

Sharing The Roads of Warner

As I write this, Warner is enjoying absolutely fabulous weather, hopefully a promise of what Fall will bring. Like many residents, I'm looking forward to watching Mother Nature's color show, smelling the earthy scent of fallen leaves, enjoying perfect Warner Fall Foliage Festival weather, and seeing the end of bug season.

Like some Warner residents, I'm also a horse owner. For equestrians, this is a very popular time to go pleasure riding (hacking). Show season is over, training demands can be put aside, and the nuisance bugs that like to eat our equine friends disappear until next Spring. Now is the time many of us hit the trails. And since Warner doesn't have much of a trail network, we also hit the roads in Warner, both for hacking and for getting to & from local trails.

Sharing the roads with horses is what I wish to talk about. Horseback riders and horse-drawn carriages are allowed on the roads in New Hampshire. However, while most people understand how to share the road with tractor drivers, plow operators, motorcyclists, bicyclists, joggers, dog walkers, mothers with baby carriages, skateboarders, and even Segway riders, many lack a basic understanding about the nature of horses which can enable safer sharing of the roads with these big animals. As a professional horsewoman, allow me to offer some insights which should help everyone.

What Vehicle Drivers Should Know About Horses

Even though the horse was domesticated over 6,000 years ago, they're still very much a prey animal. Their natural programming keeps them alert to the ever possible presence of predators. And size of the predator doesn't matter. A cute fuzzy little kitten can spook a 1500 pound horse right out of his skin.

As a prey animal hunted by predators for over 45 million years, the horse has developed the lifesaving ability to notice the most subtle changes in their environment. They are quick to assess if danger lurks. At the very least, a horse may stop and have a look at something suspicious. At worst, a horse may suddenly take off, galloping for his life. Cornered, a horse may even fight, kicking out at the perceived source of danger. This is all part of the basic instincts of the species.

Despite this, man discovered that through positive experience and use of repetition and habituation, horses can adapt to very unnatural situations, seemingly putting their instincts aside. It is the well-trained, safe, reliable riding horse that's a joy to hack and the easiest with whom to share the road.

As you pass these horses on the road, the horse doesn't even seem to notice your vehicle. Engine, muffler, radio, and tire noise don't bother him, the sight of something bigger than him doesn't faze him, and the little shift in wind as you drive past has no effect.

It can take months or years to train a horse to be this perfectly calm about road work. Time and consistently good experiences are needed. For the young and less experienced horses, riding with more experienced horses helps progress that training.

As a driver approaching a horse on the road, it is difficult, if not impossible, to assess the level of experience of the horse, predict how he will react to your vehicle, and take in everything else happening

within the vicinity of the horse. If the horse steps off the pavement onto the soft shoulder, will he slip and become fearful? Is a dog about to start barking or jump out in front of the horse? Will an acorn fall and hit the horse between the ears just as you drive by? Will the leaf raking activity at the next house cause the horse to stop, turn, and look, placing his hind end right into your path of travel? So many variables, probably more so than with any other road sharer.

When approaching a horse on the road, the safest thing to do is simple. Slow down. Then, observing both the horse and rider, pass slow and wide. Watch for signs indicating the horse and rider may need you to take extra care. These may include:

- Rider using hands signals to indicate "Please Slow Down" or "Please Stop"
- Rider tightening the reins, possibly trying to gain better control of the horse
- Horse suddenly changing his position or angle on the road
- Horse stopping, moving sideways, stepping backwards, bucking, or rearing
- Horse suddenly lifting his head and neck quite high, possibly snorting
- Horse speeding up (instead of slowing down) as you approach

As a vehicle driver, another thing to keep in mind when approaching any horse & rider is that some of the riders in Warner are quite young. Without driving experience of their own, they may not yet appreciate your perspective as a vehicle operator. A bit of patience with the rider can make all the difference.

Advice for Horse Riders on Warner's Roads

Horse riders sharing the roads in Warner also need to consider their responsibilities and how they can help prevent any horse-related road accidents or incidents.

First and foremost, BE VISIBLE! Despite their size, horses are not always easy to see. I have one horse who blends in nicely with Fall foliage and another who can easily disappear amongst the shadows. And of course a white horse becomes less noticeable when ridden in the snow. When riding on the road, horse riders should wear high visibility and reflective clothing. Even when keeping to the trails, wearing high visibility clothing is wise, especially during hunting season. Our local feed stores sell products specifically designed to help both horse and rider be as visible as possible.

When planning to ride out on the roads, consider the weather and the position of the sun. Vehicle operators are less likely to notice you easily and quickly if it's raining or snowing, or when they are driving directly towards a rising or setting sun. Also, for safety sake, stay off the roads altogether when the snow plows and sand trucks are doing their jobs. After the storm is over and the roads are cleared, feel free to hit the roads, but always remain conscious of the width and condition of the road as other road users approach.

Next, unless your horse is completely reliable in traffic, keep to the roads which have slower speed limits. Drivers traveling at lower speeds will have more time to notice you and react accordingly. When riding along sharp bends in the road or in areas where there are "blind spots", be extra vigilant. Some of the worst accidents occur due to a lack of reaction time.

Riding with a cell phone, just in case you need it, is a smart thing to do. However, please don't chat on the phone while riding on the roads! Stay focused on controlling your horse, listening and watching out for other road users, and staying safe.

If your horse is not yet reliable on the roads, ride with other horses who are. Horses learn from the leaders in their herd and this can apply to road work as well. The less experienced horse should either be ridden between the leader and the shoulder of the road, thus limiting his ability to jump into oncoming traffic, or right behind the lead horse with another experienced horse behind him.

While trotting on the roads can be great fun, whenever a vehicle approaches, do consider returning to the walk. This may alert the driver to the fact that you are being more cautious about sharing the road, while also putting you in a better position to control your horse should something go wrong.

If you feel the need, you can try to use hand signals to communicate with vehicle drivers and other road users. However, not all of them will "listen" or take heed to your requests for them to slow down, stop, or pass wide. When they do, thank them! Smile, nod, offer a polite wave.

As all horse owners know, horses can poo anywhere from 30 to 40 pounds a day, most of which is water with some chewed hay, and which quickly dries to a much lighter weight. Most manure will be delivered at home. However, horses tend to poo whenever, wherever, and especially when they feel a bit nervous. If that happens to be right in front of someone's driveway, for example, consider dismounting and kicking the fresh road apples into a less obnoxious location or maybe returning soon after your ride to scoop them up. A little courtesy can go a long way.

Should you have the unfortunate experience of encountering road rage or other forms of hostility from other road users, let the Warner Police Department know. They are well versed in both "RSA 265:5 Persons Riding Animals; Driving Animal-Drawn Vehicles" which states horses are allowed on the roads, and "RSA 265:104 Approaching Horses" which says vehicle operators must take reasonable precautions to avoid frightening horses on the road, insuring the safety and protection of the person riding.

Finally, whenever you are riding on Warner's roads, please wear a helmet. If the worse does happen and you hit the pavement or anything else, I'd personally like to see you live to tell about it later.

Enjoy the upcoming bug free seasons and glorious weather, stay visible, and be safe & courteous when sharing Warner's roads.

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About Kimberley:

Kimberley has been riding, training, and showing horses since 1970. While living in the United Kingdom, she received Road Safety training from the perspective of the equestrian as well as the perspective of a Heavy Goods Vehicle (HGV) driver. Kimberley and her husband Georg immigrated to Warner in 2005 and own and operate Kearsarge Meadows, the horse boarding and training facility on Kearsarge Mountain Road.