as being afraid of the horse and not the other way around.)
  - Every horse can kick, even though many rarely do so. However, with safety in mind, if the equestrian is going to let other trail users pass and moves the horse to the side of the trail, the horse's head should be facing the trail. Positioning the horse in any other manner can needlessly put other's in harm's way.
- The equestrian should be prepared to let other trail enthusiasts know what needs to be done to keep others they encounter on the trail, as well as themselves and their horse safe when meeting on the trail.
  - Though most hikers and bikers will yield the right of way to horses, many do not have experience with horses and/or may not do things the way the equestrian may want. These encounters are great opportunities to inform and educate with a friendly, respectful approach.
  - Keep the tone of your voice calm and welcoming. Becoming terse or angry gives your user group a bad reputation, makes others less interested in trail

## TRAIL SHARING WITH EQUINES KEEPING TRAIL USERS SAFE

---

sharing and more importantly, the emotion is often transferred to the horse – making the situation even worse.

- Less experienced horses and riders can often learn from more “trail-wise” horses and riders. Following behind an experienced duo is a good way for a new rider and horse to become proficient on the trail.
- When riding in groups, maintain a safe distance between horses. Stay at least one-horse length between each horse.
- Do not speed past or up behind another horse, and never pass in dangerous terrain. When necessary to pass the horse in front of you, call out your intentions.
- Warn others of hazards on the trail. When stopping on the trail, equestrians should stop clear of others and advise them of the reason for your need to stop. If at all possible, equestrians should not stop on inclines or declines, or in thick cholla, especially when others are behind.
- At trailheads or staging areas, park vehicles and secure stock in a manner that provides a safe distance between horses and passing traffic.

### Tips for mountain cyclists when encountering a horse

- When you see a horse, assume the horse is new to trail sharing and its flight instinct is well honed. You might also want to assume the rider is new to trail riding or has limited experience with horses... just as cyclists occasionally lose control of their bikes, some equestrians may not be in full control of their animals.
- Slow down, be prepared to stop and pull to the side of the trail, far enough away for the horse to pass.
- Let the equestrian know of your presence. Yelling out, “bikes” as soon as you see a rider and horse is usually appreciated. It tells the equestrian what type of interaction to expect and helps provide the equestrian with time to maneuver the horse into position for a safe bike/horse interaction.
- Ask if the equestrian has a preference on how to safely proceed in passing.
  - The human voice helps the horse identify the cyclist as a friendly human and not a potential threat or predator. A greeting such as, “Hi! Great weather today!” is appropriate coming from in front or behind. Horses often recognize the human voice as safe and a spoken salutation helps offset the potentially threatening appearance of a bike. For this reason, equestrians often prefer a voice alert over bells.
  - Keep the tone of your voice calm and welcoming. Becoming terse or angry gives your user group a bad reputation, makes others less interested in trail sharing and more importantly, the emotion is often transferred to the horse – making the situation even worse.
- With young or inexperienced horses, you may be asked to remove your helmet if it conceals part of your face. This is usually a very rare request, but in some cases full-face shield helmets (which appear more like a motorcycle helmet than a bike helmet), can be disturbing to an inexperienced horse. The horse will be more likely to recognize you as a human when this type of helmet is removed.
- An equestrian may pull to the side of the trail a safe distance away if they hear a bicycle approaching, but this does not necessarily mean it is safe for you to pedal by. Engage in a conversation with the equestrian to determine the safest method of passing, which is often determined by the horse’s training, experience and temperament.

## TRAIL SHARING WITH EQUINES KEEPING TRAIL USERS SAFE

---

- Ask the equestrian how he/she would like to proceed.
- The equestrian will know his/her horse and how the horse reacts to other trail enthusiasts.
  - You may be asked to stay put and the equestrian will ride past you, or
  - The equestrian may ride to the side of the trail and ask you to ride or push your bike past them.
  - If you ride by a horse, do so at a slow, steady pace and keep talking in a calm manner to help reassure the horse.
- When on uneven ground, and if possible, move to the downhill side of the trail since horses tend to perceive unknown threats on the uphill side as predators.
- When encountering a group of equestrians, remember that less experienced horses and riders are often at the end of the line.
- If you approach a horse from behind it's critical that you announce yourself loudly and calmly. Let the rider know you'd like to pass at the next safe location. Refrain from quickly riding up to the tail of a horse. It's dangerous for both you and the equestrian.
- If an equestrian becomes terse or unfriendly, give them the benefit of the doubt – their own sense of fear may be affecting their tone of voice or choice of words.
- Although many of the Preserve parking areas have designated areas for trailers, when that's not available, try not to crowd turnaround and parking spaces being used by equestrians. Close proximity may make it difficult to unload, load or tack up the horse.
- Most importantly, work together to ensure safe passage for all trail enthusiasts!

### **Tips for hikers and trail runners when encountering a horse**

Many of the same tips provided to mountain cyclists apply to hikers and trail runners. By following the tips above you're well on your way to have a safe encounter with equestrians. The additional tips below are unique to hikers and trail runners:

- If traveling with a dog, keep it on a leash and under control. Many dogs are specifically bred to herd livestock (sheep, goats, cattle, horses). Dogs often have the instinct to maneuver to the rear of the horse, bark, and/or nip at back legs. This is a potentially life ending tactic for the dog and puts everyone else in harm's way.
  - Like their owners, many dogs have never encountered a horse. Some canines will exhibit fear, others seek guidance from their handler and yet others turn aggressive. It is helpful to all involved if the dog handler communicates the dog's tendencies to others.
  - And, like our guidance to equestrians and cyclists, keeping the tone of your voice calm and welcoming helps the canine remain calm. Becoming terse or angry gives your user group a bad reputation, makes others less interested in trail sharing and more importantly, the emotion is often transferred to the horse, canine and humans within earshot.
- If traveling with a large backpack, baby stroller, sun umbrella or baby backpack, a horse may no longer recognize you as human. With young or inexperienced horses, you may need to remove the backpack, close the umbrella or move well off the trail with the stroller.

### **Summary of concepts for successful trail sharing**

## TRAIL SHARING WITH EQUINES KEEPING TRAIL USERS SAFE

---

**RESPECT:** It's a simple concept – if you offer respect, you are more likely to receive it. Education with friendly respect will diminish negative encounters on the trail for all users.

**COMMUNICATION:** Productive, positive communication is the key. Let folks know you're there, your experience level, your dog's or horse's experience. A simple “Howdy” and thoughtful, caring conversation works for all trail enthusiasts to have an enjoyable, safe experience.

**YIELD APPROPRIATELY:** Do your utmost to let your fellow trail users know you're coming – a friendly greeting is a good method. Anticipate other trail users as you come around blind corners. Bicyclists should yield to other non-motorized trail users, unless the trail is clearly signed for bike-only travel. Additionally, bicyclists traveling downhill should yield to those headed uphill, unless the trail is clearly signed for one-way or downhill-only traffic. In general, strive to make each pass a safe and courteous one.

**REVERE THE RESOURCE:** The Preserve has unsurpassed opportunities to enjoy the landscape, heritage, and unique beauty of the McDowell Sonoran environment. Help protect accessibility by playing nicely with other trail enthusiasts and treat these trails with reverence. Demonstrate and model positive trail sharing practices. Pitch-in and give back – pick up trash, learn about becoming a Steward volunteer. Take action and get more involved today!

**BE INFORMED:** It's your responsibility to be “in the know.” Know which trails are best suited for different types of user groups and skill sets and select those trails/adventures appropriately. Learn how to determine when there are trail closures, and follow Preserve rules. If you are unsure about where to get answers to those questions, contact the Conservancy Office for additional assistance.

We are all ambassadors to an amazing place – one that creates a bridge from the built environment into the natural one. Helping encourage safety and courtesy contributes to keeping the experience “special.”