

#RealNewForest

Why is it OK for horses to be ridden over the New Forest, but not bikes?

Horses and ponies are central to the special qualities of the New Forest.

Access on horseback is written into New Forest law. It is an ancient and important part of New Forest culture. This is primarily because there is no better way for commoners to check their livestock; they are much easier to spot from horseback than from any other means of travel, seeing over the gorse bushes, and a horse can go anywhere that a pony or cow might go. The riding culture of the New Forest and the benefits of using horses means that there is much less use of 4x4s or quad-bikes than is seen elsewhere on common land.

Riding ponies are an important product of the commoning system upon which the New Forest depends. Commoners will often themselves ride ponies that they been born and bred on the Open Forest, and later sell these experienced ponies on to the general public. Riding them on the Forest gets them used to a range of situations that makes them exceptional. Horses raised elsewhere are likely to be terrified of traffic, pigs, donkeys, cattle, and many of the human recreational activities seen on the Forest.

Commoners derive important support from local riding; as a market for hay, farriery, saddlery, and horse liveries, for example. Local riding also supports the suppliers upon which commoners also depend; feed merchants, large animal veterinary practices, animal rescue services, and the New Forest Hounds' vital service rapidly collecting livestock that die on the Open Forest.

The action of **horse and pony hooves on the ground, and dung, is part of the ecosystem of the New Forest**, which is neither ploughed nor artificially fertilised. Many of the species that still exist today in the New Forest but which are rare elsewhere, continue to depend on these long-standing ground effects of livestock, particularly soil poaching.

In the 1990s rights of access were extended to bicycles on many of the gravelled tracks, in the hope that this would prevent unlawful access across more sensitive terrain. There are, perhaps, three main reasons why more extensive cycle access would be a cause for concern.

Firstly, far more people have access to a bicycle than ride, so the potential impact on the special qualities of the New Forest is substantial.

Secondly, the action of a wheel (whether a car or a bike) can very quickly create artificial new channels for water erosion and rapid run-off.

Finally, the potential speed of a cycle downhill can present a real danger to other Forest users (particularly on horseback), and startling for commoners' livestock. A startled pony will put itself (and others) in danger of injury when in flight after being startled.

None of this means that horse riding does not cause concern of course. Any activity can be done sensitively or badly. In the past, when there were commercial riding stables dotted all over the Forest, some tracks were used multiple times a day every day, causing considerable erosion. Today, the very few that remain are licensed, with very clear terms to avoid damage. Riders are not permitted to build jumps, and they are required to be considerate to other users and to the rare species of the New Forest. Large events have to be licensed and conditions on routes etc., respected.

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