

Horse Sense on the Roads.

Motorists, cyclists, pedestrians and **horse riders** all have a right to use the road. They also share a responsibility to consider each other's needs. This site has been created to help all road users understand the special requirements of horses and their riders, and to remind horse riders about safe riding practices on the roads.



About Horses

Unlike any other 'vehicle' on the road, a horse is a living, breathing animal with instincts, thoughts and feelings. They outweigh and outmuscle their riders, often by a factor of 10x or more. Through training and trust, a horse can perform amazing tasks for its rider, but it is also a timid and fragile creature by nature.

Why Horses React to Traffic

The horse's main mechanism for survival is flight; it is a prey animal that runs from any perceived danger. This flight instinct is often triggered by the horse's keen senses of hearing and eyesight. Even though horses have been domesticated for nearly 6000 years, this doesn't override millions of years of instinctive behaviour.



The Horse's Senses

A horse has amazing senses that in many ways outstrip any human's, but they are not the same as ours. When both sight and hearing senses are affected the horse is much more likely to react e.g. a flapping tarp on a trailer is both noisy and fast moving. Like most animal's the horse also has a very good sense of smell, this can also trigger reactions to things that we as humans cannot see or sense.

Eyesight

Horses do actually need to move their heads up and down in order to use their eyesight effectively, when being ridden they are often stopped from doing this and therefore take more cues from their rider (and have to trust them).

Designed for scanning the horizon and detecting predators

- A horse's eyesight is designed to scan wide areas for fast moving objects, a horse can see almost 360 degrees!
- However, horse eyesight is not very focused. There is only a small area of binocular vision in front of the horse, which starts from about 2m in front of the horse.

Horse Sense on the Roads.

- One of the places that horses have trouble seeing (with their head up) is their own feet and lower legs

Light conditions matter

- A horse has difficulty seeing in bright sunlight (although very good eyesight in low light and at night).
- A horse has difficulty with high-contrast between light and shadow. It cannot tell shadows from a 'real' object. To a horse black and white stripes on a road look the same as a cattle grid or even a bridge with gaps between the steps. This is why a horse may be frightened of an object it has seen many times; changes in light make the object completely different!!
- A horse's eyes react slowly to changes in light (moving from shadow to bright light or vice-versa). A human eye adjusts in a few seconds, a horse's eye takes minutes.

Designed to move first and ask questions later

- A horse is almost hardwired to react (move its feet) to fast moving objects in it's vision area. It must be trained to not instantly react, but any training is always at odds with the horse's instinct.
- Like most animals, a horse is a natural athlete with reaction times faster than a human's (this is where the first point comes in, humans think then react, animals react then think. They don't need the 2 second rule!)
- To escape a predator it doesn't matter which way you run or leap, as long as you do it quickly. This is bad news if the oncoming predator is a car or bike, a horse is almost as likely to leap into the traffic as away from it. It is not a human - it doesn't have our intelligence or traffic sense to know that the thing it saw coming at it will stay on the road.

Hearing

- A horse has extremely good hearing, and can hear many noises that we cannot.
 - They hear both in higher and lower pitch ranges than humans, and can swivel each ear independently over 180 degrees to focus on noises in any direction.
 - Windy conditions often make horses nervous, because they lose the ability to hear well above the wind noise (and everything is moving fast).
-

About Riders

Many people have misconceptions about horse riders, some of these misconceptions may come from rider behaviour which may seem strange or offputting to non-riders. The rider you meet may be a pensioner on a tight budget, a farm worker, a working mum, a schoolchild, a banker or executive. Horse riders and owners come from a wide variety of backgrounds, age groups, and experience. Everything a rider does and even thinks (because thoughts unconsciously change our muscles, not because horse's are psychic) is transmitted to the horse. Even through the saddle a horse feels the riders body, where the weight it positioned (even which way a riders head is looking), and whether the rider is calm or nervous. So most rider behaviour is about communicating with the horse, to keep them, the rider and everyone in the vicinity safe.

- A rider sitting tall in the saddle is not trying to be superior to others, this is the best balanced riding position. It distributes the riders weight evenly on the horse, and the rider carries some of his\her own weight instead of sitting heavily on the horse's back.
- Because the horse can tell how the rider is feeling, many riders learn to bluff well. When the horse is nervous the rider puts on an air of total confidence and the horse

Horse Sense on the Roads.

will be happy to follow the orders of this 'leader'. This may include a loud voice or apparent minimisation of others concerns (voicing what they are wanting the horse to feel - "that's nothing, walk on!").

- Because horses follow the orders of strong leaders (in their own herd) a good tap with a whip or loud confident voice may be used to tell the horse to ignore their fears. This is not because the rider doesn't care for the horse or is a generally uncaring person, this is all about conveying confidence to the horse. Riders are like sergeant-majors in the army, potentially they are outmuscled by all the army recruits but their swagger and loud voice means they are rarely challenged - even when the recruit is scared, he does what he is told believing the sergeant-major will not get him killed.
- Sometimes motorists or others may be offended if the rider does not give them a wave of thanks or acknowledgement. In some situations the rider is in more danger than may be apparent to those on the ground (sitting on an unexploded bomb). Both hands may be required, and the rider may need to keep looking away from the danger (a horse will look where the rider is looking) and pushing the horse forward. All riders should be able to thank you for courtesy shown, but they may be busy trying to make sure that you, and they, remain uninjured.