



## Trails and Open Spaces

Column editor Sarah Reid

# Out on the Trails: Let's All Get Together!

"Coexist: 1. to exist together, at the same time, or in the same place; 2. to live together without hostility or conflict despite differences. . ." Webster's New World Dictionary

How often have you paused on one of our Sonoma County trails and thought how lucky we are to have so many parks and open spaces to experience? We all know how fortunate we are to experience these places during the same winter that socks-in so many other areas with ice, freezing rain and wind, and piles of snow. But have you considered that we are also fortunate because, as a community, we have created a trail and open space system that encourages all users? As the weather improves, and the parks experience more visitors, this is time to recognize that we all have a role in sustaining our collaborative, multi-use environment. Whether you are beckoned out by drier, warmer weather, or you have consistently braved the wind and rain, you have a role and responsibility. No finger pointing allowed: All the user groups must work together so we all have a great time out there. Here are a few points to ponder when you are out enjoying our beautiful Sonoma County trails.

### Multi-use trail plans

As a general plan, our local parks and open spaces have been intended for "multi-use." This means that people use the trails and parks in Sonoma County in differing manners—on bikes, on horses, on foot—and many of the trails have been designated as useable by all of these groups at the same time. In some other parts of California, designated trails are open to certain users only, or open to certain users on certain days of the week. In Sonoma County our properties are open to multi-users without these restrictions, although a few trails are designated for hikers only to protect a habitat or historical place of interest. Two such examples are Rhyolite in Annadel State Park and the Grandmother Tree trail in Jack London State Historic Park (SHP). Every user should know the local trail rules and stay on designated trails.

Benefits of shared-use trails are many, and these trails can accommodate the needs of most users. Shared-use trails help build community by facilitating cooperation in preserving and protecting common re-



Photo by Susan Johnson

Equestrian Sarah Reid shares the trail with cyclist Ken Reid

sources and properties. Designing multi-use areas are most cost effective for land managers: One shared trail is easier to build and maintain than several trails open to specific users only. Shared-use trails enable responsible, experienced users to educate outlaws and novices. Our local organizations—Sonoma County Trails Council, Sonoma County Horse Council, Back Country Horsemen, and BikeMonkey—have been coordinating efforts by helping users to get together to protect and maintain the trails and properties so we all can continue to use them together. When groups collaborate, we understand each other's needs better, and create a healthier environment for all to enjoy. As we continue to work together, our positive trail experiences will grow.

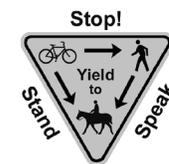
### Perceptions of speed

Horses, as prey animals, have highly tuned senses. Instinct directs them to run away from danger. The horse recognizes speed as a potential predator. Cyclists in particular, should announce themselves when approaching a horse and rider from the rear. A human voice carries with it the positive experiences that the horse has with humans, and establishes that the cyclist is not a predator. While a voice may startle the horse momentarily, the rapid approach and noise of a bike might simulate the surprise attack of a predator from the rear, causing an explosive response. Also be aware that perceived speed may be dif-

ferent to the hiker or horse and rider than the actual speed. Slowing from 15 MPH to 8 MPH feels like a dramatic change, but a hiker or horse may still perceive a fast-moving threat. That's why slowing a little more than what seems natural is an important element in a well-executed pass. Most hikers and equestrians may feel safest if a bike passes only slightly faster than they are moving. This likely feels like a crawl to the cyclist, but will provide the best experience for everyone. Passing safely only slows a ride by seconds, but it prevents a potential rodeo. The same goes for equestrians; slowing from a canter to a trot may seem like a dramatic decrease in speed, but to a stopped cyclist or hiker, you may be perceived as traveling at an unsafe passing speed. The most respectful pace is a walk.

### Trail etiquette

Cyclists yield to hikers, and both cyclists and hikers yield to equestrians. The inherent unpredictability of the horse is why the standard multi-use trail regulations give equestrians the right of way. As the privileged user, this means it is up to the equestrian to think of safety for all at all times. Take control of encounters with others, and be diplomatic and polite. Communicating your needs tactfully and educating other users about horse behavior can create a positive experience for everyone involved. For instance, when encountering other users on the trail, equestrians should communicate where they want the other users to stand



to allow safe passing. Some hikers move off trail behind a bush or tree not realizing they have become a hidden predator to the horse. Some equestrians find it safer to move the horse off trail to let others pass; this should be communicated properly to make sure the other users feel safe about passing the horse. In most situations, stay to the right except when passing. Sometimes, however, equestrians may feel safer staying uphill with their horse. Again, communicate this need to the other users and explain why. Luckily for these users, the bike and the trekking poles don't have minds of their own or react to stimuli!

### **Communication and safety are number one**

Communication is one of the most important tools for all users when meeting others on trail. Multiple-use trails are generally wide enough for user groups to pass each other with adequate visibility to avoid collisions. However, it is important to ride (horses and bikes) at a safe and controlled speed and single file when someone is approaching, or when passing. For equestrians, keep in mind that some other users have had past experiences with novice or spooky horses, or are scared of horses altogether. Be aware of the tension or nervousness of another user when approaching with a horse, and help create a positive experience.

It is also important to ride at a safe and slow speed when approaching a blind turn or corner where there could be another user who may not hear you. Always announce yourself, say hello, or otherwise make polite voice contact; don't wait for the other person to notice you. A polite interaction leads to safe passage, especially as the horse recognizes the other as a human. Watch to see if the other person has earbuds in both ears, in which case they may not hear others approaching, or greetings. Sometimes a startle will be unavoidable,

especially when a visitor is unaware of his or her surroundings. To protect yourself from dangerous situations, please do not hike or ride with both ear-buds in. Safety is the most important issue.

### **Green horses and green cyclists**

Some users ride over their heads. Lack of experience can be a safety issue, regardless of activity. Before going out on the trail, become familiar with the property you are visiting. If the horse has never been on a trail or encountered mountain bikes, know that Annadel State Park is a very popular cycling venue. Perhaps this is not the first place to take a green trail horse. Choose a quieter park, such as Jack London State Historic Park as a first ride so the horse can be gradually introduced to stimuli, or prepare the horse at home with mountain bikes and hikers with packs and trekking poles, or strollers. Preparing horses for the trail results in a better experience for horses, the riders, and most importantly, the other users.

Just as important, the first time mountain biker or hiker may have a more rewarding experience going out with a seasoned cyclist or hiker who knows the park, trails, and habits of users in the park. Mentored by an experienced peer, the new user may learn etiquette of the trails, where the best spots

are to view vistas and take a rest stop, where to use caution, how to approach other users.

### **Impressions**

Unfortunately, negative experiences between trail users become the often-told stories and the focus of conversations. In reality, accidents between user groups rarely occur in our local parks. We are all charged with remembering and focusing on the positive encounters with other users, and continuing to create positive interactions out there on the trails. If we all coexist, and maintain our collaboration in sharing our properties, we will all have a much more satisfying time.

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