

Code of practice for horse riding in parks



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This code was prepared in collaboration with several horse riding and conservation groups, and OEH thanks these groups for their assistance. Information in the code concerning the care and management of horses has been endorsed by the Australian Horse Alliance, the Australian Trail Horse Riders Association and the NSW Endurance Riders Association.



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The code of practice

Horse riding is a popular recreational activity that has strong cultural associations for many Australians. It is an enjoyable way to experience natural environments and some of the best natural environments in NSW can be found within national parks, state conservation areas and other reserves – collectively referred to as ‘parks’. There are a large number of parks in NSW where horse riding is permitted (outside state forests, where horse riding is also often allowed). These include some of the most exciting areas for riding in the state, such as Kosciuszko, Blue Mountains and Oxley Wild Rivers national parks.

These parks are managed by the National Parks and Wildlife Service, which is part of the NSW Office of Environment and Heritage (OEH). Horse riding in the parks is guided by OEH’s recreational horse-riding policy. While providing for horse riding, the policy acknowledges that all recreational activities can have impacts on parks. Park managers and horse riders need to work together to balance protecting park values with using parks. The policy aims to achieve conservation while facilitating a quality experience for horse riders.

Horse riding groups such as the Australian Horse Alliance, the Australian Trail Horse Riders Association and the NSW Endurance Riders Association promote responsible horse riding as an outdoor leisure pursuit. This code of practice was developed in collaboration with these groups and with peak environmental bodies.

The aim of the code is to provide practical details to help guide horse riders and OEH staff to sustain the use of horses in parks by maximising safety and enjoyment while minimising any potential impacts on the park’s natural and cultural values. By working together and making sure this code is adhered to whenever horses are taken into parks, OEH and the equestrian community can ensure horse riding remains an appropriate way to enjoy some of the best natural areas NSW has to offer.

OEH recognises the horse riding community may have valuable local knowledge of the parks in a region. Where possible, park staff will aim to consult with local riding groups when making decisions on park management issues relevant to horse riding. Horse riders are encouraged to aid in park management by informing staff of issues encountered while riding, such as new infestations of weeds or illegal activities. Thus a mutually beneficial and satisfying relationship can be formed between OEH and the equestrian community.

Planning your ride

The NSW park system is very extensive, covering more land area than a small country. It includes a variety of different environments used by a wide range of user groups. This means many of the rules governing recreational activities (including horse riding) vary between parks to account for the differing needs of each park and its users. It is therefore strongly recommended that before riding in a particular park for the first time, or when returning to a park after a long time or in changed conditions (such as after a bushfire), you contact the local area park office for information to help plan your ride.

Park staff can give information on topics such as:

- whether or not riding is permitted in the park (and if so, where)
- access and facilities available
- whether riding or camping permits are required, what restrictions on group size apply or if there are any other special regulations relating to riding in the park
- any trail closures currently in force
- sensitive areas to be avoided, information about why these areas are sensitive, and other advice on minimal impact riding.

Contact details for each park can be found on OEH's website at www.environment.nsw.gov.au. This site also provides access to the plan of management of each park. A plan of management provides a lot of information about the values to be found in the park, sets out how the park will be managed and includes details of which recreational activities are permitted in the park and where. All park visitors are encouraged to take an interest in the environment and heritage of the parks they visit.

Where can horses be ridden?

Riding in parks is permitted only with consent. This can be given generally by way of a plan of management – or sign or in specific incidences – created by authorised parks staff. In general, riding in parks is permitted only on designated roads and trails. In a small number of parks, riding is also permitted off-trail in broad clear areas such as beaches and sub-alpine plains. Horse riding is permitted in wilderness areas in five national parks that are part of a 2-year trial of horse riding in wilderness. The trial commenced in April 2014, and is being evaluated to determine the impacts of horse riding in wilderness areas. The trial is in Deua, Monga, Mummel, and Kosciuszko National Parks. A trial of horse riding in wilderness in Curracabundi National Park is proposed after a plan of management for the park is prepared. Horse riding is not permitted in declared wilderness areas in other parks. Depending on how much horse traffic a park receives, horse-riding areas may or may not be signposted. However, in all cases it is the responsibility of riders to make sure they are riding in the correct locations.

While riding in parks, riders need to remain vigilant at all times for areas of sensitive environments, such as bogs, moss beds, threatened species habitat or Aboriginal and historic artefacts and sites. They must avoid riding in these areas. Information provided by the local area park office can help identify these areas.

Park staff monitor horse riding trails and other recreational areas for signs of impacts. If these impacts start to reach unacceptable levels and there are no other practical management solutions, those areas may be temporarily or permanently closed or relocated. Where practical, park staff will consult with relevant user-groups in the process of making such decisions.

Facilities for horse riders

If warranted by the level of use, specific facilities for horse riders may be provided in parks. These may include signage that recognises the unique needs of horse riders or educates non-riders about the use of horses in parks. They may also include fixtures to help minimise the impact of horse riding, such as troughs, hitching rails or overnight yards.

Where such fixtures exist, riders are requested to make use of them as much as is practicable. For example, where troughs are provided, water your horses at these rather than at streams to prevent erosion (see waterways section). Where hitching rails are available, tether horses to these rather than to vegetation (see holding horses section).

Putting safety first

The terrain in some parks can challenge even the most experienced riders. In large or remote parks, riders may find themselves far from emergency assistance. Therefore, riders in parks are requested to follow simple safety rules:

- Carry a first-aid kit for both horse and rider on all long trips, along with other emergency gear such as rope and torches.
- Check all equipment is in good working order before setting out.
- Ensure horses are accustomed to the things they may encounter in parks, such as wildlife or cyclists, and are under adequate control at all times.
- Keep all emergency gear in backpacks, not saddlebags, so it isn't lost if you become separated from your horse.
- If planning a long trip, tell someone you are not riding with about your plan.
- Check predicted weather conditions before beginning the ride.
- Have a lead rope handy so that the horse can be lead if the terrain gets too difficult.
- Riders under the age of 18 must wear helmets when riding in parks. It is strongly recommended that all other riders also wear helmets.

Brumbies are found in several parks in NSW. Their presence can unsettle domestic horses and aggressive encounters may take place. The most common aggressive actions occur between stallions, particularly in the presence of mares in season. Therefore, it is advised that stallions and mares in season not be bought into areas where there is a reasonable chance of encountering brumbies. Park staff can give advice of where and when brumbies are likely to be found.

If someone is seriously injured and help cannot be contacted, one or (preferably) two riders should go for help while the rest of the group remains with the injured person and their horse. If a horse escapes in a park, park staff must be notified as soon as possible.

Meeting other park users

In many parks there is a high likelihood of encountering walkers and other park users who are unfamiliar with horses. Such people may be intimidated or unsure of how to act in their presence. Exercise caution and keep speed low in high-use areas where such people may be encountered, such as on multi-use trails and beaches. When passing them, do so in single file and make sure all horses in the group are walking calmly.

Some park users do not believe that horse riding is an appropriate recreational activity in parks. However by informing these users of this code and making sure you adhere to it at all times, you

can become a good representative of the equestrian community and increase the support for this activity among other park-users. Other park users may be excited to see horses and may wish to pat or feed them and may want to ask you questions. This presents a great opportunity for riders to create a positive impression of horses in parks among other users.

Riders who meet others acting contrary to this code are encouraged to discuss the matter with them or inform park staff.

Protecting the environment

Like any other recreational activity, horse riding has the potential to have an impact on the natural and cultural environments found in parks. However, if correct care is taken, such impacts can be minimised and these environments can be sustained to allow horse riders and other users to continue to experience and appreciate them. Set out here are some simple guidelines for reducing the major impacts caused by horse riding.

Holding horses

How a horse is held can greatly effect its level of impact. For information on holding horses overnight, refer to the camping section later. When holding horses during the day, apply the following guidelines:

- Horses must be under competent control at all times while in parks.
- If tethering horses to vegetation (permitted during the day only), make sure horses are tied to sturdy trunks or branches where there is no evidence of previous damage to the soil or tree and place padding between the rope and the tree. Don't tie horses to trees if they become restless and paw the ground or chew trees when tied up as this can quickly cause damage to soil and vegetation.
- Horses must be held at least 50 m from bodies of water, huts, Aboriginal sites and other features that may be damaged – unless otherwise directed by individual park guidelines or where official facilities are provided within this distance.
- Horses should be tethered using lead ropes and headstalls – many horses have escaped into parks due to broken reins.
- Horses should not be held in areas set aside for use by groups other than horse riders, such as picnic grounds.

Soil compaction/erosion

Horse hooves can compact soil, preventing aeration and infiltration of water. This reduces soil viability. Horses passing through an area can also increase soil erosion and remove natural litter coverings.

A horse's impact on soils can be minimised in the following ways:

- Avoid riding during wet weather or in any area where soils are waterlogged. In these conditions the soil is more susceptible to erosion. In many parks, riding is prohibited during these times or in waterlogged places.
- When riding off-trail (where this is permitted), groups of riders should spread out so that impacts are not concentrated on a single path.
- Marking of off-trail riding routes is prohibited as this encourages others to follow the same route, which concentrates impacts.
- If training horses on park trails, do so by riding one or two times over a longer section of trail rather than by riding along a short section of trail a large number of times in quick succession. This helps stop impacts from becoming overly concentrated on small areas.

Damage to vegetation

Horses can damage vegetation through trampling and grazing. Trampling damage can be minimised by following the above guidelines for protecting soil and holding horses. Additional protection measures include:

- always avoiding sensitive areas such as bogs and moss beds
- never allowing horses to graze on small trees and shrubs as these can be easily killed.

Weeds

Weeds are plants out of place that can damage natural environments by reducing biodiversity and displacing native plants that provide food and habitat for animals. Any human, animal or vehicle movement through the natural environment has the potential to introduce and spread weeds. In particular, the seeds of many species of weed plants are adapted to stick to the fur of mammals or to be passed in their manure.

While the specific role that horses may play in the spread of weeds in the Australian bush is uncertain, checking a horse's coat and hooves for seeds before riding in a park is a simple way of ensuring weeds that attach to fur do not enter the park. The following precautionary measures also ensure your favourite riding spot is kept free of the weeds found in horse feed:

- Only bring weed-free feed into parks. This includes clean chaff, pellets and cracked, rolled or steamed grain. The plans of management of many parks prohibit hay. In parks where this is not the case, the only hay permitted is good-quality weed-free lucerne. Park staff may ask riders to leave the park if they possess hay that staff reasonably believe is unclean. If going on a long trip, make sure your horse is used to this diet before departing.
- Horses should be fed using nosebags. Feed is not to be spread on the ground and any spillages must be cleaned up.
- Scatter manure away from campsites and rest stops to speed up decomposition.
- It is recommended that horses be fed a weed-free diet (as outlined above) for two to four days prior to any extended trip into a park to reduce the risk of seeds being spread through manure.

Waterways

The presence of horses in or adjacent to waterways can cause bank erosion and reduction in water quality. The following steps can help minimise the likelihood of these impacts occurring:

- Where possible, cross streams at bridges or culverts rather than by fording.
- Where horses are taken to streams (to cross or to be watered) this must only be done where banks are hard and stony (and therefore erosion resistant) and downstream from campsites and other areas where water may be taken for human consumption.
- Horses must remain in the water for the minimum amount of time possible and should not be washed in streams or allowed to linger on banks.
- Where there are no suitably stable points for stream access, horses must be watered using buckets (canvas/collapsible buckets are generally the most practical).
- Tether horses at least 50 m from stream banks unless otherwise directed by individual park guidelines or facilities.

Camping with your horse

Overnight camping with horses is permitted in a small number of parks. Some of these parks have designated horse camps that may have yards for holding horses overnight. In others, riders and their horses may camp wherever they can find a suitable spot. Bookings may be required in some horse camps (the most popular of which can become quite busy at peak times). There may be restrictions on the number of horses allowed at each camp at any one time and on the length of time a single group may occupy a site. It is therefore essential to contact local park staff before embarking on an overnight trip with horses.

When camping with horses in parks, riders should adhere to the following guidelines:

- Hold horses overnight using yards where provided. Horses are not to be tied overnight to vegetation.
- Where yards are not provided, the preferred method of holding horses overnight is in temporary yards formed using portable electric fences. Use only low power energisers and make sure that electric fence warning signs are prominently displayed and that the horses involved are accustomed to electric fences.
- Light weight portable metal fencing and hobbles (either separately or in combination) are also acceptable ways of holding horses overnight. However, given that hobbles still allow the horse to wander, they should only be used on horses that can be adequately restrained by this method. In particular, the horse should not be able to wander to waterways or sensitive vegetation unsupervised while hobbled. Make sure horses are familiarised with hobbles in a safe environment before they are hobbled in the bush.
- Temporary yards should not include shrubs, small trees or other sensitive vegetation or features.
- Be sure to set up camp before dark so horses can get used to the new surroundings and don't panic during the night.
- Horses in temporary overnight yards should be given enough room to move to prevent impacts being concentrated on a small area. If using the same campsite for more than one night, relocate holding areas each night if noticeable impacts appear after the first night.
- Where horse camping is permitted outside of designated camp sites, it should be done in well-drained areas away from areas used for other recreational purposes, such as picnic grounds and non-horse camp sites. Don't stay in one spot for more than two nights in a row.
- When leaving campsites, scatter manure at least a few metres away from the site.

Using vehicles

All the normal road rules that apply on public roads apply to roads in parks, including provisions relating to horse-drawn vehicles and floats. It is recommended any horse-drawn vehicle have a driver and a passenger who are both capable of taking control of the vehicle in an emergency situation.

If an area of a park has no car-parking facilities sufficient to allow a float to be parked without causing obstruction or inconvenience to other park users, floats may be parked along roadsides. Floats must be parked safely in accordance with any signs or road markings and in a way that does not obstruct the road or damage any vegetation. Floats should not be cleaned out in parks except in areas where facilities for the disposal of manure are provided.

Group events

Parks can be great locations for a variety of group riding events ranging from informal rides for a few hours with a small group of friends to organised endurance rides and other club events. For many parks in which horse riding is allowed, the park's plan of management has a threshold on the number of horses allowed in a single group. For numbers over the threshold you must seek permission from the park authority. All parks also have a limit placed on the number of people in a single group in a park (this limit is 40 unless the relevant plan of management sets a different number). Park staff can give advice on what limits apply in a particular park and how to go about getting permission.

For formal group events, such as endurance rides, event organisers should contact park staff as far in advance as possible, but no later than four weeks before the planned event. They will need to ask for consent and to discuss matters such as how many people and horses are expected at the event and which trails they intend to use. Organisers must provide evidence of public liability insurance (to the value of \$10 million) and a risk assessment specific to the event. An administration fee and/or security deposit may be payable. Numbers of horses and people involved should be kept to a minimum in order to minimise impacts on the park environment. It is also a good idea to have a wet weather contingency plan as many trails will be closed or otherwise unusable in such conditions.

Permission for the event may also need to be sought from other bodies such as local councils, police, the Roads and Maritime Services and private landholders. If parks staff are satisfied the event meets all necessary criteria, consent may be granted. The consent should not be delayed while waiting for other organisations to consider it as this can lead to the process becoming unnecessarily bogged down while each organisation waits for the others to give consent first. Rather, parks staff should give consent contingent on the consent of all other relevant bodies being given.

Park staff regularly monitor the condition of trails and will not consent to a proposed event using a particular trail if, to their knowledge, it is environmentally unsuitable for the proposed event. However if event organisers find problems with the relevant trail in the lead-up to the event, such as fallen trees, they should discuss the matter with park staff rather than carrying out unauthorised maintenance work themselves. Vehicle access to roads not usually open to the public will not be given as part of the consent for riding events.

If event organisers wish to mark a route, this is to be done using non-damaging means, such as surveyor's tape, stakes along trails or signs tied (not nailed) to trees. All such markings must be removed following the completion of the event.

In addition to the requirements of organising a specific event, the Department of Primary Industries (DPI) has developed general regulations for tracking the movement of groups of horses. Event organisers should ensure they are aware of the current DPI rules that relate to their type of event.

Further details of the requirements for large-scale organised activities and commercial horse-riding operations is provided in the OEH Recreational Horse Riding Policy www.environment.nsw.gov.au/policies/index.htm