



Photos by Craig Hill/The News Tribune

A group poses for a picture in a meadow while hiking in Washington State’s Rainier National Park in August despite numerous signs asking visitors to stay on the trails to protect the fragile meadows.

Of manure, lake baths and found boots: hiking etiquette

The scoop on poop, and other trail advice

By CRAIG HILL
The News Tribune

TACOMA, Wash. — I was lying on a boulder at the base of a waterfall a few weeks ago when my mind started wandering to the subject of trail etiquette.

While I was relaxing, my hiking buddy was fording his way up a river in the Gifford Pinchot National Forest trying to find a family that had made off with his hiking boots.

My question: What exactly should you do if you stumble across a pair of hiking boots in the backcountry?

It’s not as if a hiker is likely to get home from a trip and think, “Man, it seems like I forgot something. And why do my feet hurt?”

So, before I dozed off, I made a mental note to run that question by an expert.

More on that in a second. It wasn’t the only scenario I was wondering about, so I dug up some answers for those too.

Manure Maneuvers

Scenario: A hiker recently told me she was bothered by the trail to Packwood Lake. She said it seemed as if she spent more than half the hike maneuvering around manure. Why is it acceptable for horses to leave trail apples, but dog owners are expected to clean up after their animals?

Etiquette: The Backcountry Horsemen of Washington encourages Leave No Trace principles, said Karen Johnson, director of the Capitol Riders.

The scoop on poop, according to the organization, is to disperse manure piles at the trailhead and camps. This helps the manure deteriorate faster. Horsemen are also encouraged to carry manure away from campsites for aesthetic reasons.

But the guide doesn’t address leaving deposits on the trail.

Why? It seems to come down to the fact that when riding on a horse, the animal’s offending end is out of view. It’s not uncommon for riders to be unaware that their horses are taking care of business.

“It is really hard to do when you are out there riding,” Johnson said. “We try to be conscientious.”

Some horse riding organizations encourage riders to keep moving when their beasts are bombing the trail. This keeps the manure



A sign on a trail system in Boise, Idaho, explains who has the right of way on trails. Everybody yields to horses. Bikes yield to everybody.

from piling up and allows it to more quickly decompose.

How to pass a horse

Scenario: Speaking of horses, what if you’re moving up or down a narrow trail and encounter one of these creatures. It’s accepted trail etiquette that all trail users yield to horses and mountain bikers yield to all users. But what is the safest way to pass a horse?

Etiquette: Safely passing a horse starts before you see the animal, especially if you are on a bike.

Slow down at blind corners and areas where you can’t see ahead to avoid startling other trail users, Johnson said. When you see a horse, calmly speak to the rider. This helps the horse understand you aren’t a threat.

If somebody needs to step off the trail onto a durable surface to make enough room to pass, the horse gets the trail and the other trail user should use the downhill side of the trail.

“It is very unsafe for the horse to pass with something above them because they think anything above them might be a predator type thing,” Johnson said. “The horse would tend to want to move away from the person or the object they consider scary, and they could go down the slope.”

fort level. I’ve seen people address their fellow hikers in these situations using a polite manner that avoided confrontation.

And I’ve seen it get ugly.

But even with rangers and volunteers patrolling the area and talking to these people, parks don’t have enough manpower to interact with everybody who leaves the trail.

“Sometimes it seems like I’m stopping every 30 seconds to ask people to get off the meadows,” said Rachel Jantzi, a backcountry ranger at Mount Rainier. “People even pose right behind a sign because they think it’s funny.”

“I think a lot of people think, ‘Well, it’s just me.’ It’s not just you. It’s a lot of people stepping in that spot. That area will be bare for up to 10 years while the vegetation comes back. . It is a lack of respect for the meadows and conserving the area. But who knows what’s going through their minds.”

About those boots

Scenario: You’re playing deep in the backcountry when you stumble across a pair of hiking boots. Leave them or take them?

Etiquette: My friend had stashed his boots while we explored a river in the Goat Rocks Wilderness. When we returned a few hours later the boots were gone.

Luckily another hiker informed us that a family was making their way out of the wilderness with his boots. My friend headed after them.

As I pondered what I’d do if I came across a pair of abandoned boots in the wilderness, I decided I’d probably leave them but notify a ranger. (Even if they were really nice and my size.)

I posed the question to Jantzi. She said, “I’d look around, but if they are clearly abandoned I’d hike them out and take them to our office. But I think the most important thing is to locate somebody. You don’t want to deprive somebody of their only shoes out in the backcountry.”

Jantzi said she’d also notify other rangers in the area. By returning the boots to the nearest ranger station, the person who lost them has a good chance of finding them. And by letting the rangers know where the boots were found, the rangers have valuable information should it later be determined they need to search for the boots’ owner.

If it was a loaded backpack, Jantzi said she’d leave it (because she’d likely already be carrying her own pack) and notify rangers of its location.

After about 20 minutes, my friend returned with his boots. What’s the lesson we learned? Next time, find a better place to stash the boots.

Lakes aren’t baths

Scenario: ESPN recently reported that Alabama football coach Nick Saban takes a bar of soap and bathes in the lake when he stays at his vacation home. Is that acceptable behavior for football royalty and campers?

Etiquette: When it comes to water quality, you probably shouldn’t follow the lead of a guy who prefers his tides to be crimson. Bathing in lakes and rivers is an acceptable practice when camping and backpacking. But using soaps, shampoos (even the so-called environmentally safe varieties) and other cleaners is a no-no.

If you need to soap up, take some water and your soap at least 200 feet from the nearest water source.

Stay on the trail

Scenario: Hiking in an area such as Paradise or Sunrise at Mount Rainier National Park you see visitors ignoring the many signs asking them to stay on the trail to avoid damaging the fragile meadows. Should you say something to these people?

Etiquette: This one comes down your com-

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