

The British Horse Society

Advisory Statement



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Registered Charity No. 210504

No.25 Hill and Moorland Riding

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This note applies to England and Wales.
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Arow/crdft

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 and grouse and little else so one may ride for hours without seeing any sign of human habitation. These notes are prepared 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. Always remember to close gates behind you to protect stock.

Where and when to ride?

The National Parks of Exmoor, Northumberland the North Yorkshire Moors have good bridleway networks and places where you can stay with your horse. Other National Parks such as the Lake District, the Yorkshire Dales and Dartmoor can also offer opportunities for riding holidays, but in the Lakes many of the bridleways are very rocky and in the Yorkshire Dales and on Dartmoor you need to be very wary of bogs. 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 which has an increasing network of restored Packhorse trails.

The best months to ride in these areas are June and September. In May you may disturb ground nesting birds and in some areas lambing will not be over so farmers may be too busy to receive visitors. If you do ride during the lambing season, take great care not to disturb sheep by keeping to outside of fields and riding quietly and steadily.

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 many 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 areas mentioned are ancient tracks linking one valley with another. The best are green 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. But some moorland bridleways may be no more than faint sheeptracks across ground that can be soft. Always follow a promoted route or discuss your plans with a local rider who knows which bridleways should be avoided. Some are suitable in August and September when they have dried out but are not advisable earlier in the year.

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 ride with the relevant OS Pathfinder map and be able to use it. It should be carried in a map case slung across your shoulders by a short strap, folded so that it can be read easily. 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. Look at the map frequently so you know exactly where you are. 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.

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. 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.

What other hazards are lurking in the hills?

These remote areas are often flown over by low flying jets. But it is often the rider rather than the horse that is upset by their sudden noisy appearance.

Some horses will shy when a grouse gets up from close to their feet.

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.

Because of the lack of shelter high winds can make riding very difficult 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 if low cloud 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.

The grouse shooting season lasts from 12 August to 10 December. There is no

shooting on Sundays. As most of the heather covered hills and moors are managed for grouse shooting you may come across a shoot , always behave with courtesy and care and wait while a drive is in progress. The gamekeeper or whoever is in charge will probably indicate when it is safe to move on.

What should I take with me?

A headcollar and long lead rope which can be worn under the bridle for leading through boggy ground and at lunch stops.

A breast plate which will prevent the risk of your saddle slipping back on steep climbs.

Windproof and waterproof clothing for a normal summer. Sun cream and protection for arms and neck for heat waves. Protect any pink patches on your horse as well as your own exposed skin. A holder for a water bottle that is attached to the saddle will also be needed for hot summers. A sponge tied to the saddle can be used to cool the horse when fording streams.

A bum bag with basic first aid for horse and rider such as a sachet of antiseptic, insect repellent, sterilised dressings, plasters, bandages and a survival bag. Other essentials for the bum bag are a hoof pick, a penknife and binder twine for tying up poor gates.

You may want a saddle bag for your food, spare clothing and maps.

An equiboot or shoof can be tied to a D ring in case a shoe is lost. Experiment with it at home as they can be difficult to put on. A spare set of shoes should be at your base.

NEVER RIDE ALONE, A PARTY OF THREE IS BEST IN CASE SOMETHING GOES WRONG.

TELL SOMEONE WHERE YOU ARE GOING EACH DAY, PREFERABLY IN WRITING.

DON'T TAKE YOUR DOG WITH YOU. THIS IS SHEEP REARING COUNTRY AND THE HABITAT OF MANY GROUND NESTING BIRDS.

CLOSE AND LATCH ALL THE GATES HOWEVER DIFFICULT.

ALLOW PLENTY OF TIME TO COMPLETE YOUR RIDE.