

Advice on Riding on hills, mountains and moorland in Scotland

From the Highlands to the Southern Uplands, Cheviots to the Cuillins of Skye, Scotland's hills, mountains and moorland offer some of the best off-road riding in Britain. The Land Reform (Scotland) Act provides the legal framework for outdoor recreational access north of the border, under which horse riders and carriage drives enjoy the same access rights as walkers and cyclists to most hill ground.

In contrast to England and Wales where riders are restricted to defined linear rights of way, in Scotland access rights extend over most ground, provided these rights are exercised responsibly. This doesn't necessarily mean you can ride anywhere you like on hills, mountains and moorlands in Scotland. Some ground is simply too boggy or too steep to cross with a horse, and some rivers and burns are impassable with a horse, particularly when in spate. March boundaries between farms, crofts and estates are usually defined by dykes (walls) or fences, often without provision to allow horses to pass through, even on well established paths.

This information sheet summarises the key considerations for riders and carriage drivers keen to get out on the Scottish hills with their horse.

Legal context for equestrian access on the Scottish hills

Access rights apply to hills, mountains and moorland throughout Scotland, provided you exercise your rights responsibly. This means respecting the interests of the farmers, crofters, foresters, stalkers and gamekeepers who make their living from the land, as well as others enjoying the outdoors, and taking account of shooting and stalking. Your responsibilities also include avoiding disturbance to wildlife or livestock.

Finding routes to ride and drive across the Scottish hills

BHS Scotland's information sheet on "Finding places to ride and drive horses off-road in Scotland" offers guidance on how to identify suitable routes with a horse. Checking out Ordnance Survey maps and consulting Scottish Hill Tracks, published by Scotways, are good starting places. Scotways' excellent Heritage Paths website (<http://www.heritagepaths.co.uk/>) is also a useful information source. However, none of these will actually tell you whether any particular route is passable with a horse.

Anyone familiar with the Scottish hills will know that hill paths and tracks vary enormously. Tracks marked on OS maps as double-dashed lines are generally more likely to exist on the ground, and be

reliably passable, than faint dotted lines, but there is still no guarantee where you may meet a deer fence, ladder stile, locked gate or deep bog. Or where the bridge marked on the map across a steep-sided cleugh, ravine or fast flowing river has long since been swept away, or the decking is so rotten as to pose a serious risk to life and limb of pedestrians, let alone a horse. Scotland's access legislation has many benefits, but unlike England and Wales, there is no legal obligation on landowners or the access or highway authority to maintain bridges or other access facilities. It pays to do your homework in advance, to speak with other riders who have used the route you are thinking of riding or driving, or others who have first-hand experience of that particular route. Shepherds, stalkers, farmers and crofters are also reliable sources of information, particularly those who have used (or still use) ponies for stalking or shepherding.

Signage and waymaking of hill routes

Established rights of way, core paths and promoted routes are usually signed where they leave the public road, but few hill tracks or paths are waymarked on the ground.

When to ride on the Scottish hills

Access rights apply year-round, although snow and ice may limit where you can go and when. The best months to ride in the Scottish uplands are generally mid-May to late September, but you should be aware that at altitude, snow is not uncommon in May, and is often still lying until the end of June (and beyond) in the Highlands. Boggy ground, typically more common in the wetter west of Scotland but also an issue on the Cheviots and many other eastern hills, is usually more of a problem in the autumn, winter and spring, but can be equally treacherous during a wet summer.

Remember that access rights in Scotland only apply if exercised responsibly. You need to think not only about whether the route you are planning to use will be passable, but also how your use will affect other users, whether a horse might damage the route, and whether your use might interfere with grouse shooting or stalking, or with livestock or wildlife. Remember that a group of riders is far more likely to cause damage and interference than one or two riders.

Practical tips on riding and driving on the Scottish hills

On a sunny day, there's nothing better than riding or driving across the hills. Provided you are careful, you and your horse are sufficiently fit and suitably equipped, there is no reason anything should go wrong. But hills, mountains and moorland are by their very nature typically more remote than the lowlands, the weather can change very quickly, and if you are not experienced, the risks of riding on hills, mountains and moorland are arguably greater than riding at lower altitude. The key is to be prepared.

- Stick to tracks and well established paths wherever possible.

- Always take a map with you at sufficient scale to ensure you can relate where you are to features on the ground - and make sure you know how to read it!
- Always take a compass, and learn how to use it before you set off.
- Keep a constant eye on where you are on the map, and what your escape route would be at any point. Remember that some of the tracks you see on the ground may not be marked on the map: they may be sheep or quad tracks
- Check the weather forecast before you set off, and be prepared to alter your route if necessary, particularly if your route involves crossing rivers which may rise rapidly during or after heavy rain, or where rocky scree may become dangerously slippery.
- Have a fall-back plan in case the weather changes, or you meet a problem.
- Carry a whistle and a charged mobile phone in case of emergency. A torch with spare batteries is also very useful if you are out longer than anticipated.
- Tell someone before you set off where you are going, and when you expect to be back, or reach your destination.
- Wear high-viz so that shooters, stalkers and low-flying military aircraft can easily see you (and so that rescue services can locate you more easily in case of accident).
- Bogs and deep peat are probably the biggest and least well recognised hazard on hill ground. Avoid patches of bright green, spongy sphagnum moss, rushes and areas of peat where there is risk of horses getting bogged. Heather does not usually grow with its roots wet so is a good guide to patches of slightly drier ground. If necessary, get off and lead your horse, or if you are with someone else, send a scout in advance to test the ground.
- Most horses, particularly native ponies, will instinctively avoid bogs, but if you do find yourself sinking, get off immediately, loosen the girth (or take off the saddle) if possible, stand clear to avoid risk of your horse catching you with flailing legs, and encourage your horse out. It's usually best to leave the reins over the horse's neck to avoid risk of entanglement with its legs, but be ready to catch your horse when it is back on firm ground. It may well be frightened.
- Always carry waterproofs, spare clothing, food and water.

See below for guidance on livestock, grouse shooting and deer stalking.

Livestock on the hills

Despite sometimes looking rocky, bare and bleak in places, particularly the craggy mountain tops, Scotland's mountains and moorlands are an essential part of Scottish agriculture. You can expect to meet sheep, cattle and sometimes herds of ponies on many of Scotland's hills and mountains, particularly during the summer months. Cows and sheep are often protective of their young, and may sometimes try to follow you, but generally keep their distance provided you do not give them cause for concern. Bulls and stallions grazing on hill ground are not usually a problem provided you do not come between them and their cows or mares.

When you encounter livestock, keep your pace to a walk and give all animals a wide berth, particularly those with young at foot, and entire males. This is basically common sense and all that is usually required to avoid any problems. BHS advise riders not to take their dog with them, but if you are

accompanied by a dog, take particular care that it is under close control (on a short lead or at heel) the whole time, and that it does not chase livestock, game or wildlife.

Grouse shooting and deer stalking

Grouse shooting is an important economic activity in Scotland. The grouse shooting season runs from 12 August to 10 December each year, with most shoots taking place during the earlier part of the season. Deer stalking helps keep deer numbers in balance with the upland environment, as well as being an important economic activity in parts of Scotland. The red deer stag season is from 1st July to 20th October, although most stag stalking takes place from September onwards. The red deer hind season runs from 21st October to 15th February.

Legally, access rights continue to apply throughout the grouse shooting and deer stalking seasons, and while deer management is taking place, but anyone exercising their access rights is responsible for minimising disturbance.

All riders and carriage drivers thinking of venturing out onto the hills should:

- be alert to the possibility of shooting taking place on the Scottish hills and uplands, particularly during the stalking and shooting seasons;
- take reasonable steps to find out where and when shooting or stalking is taking place for example by using the Hill phones service which provides daily updated information on shooting and stalking in the Scottish Highlands.
- as far as reasonably possible, plan your ride or drive to avoid places where stalking or shooting is taking place. Stalking and grouse shooting do not normally take place on Sundays, so these are good days to get out on the hills without risk of disturbance. If you are planning a long ride through Scotland, think about doing it between May and July, before the start of the grouse shooting and stalking seasons;
- avoid crossing any land where shooting or stalking is taking place until it is safe to do so;
- take account of advice and where possible using alternative routes.
- stick to recognised paths and tracks during the stalking and shooting seasons across ground used for grouse shooting or deer stalking. Land managers will take these routes into account in planning their shooting, and if necessary will put up signs and information at key entry points including advice on potential alternative routes;
- restrict your pace to a walk to minimise risk of disturbance.
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If you do inadvertently find yourself in the middle of a shoot, keep calm, make sure the shooting or stalking party are aware of your presence, and identify the best way forward with the minimum disturbance to the shooters or stalkers.

If you need further advice on equestrian access in Scotland, contact your local BHS access representative (see www.bhsscotland.org.uk for contact details) or Helene Mauchlen, national manager for BHS Scotland Tel. 01764 656334 or email Helene.Mauchlen@bhs.org.uk.

For guidance on equestrian access in England and Wales, contact Access and Rights of Way Department, The British Horse Society, Abbey Park, Stareton Lane, Kenilworth, Warwickshire CV8 2XZ. Telephone 02476 840581. Email access@bhs.org.uk.

IMPORTANT This guidance is general and does not aim to cover every variation in circumstances. The Society recommends seeking advice specific to a site where it is being relied upon.