

Advice on Hill and Upland Riding and Driving in England and Wales

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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, and sometimes drive, for hours. Some uplands have long byways or very minor unsurfaced roads suitable for horsedrawn vehicles.

These notes aim to guide those who have not yet ventured into the remoter parts of Britain on or driving a horse 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.
- The South Pennines and Peak District are less remote but have a number of restored packhorse trails.

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 go out in the lambing season you should take great care not to

distress sheep as, 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 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 dismount and heave so a cooperative, well-trained horse and your fitness will be a great help.

A fit rider will greatly assist a horse. A rider who is well toned, with good core strength, and relaxed but not sloppy in the saddle, will be a much less tiring burden for a horse.

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 user should be prepared for a steep drop on one side. Some moorland bridleways may be no more than faint sheeptracks and may not be apparent at all. Be wary: in some cases this will be because bog or scree has developed across the line of the bridleway.

Ground can be very rocky, have sharp stones or be soft and potentially boggy. In a dry summer, some may be useable in August and September when they have dried out but are not advisable earlier in the year. On peat uplands, some may be trods – historical 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. Byways and unsurfaced roads are much more likely to be available and easier to use.

Will they be waymarked?

The signing and waymarking of bridleways and byways is less likely in more remote areas and cannot be relied on so it is important to be able to use an Ordnance Survey map for the area 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. Alternatively, map apps on a smartphone or GPS (Geographic Positioning System) apps or devices are increasingly popular and can be a boon in showing exactly where you are so reducing some of the need for map-reading skill.

A compass should always be carried if you are not using GPS. Check your compass or GPS when you take a turning to 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 amiss.

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 or GPS can be essential in forestry where you cannot see far and it is easy to lose your sense of direction. GPS coverage has improved but can still be marginal in some remote areas so keep checking.

What is the main danger I might encounter?

Soft and boggy ground is the most widespread hazard to equestrians 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 or bright green sphagnum moss. These areas should be avoided by going carefully round the edge. If a horse is unwilling to go forward, lead them or give them to your companion while you check the ground on foot. Especially with native breeds, it could be the horse knows best and is not simply jibbing.

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 deep bog. Cotton grass is indicates unsuitable ground.

Should a horse sink into boggy ground, even a little, get off at once and encourage them to stand while you find firmer ground, which may be behind. A horse in deep may lie still in shock. Loosen the girth if you can, wait a moment, then encourage them again, very forcibly if necessary; horses easily give up in this situation, this is their life you are saving! A long headcollar rope can be invaluable here to give you length so that if the horse heaves itself out, they don't land on you. More than one rope between you can also mean you can give extra leverage, e.g. round a girth.

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 public rights of way 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, 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 RAF jets at low altitude but it is usually the rider or carriage-driver rather than the horse that is upset by their sudden noisy appearance. Hi-viz which is visible from the air will help pilots to avoid you if they can.

Very stony ground, rock slabs and loose scree can be difficult to ride over. It is much easier for horses to keep their balance if you are leading.

Lack of shelter means that high winds can make riding or driving 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. This is where GPS apps are invaluable. 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 may 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, or low flying aircraft to see you. Hi-viz on your horse makes them more visible should you part company.
- A fully charged mobile phone which includes an easily accessible 'In Case of Emergency' (ICE) contact number. Even if you have no reception, it may be useful for rescue workers when they find you.
- Consider a tracking app on a phone so a nominated friend knows your location.
- What3Words is an app that provides three words for every three metre square e.g. 'courts.outhouse.sweep'. Its purpose is to give a more easily memorable location than a grid reference if you are reporting to emergency services.

- 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 (quick release) 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.
- Baler twine or string.
- A breast plate will prevent the risk of your saddle slipping back on steep climbs.
- A water bottle in warm weather. A sponge tied to the saddle can be used to cool the horse when fording streams.
- 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 or mist can appear quickly even on a fine day.
- A temporary shoe replacement/sole protection 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 saddle bag or waist bag with:
 - 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.
 - 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 and folding knife.
 - Emergency food such as a high energy bar and drink
 - A whistle, fully charged torch and foil survival blanket

Safety

- Don't ride or drive alone in unfamiliar country. A party of three is best in case something goes wrong.
- Tell someone, preferably in writing, where you are going. Consider a tracking app so a nominated friend knows your location
- Be aware of the risk of no-one knowing your location if you change your route from your original intention.

- Leave dogs at home. Uplands are likely to be sheep-rearing areas 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 gates if they were closed when you reached them. Stock security is vital; even if you have to struggle with a gate, make sure it is secure. Use your baler twine if necessary.
- Allow plenty of time to complete your ride or drive, it will take much longer than you expect on unfamiliar ground.