



## Take the trail rider's

# Pledge

Follow these  
**commonsense**  
**rules** to increase  
your safety and  
enjoyment when  
you head for  
the trails with  
your horse.

*By Gene Wood, PhD,  
with Laurie Bonner*

**F**ew things are more satisfying than exploring lovely woods or countryside aboard your favorite mount. And American equestrians are fortunate to have access to an amazing variety of forests, parks and wilderness areas.

Yet in many parts of the country, these idyllic rides are increasingly difficult to achieve because trails must be shared with growing numbers of bicyclists, hikers, picnickers, sunbathers and even all-terrain vehicles.

Public land and recreation managers work hard to make sure the trails are safe and accessible. But they often must maintain a difficult balance between two sometimes conflicting priorities: to preserve the integrity of ecosystems, while providing wide and diverse public access to them. And when too much goes wrong too often, the most common management recourse is to close off trails.

You cannot control the actions and attitudes of other people, but you can prepare yourself for the exigencies of unfamiliar trails and minimize the impact that you and your horse have on the areas where you ride. Although any trail outing requires some preparation, when you set out for a shared-use trail, it becomes even more important to be a good trail citizen, approaching challenges with good humor and common sense and offering courtesy to all.

To help you, we've assembled a trail rider's pledge. By adhering to its tenets, you'll not only increase the likelihood that your outings will be safe and enjoyable but you'll also contribute to the public perception of equestrians as "the good guys" who should be allowed continued access to public lands. Will you join us in taking this pledge?





## Trail safety Tip

If you carry a cell phone on the trail, pack it on your person. Should your horse gallop off after a mishap, a cell phone in your saddlebag will do you no good.



JUSTY PERIN

### I pledge to do my homework before heading out for a new trail.

Naturally, if you are venturing to unfamiliar trails traversing a large area, you'll want to gather maps, brochures and/or other information about the place ahead of time.

Resist the temptation to simply depend on a companion who knows the trails—if an accident befalls that person, you may be left in a real fix. Instead, make sure everyone in your group has access to maps and other information. In addition, conditions in wild ecosystems are highly variable, so shortly before your trip check with the land or recreation managers about trail warnings and closures.

Check the weather forecasts, too. It's the rare horseman who hasn't experienced a sudden downpour on an otherwise bright afternoon, but it's easy to forget other potential pitfalls. An overcast morning may give way to scorching sunshine by midday, for example. Changes in altitude also can have a significant impact on riding conditions—even summer-time snow squalls aren't unheard of at high elevations.

Depending on the length and nature of your planned ride, it may not be possible to pack for every exigency, but a review of the basics can help keep you and your horse safe and comfortable even if conditions change.

JANIS TREMPER

**JUST IN CASE:** When going out on a new trail, resist the temptation to simply rely on a companion who knows the area—if an accident befalls that person, you may be in for trouble. It's much safer to make sure everyone in your group has access to maps and other trail information.

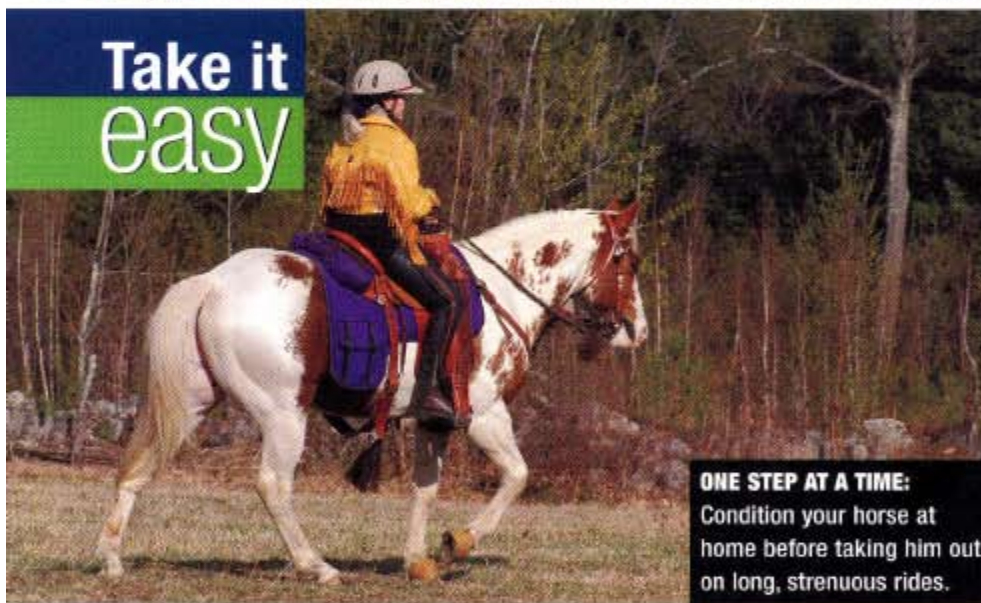


#### **IN CONFIDENCE:**

Although you may not be able to make your horse "spook proof," you can teach him to trust you and control his fears when confronting something unfamiliar on the trail.



#### **Take it easy**



#### **ONE STEP AT A TIME:**

Condition your horse at home before taking him out on long, strenuous rides.

For those who live in Northern climates, the first warm days of spring often bring the irresistible urge to drop everything and head for the hills. But horses who haven't worked much all winter will likely need some conditioning before they'll be ready to tackle strenuous rides.

Start at home with three to five rides per week. Go slowly at first, interspersing trotting with walking, and gradually increasing either the distance or the intensity of the workouts (but never both at once). On your initial trail rides head for shorter and less challenging paths. If your horse is unfit, it may take several weeks of regular riding to tone his muscles.

Also, if you plan on taking your horse on a riding vacation in an environment located at a much higher altitude than your home farm, he needs to be conditioned to perform in the thinner air. Ideally, you'd give him a couple of days of rest at middle elevations (3,000 to 5,000 feet above sea level) then another few days to acclimate at your destination (6,000 to 10,000 feet).

#### **I pledge to prepare my horse for the sights, sounds or obstacles he may encounter on the trail.**

No trail is completely clear of obstacles, and the more remote the path, the more likely it is you'll have to negotiate fallen rocks and trees and other impediments. An inexperienced horse likely will be inclined to jump, but stepping over is the safer option in unfamiliar terrain.

You can't condition a horse to handle every possible challenge, of course, but you can teach him to trust you and to control his fears when he does encounter something unfamiliar or scary. At home, work at desensitizing him to potentially frightening stimuli, such as bicycles, balloons, plastic tarps, car horns—be creative in devising new encounters.

In the saddle, do your best to maintain an air of calmness, no matter what happens—eventually, your horse will learn to take his cues from you. If he is young or inexperienced on the trail, it's wise to plan an outing with calm, experienced horses who can show him the way to handle the outdoor environment safely.

#### **I pledge to err on the side of caution when the unexpected occurs.**

Even with the best of planning you may encounter unanticipated challenges on the trail—trees fall across trails, rockslides make areas impassable and streams may become swollen with runoff.

If you are not sure that you and your horse have the skills to negotiate a particular obstacle, do not hesitate to turn back, choose a different path and/or get off and lead him.

The inconvenience of a slightly longer ride and the disappointment of deviating from your original plan are nothing compared to the aftermath of an accident.

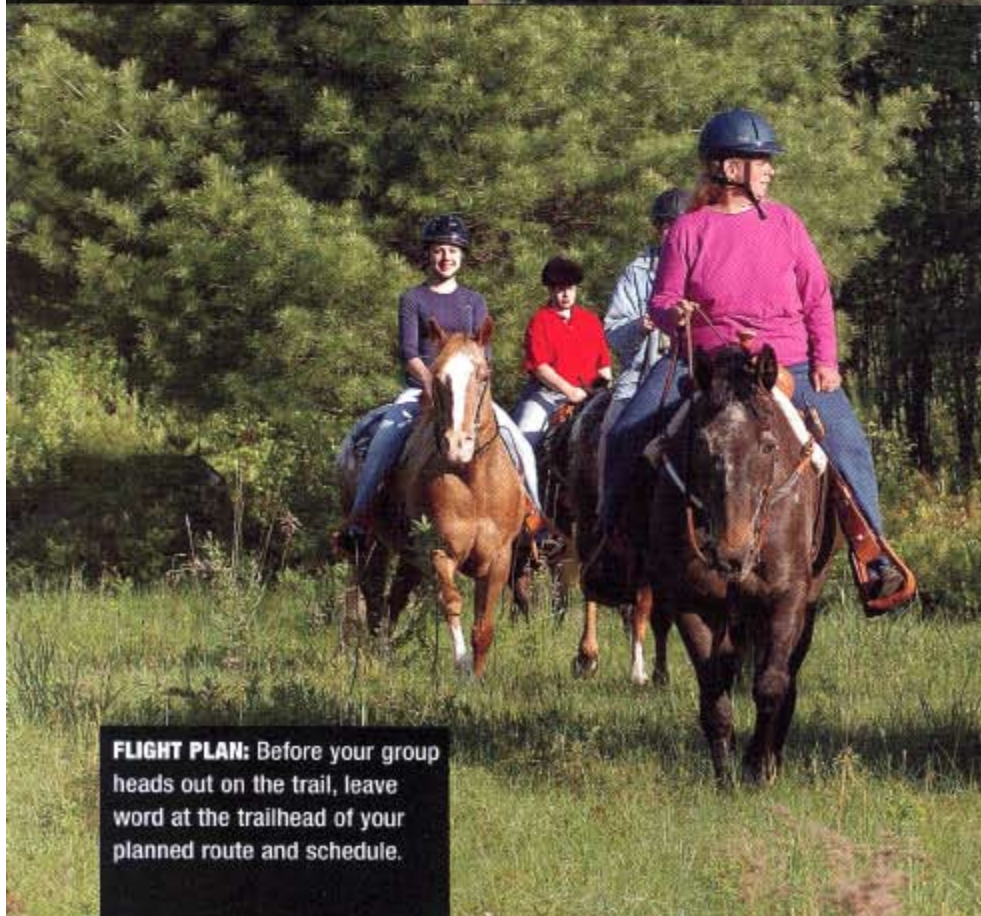


## Trail safety **Tip**

Put a halter under your horse's bridle or fit him with a halter/bit combination and carry a six- to eight-foot lead.



**STAY PUT:** Tying your horse to a picket line will keep him secure without endangering trees.



**FLIGHT PLAN:** Before your group heads out on the trail, leave word at the trailhead of your planned route and schedule.

## I pledge to keep my horse from endangering people and the environment.

Whether you stop for short rest breaks or overnight camps, it's important to tie your horse in a way that keeps him safe, does not endanger other people or animals, and does not harm the environment.

Horses tied to the trunk of a tree usually chew on the bark, which often results in girdling of the tree. Also they often paw at the base of the tree, which exposes and damages roots. Together or separately, these activities can kill the tree—an unfortunate reminder that a horse was there.

Always have on hand any equipment you'll need to tie your horse to the trailer, hitching posts or rails, picket line or high line. If you must tie to a tree in an emergency, choose one at least four to six inches in diameter at chest height. Trees this size and larger are less likely to shake and scare the horse should he lean on the tie rope.

GABRIELLE BOIRELLE

## I pledge to use the buddy system.

Horsepeople tend to be an individualistic and independent lot, but even the most experienced rider can get hurt on a trail.

Carrying a cell phone in your pocket is a good precaution, but it's not a fail-safe: You may not be able to get reception in remote areas, it could be damaged in a fall, or you could be knocked unconscious. It is far better to plan to ride with a companion or two. And even when you're going out with a group be sure to leave word at the trailhead of your planned route and schedule—post your plan in your tow vehicle or on a trailer door.

Also, when you leave home, be sure to tell someone when to expect you back and where you might be if you are not back by that time. The sooner someone knows to look for you, the better.

DUSTY PERIN





**GET ALONG:** As trails get more crowded, it becomes increasingly important to observe the rules and be courteous to others.

## I pledge to respect the trail and the ecosystem.

Many a wilderness area or trail has been marked off-limits because of the damage caused by its many users, and horses can be particularly hard on the terrain.

Too fast a gait on wet soil destroys footing; repeated shortcuts across switchbacks cause erosion that creates deep gullies; crossing streams at random points pushes silt into the water; off-trail riding in desert, marsh or other fragile ecosystems damages plants that may take years to recover. Even seemingly minor actions can have a big impact.

If you haven't already, ask land or recreation managers about local rules designed to protect sensitive areas and stay in touch to keep up to date with changes. Your concern and willingness will help cultivate your reputation as a friendly, cooperative and concerned user of the trails—something that could pay off if equestrian access to them is ever called into question.

### Trail safety Tip

MERIKA CUTLER

If your horse wears shoes, make sure they are on tight before heading out on long rides. Also carry a hoof boot or two so you can protect his hooves in the event of an unexpected shoe loss.



MAHE PHOTO

## I pledge to be courteous to my fellow trail users, including other equestrians.

It's always a good idea to treat others with basic courtesy, but on the trail it is a necessity. Not only do unpleasant encounters ruin an afternoon, they can also lead to accidents.

Respect for other horsemen includes basic etiquette such as slowing to a walk as you approach or depart from other horses, keeping your horse secured at all times, and warning others away from a horse who has a tendency to kick.

Courtesy for other recreationists is even more crucial. Keep your distance from the general crowds as much as possible: Park in remote corners of large common-use parking lots and stay away from picnic grounds, swimming beaches and any other areas that are normally off-limits to horses. On the trails, yield to other users whenever you can, even if horses normally have the right of way.

In a crowded public park, you're likely to encounter many people who don't know how to behave around horses; politeness is crucial when you must warn people away. Stories about rude equestrians can only hurt you when land managers are making decisions about future use of public trails.

Perfect trail rides can never be guaranteed. But the more we strive to apply commonsense rules of courtesy and etiquette—and the more prepared we are to take responsibility for our own safety and well-being—the better the chances of an uneventful, stress-free ride. 🐾

*Gene Wood is a professor and extension trails specialist at Clemson University in South Carolina.*

### TO LEARN MORE

... see "Safe on the Trail" (EQUUS 272), also available on

▶ [EquusMagazine.com](http://EquusMagazine.com).