

TRAIL ETIQUETTE 101

What to do when you meet:

1. **Mountain biker(s).**

The bikers should slow down and alert you to their presence.

Not all of them do.

And many of them would disagree with me. Their expectation is that because they are more mobile, they have right of way on the trail no matter what - and it is up to the hiker to spot them and move aside.

I have a couple of biker-related scars on my knees from diving into the woods, so I'm a little jaded about mountain bikers. Full discloser: My son *is* one, and even he has hair raising tales of bikers who play chicken with anyone or thing on the trail.

Hopefully you will hear the mountain bikers before you see them, giving you enough time to determine whether or not they are going to slow down or yield.

If they yield, great! Say thanks and move along.

If they show no signs of slowing down, pick a soft bush and get your body safely off the trail.

I find it helpful to wave if they are heading toward me.

If they're friendly, they consider the gesture a sign of friendliness, and return it.

If they're oblivious, it gets their attention.

If they're hostile, they ignore it or give me a gesture of their own.

In all three cases, my objective has been accomplished: *I've made my presence obvious.*

Now the ball is in their court.

Just a word of warning: If you're on a "shared use" trail with short sight distance due to foliage or contours, be prepared to leap off the trail in a split second. What a fine test of your sympathetic nervous system, also known as adrenalin rush!

Here's a biker's viewpoint that I can live with:

<http://www.animatedsoftware.com/mtnbikes/mtbetiqu.htm>

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2. Equestrian(s).

Always yield to a horseback rider. The horse is a large and unpredictable animal, and may be spooked by your strange lumpish appearance (hat, pack, poles).

I make it a point to ask the rider what I should do.

Sometimes they want me to step off the trail, downhill and in full sight of the horse.

Occasionally, they want me to keep approaching.

Once I was asked to take off my pack so the young wild eyed horse converted me back into being “human” from “big scary monster”.

I tend to go with the flow – the horse is bigger than me, and I don't want trouble. Best advice: greet the rider and ask for guidance.

If the rider seems unconcerned with your presence or is too far away to talk to, just step off the trail and stand still.

Here's another source of information:

<http://www.imba.com/resources/risk-management/shared-trails>

3. Unleashed dogs.

This is problematic for so many reasons.

Some dogs are **friendly** and run ahead of the owner simply for the sport of it. They give you a quick sniff and then want to be petted. This takes up trail time and can be potentially dangerous. Once, I had my backpack knocked downhill by two friendly dogs milling around my legs while I was enjoying a rest break. The owner had to down climb quite a ways to retrieve my pack! Luckily, it wasn't me that was knocked down the hill.

Other dogs are **aggressive** and want to defend the owner against what they perceive as your intrusion: raised hackles, bared teeth – not a sight you want on a hiking trail. This type of dog should be leashed – voice control enough is not going to do the job. Sadly, many dog owners think that a leash violates the dog's freedom. What about a hiker's freedom from worry on a trail??

And there will be the dogs that breeze right past you, intent on a scent trail. But while they are running at you, your heart may start pounding.

What to do?

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I give each dog a quick visual assessment, scanning the body language for signs of dominance versus docility. For instance: Does the dog stare at you, or drop its eyes? Does it slow down once it spots you, or continues its movement toward you?

If the dog appears to a dominant animal, I raise one hiking pole in front of me and stand firm. Hopefully, the owner is just a few steps behind.

If no human appears within a few seconds, I shout “Come here NOW and control this dog.” Nine times out of ten, the owner is apologetic. But I’m still left with lots of adrenalin flooding my system. I take some deep breaths and continue on my way, but it’s hard not to send some angry words toward the dog owners.

Some hikers advocate carrying pepper spray. I haven’t gone that far yet, because spray can backfire on you.

I have had only one really close call with a snapping, growling dog. The owner told me afterwards that I should have hit the dog with my hiking pole. Exactly what I was thinking!

4. Bears.

This depends.

Which type of bear? Which type of encounter?

Startled female black or grizzly bear with cubs – uh oh.

Young clueless black bear – usually not a problem. Odds are it will stand up on its hind legs to take your measure, and then turn tail and run away. Whew!

The key here is to give the bear plenty of warning: talking, singing, whistling.

This is harder when you’re hiking solo, because it seems somewhat sacrilegious to make tons of noise in the back country. But if it’s bear country you’re hiking through, sing “Row Row Row” or some other mindless song for all you’re worth.

If you are in brushy or noisy (waterfalls, streams) country, the bear might not hear you even if you’re making noise. Voices tend to carry in unpredictable ways. Proceed cautiously and continue to make noise. Your goal is to give the animal plenty of opportunity to see, smell, and hear you.

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People always ask about bear bells. Not every effective, in my opinion. They're not loud enough, they are too repetitious, and if you haven't heard the old hiking joke about "What's the difference between grizzly scat and black bear scat?", email me for the punch line: diane@hiking-for-her.com

What to do if you startle a bear? Again, it depends. The bear is fully in control of the situation – it's bigger, it's startled, and it might not have enough prior experience with humans to make what *you* would consider a good decision.

As a pre-emptive defensive maneuver, read up on the differences between black bears and grizzly bears. Understand predatory and defensive bear behavior, and plan *your* behavior accordingly. <http://www.mountainnature.com/wildlife/bears/bearid.htm>

5. Cougar.

This probably won't happen. Most people are unaware of a big cat's presence, because that's the way the cougar wants it.

And if you are hiking with other people, there's not much to worry about.

A solo hiker needs to be alert when hiking through cat country. Keep your pack on at rest stops, don't crouch down for long periods of time, and watch for cat signs. The noise rules I outlined for bears applies here, too.

If you're lucky enough to encounter a cougar, stand tall and never turn your back on it. If your pack is on, unbuckle it and raise it above your head to appear huger than you are. But don't bend down to get it – that makes you look vulnerable.

Again, read up on this animal's behavior. <http://www.cougarfund.org/living/behavior/>

And check ahead of time if there have been cougar sightings where you're headed.

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6. Other hiker(s):

The rule of thumb I use is that a hiker heading downhill toward me gets the right-of-way, due to gravity and momentum.

I reverse this rule for backpackers chugging uphill toward me under a full load. I know they need to keep their momentum going, so I step off the trail as soon as I spot them. And sometimes they don't hear me over their labored breathing - I don't want to startle them out of their trail rhythm, so I don't greet them.

Oftentimes, hikers headed uphill WANT to stop and let me go past, by while catching their breath.

In actuality, stepping politely off the trail can be done by either party – just read the body language and decide whether to keep going or to step aside.

And please! Don't take your rest stop in the middle of the trail or creek crossing, no matter how hot or tired you may be. It's irritating to have to step over your pack and water bottles.

7. Personal behavior:

It's only fair to abide by a few trail rules, right?

For your consideration, here are my "Hiking Rules I Live By":

- Don't cut switchbacks. Ever. Why not? It gives water an opportunity to flow downhill, ruining the lower section of the trail. And so many trails never get maintenance – don't help them erode faster than Mother Nature can get to the job!
- Don't spew sunflower seed hulls, orange peels, or worse along the trail. It's the whole "leave no trace" philosophy. I assume that you don't want to have an image in your head of my snack – you're hiking to attain much more pleasing images! Please return the favor.

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- Keep conversations to a low pitch. I'm not exaggerating when I say that I sometimes hear humans half a mile before I see them. Be mindful of the wild places. Would you want a bellowing oaf walking around your yard? Neither do the creatures you're hiking past. This advice extends to refraining from the Tarzan yell or alpine yodel, no matter how strong the impulse.
- On the flip side: Don't sneak up on hikers. If I want to pass on your left, I try to let you know I'm behind you - before I'm close to you. I clear my throat, or tap my hiking pole against a rock – anything to alert you to my presence. I abide by this rule because I have been so startled by trail runners or solo hikers literally *on my heels* that I have tripped, and once even fallen on my face. Make a little noise – but just enough.
- Leave electronic devices at home. I love to unplug and listen to Mother Nature's sound track, rather than ones I have on my iPod. And phone calls can wait. Think about what you are missing: an eagle's call, the wind dancing through tree limbs, the melody of a waterfall. And being plugged in is dangerous, too (see the info on bears, for example).
- Be respectful of other hikers' space. If you are not the first one to a summit or a viewpoint, don't crowd the hikers that got there first. Even if there's room for a few more people up there, wait your turn rather than plunk down in the midst of them. If you're in that much of a hurry, reconsider your hiking priorities.
- Be friendly but not intrusive. If I greet you with a "Hi" and you return a short grunt, I know you don't want to talk. But if you say "Great day! Where're you headed?" I know the door is open for some trail conversation.

OK, enough with my personal credo..... here's the last little bit of trail etiquette I want to share with you.

8. **Unicorn(s)**: If you meet one on the trail, take a picture and send it to me, fast!
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