

Pedal, Paddle and Hike

By Trent Carbaugh

Not all who wander are lost – J.R.R. Tolkien

A Primer of Trail Etiquette on the C&O Canal – And Some Other Useful Information

The National Park Service has a well thought-out set of rules for the use of the C&O Canal towpath. It is wise, at times, for all users of the towpath to review these rules for everyone's safety. There are also things that are not in the rules that you should strive do as well when conditions warrant. The main thing is to be respectful of other towpath users even if they are not respectful to you. Reviewing the rules is also important as the demographic of towpath users is changing; bicyclists are now the biggest user group. This will only increase as dedicated trail systems grow across the country and folks are making longer trips by bicycle.

All trails throughout the United States pretty much have the same rules as the C&O, though there are fewer trails where you will encounter horses and mules. In a quick search I could find no trails, other than a few dedicated mountain bike trails, that are bicycle only.

The C&O is unique in that it is a National Historical Park on a major river. This means that you can encounter everything from local fishermen to bike touring travelers from anywhere in the world. All of these people need to get along, and usually do. Unfortunately, there are plenty of users of the canal who don't know or understand the rules and this can cause problems. Hopefully this article will help to alleviate this discrepancy. Effectively, trail rules are guidelines; circumstances dictate what you should or should not do. Everyone should use common sense in unusual situations and always try to err on the side of safety.

The Rules per the National Park Service

Right of Way Rules

Words after bold text are my commentary and advice.

1. **Horses and their riders always have the right of way over walkers and bicyclists.** Horses, on a narrow pathway like the towpath, take up quite a bit of space. They take up more space, often randomly with biting teeth and flailing hooves, when they are spooked by walkers and bicyclists. Always try not to startle horses.

2. **Walkers have the right of way over bicyclists.** If you are walking, be alert for bicyclists overtaking you from behind or in front from around curves in the trail and stay to the right. This includes everyone in a group; scattering randomly all over the towpath is not safe for anyone. Runners should act like bicyclists when overtaking walkers and should use a verbal warning when approaching from behind.
3. **Bicyclists need to give verbal or mechanical (bell) warning when overtaking walkers and slower bicyclists.** When overtaking walkers, verbally warn or sound your bell when approaching or both. Do this far enough away to not surprise walkers and be sure your approach is noticed. Be extra cautious if you are riding a wide wheelbase recumbent bike or upright trike.
4. **Stay to the right of the towpath except when passing.** Be mindful of other users. Birders, photographers, and similar users may be distracted and in your way. Always try to safely move around them or wait for them to move.

Hiking

Several park areas have interpretive trails and other hiking opportunities. Aside from the towpath, there are many great hiking trails in the park: the Tunnel Hill Trail near the Paw Paw Tunnel, the Ferry Hill Trail near Sharpsburg, as well as 14 miles of trail near Great Falls.

1. **Bring food and water.** Hydration is important. Even on short outings bring water. It is also wise to have an energy bar or more with you just in case.
2. **Wear sturdy footwear.** The towpath can be a rough place in some locations. Good waterproof hiking boots or shoes can mean the difference between an unpleasant slog or an enjoyable trip. In winter conditions consider carrying ice creepers and a trekking pole/walking stick with you.
3. **Be prepared for changing weather conditions.** On some parts of the C&O it is possible to be rained on, snowed on, and blown over by high winds all on the same afternoon. Check local weather forecasts and carry at least a lightweight rain jacket or poncho. Adjust your gear for weather and time of year.

4. **Know your location.** Keep a mental note of the mileposts that you pass. If you or someone else needs help this allows you to locate yourself when getting help.
5. **Share the towpath with other users.** See previous comments.
6. **Pack out all trash. Trash bags are provided at dispensers located throughout the park.** Always, always practice *Leave No Trace* practices. If you can carry it in, you can certainly carry it out. See sidebar.

Biking

Bicycle riding is permitted on the canal towpath, Western Maryland Rail Trail, Capital Crescent Trail, and Berma Road – biking is not permitted on hiking trails or off trail. The surface of the towpath is for the most part an even hard-packed dirt trail. The towpath can be very muddy following heavy rain. Bicyclists should carry tools for repairs.

1. **15 mph maximum speed limit on towpath.** Keep your speed down. Hitting someone with a bike is not good for you, your bike, and especially not for the person you hit. Hitting a horse will also not go well at all for you. In some areas it is also possible to be in a position where you may have to avoid hitting wildlife. Hitting a thirty pound snapping turtle at speed will ruin your day and your bike. Should you encounter park maintenance workers, especially when they are using heavy equipment to cut grass, weeds, or brush along the towpath, let them tell you when it is safe to pass.
2. **Ride single file.** This should be self explanatory, but if folks aren't paying attention riding side by side can cause some unpleasantness. Also keep in mind that poor weather conditions can cause slipping and

skidding and if you are too close to another bicycle, mayhem may ensue.

3. **Stay to the right except when passing.** See previous comments.
4. **Yield right of way to all pedestrians, horses, and mules.** See previous comments.
5. **Walk bikes over aqueducts.** Towpath surfaces of aqueducts are narrow and often polished by use, making them slippery, especially when wet or damp. Attempting to pass another bike or walker on an aqueduct is just plain foolishness. Walk your bike.

Sound devices (bell, horn, etc.) are recommended and should be sounded within 100' of approaching others.

Helmets required in accordance with county ordinances. Children under the age of 18 are required to wear helmets in Montgomery County, Md., and children under the age of 16 are required to wear helmets in other areas of the park.

E-Bikes

E-bikes are allowed in the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park where traditional bicycles are allowed. E-bikes are prohibited where traditional bicycles are prohibited, except where use of motor vehicles by the public is allowed. Using the electric motor to move an e-bike without pedaling is prohibited. The term e-bike means a two- or three- wheeled cycle with fully operable pedals and an electric motor of less than 750 watts (1 horsepower).

Trail areas where the e-bikes are allowed include the towpath, Berma Road, and the C&O Canal NHP section of the Capital Crescent Trail. A person operating an e-bike is subject to the following sections of *Code of Federal Regulations 36 CFR Part 4* that apply to the use of traditional bicycles: Sections 4.12, 4.13, 4.20, 4.21, 4.22, 4.23, and 4.30(h)(2)-(5).

The Seven Principles of Leave No Trace

1. *Plan Ahead & Prepare*
2. *Travel & Camp on Durable Surfaces*
3. *Dispose of Waste Properly*
4. *Leave What You Find*
5. *Minimize Campfire Impacts*
6. *Respect Wildlife*
7. *Be Considerate of Other Visitors*

Leave No Trace principles may seem like something that applies only to wilderness travel in remote areas. This is not the case. They apply everywhere, from your backyard to the remotest wilderness you can imagine. They are especially important in an environment like the C&O Canal with a high volume of traffic.

These Seven Principles are put forth by the Center for Outdoor Ethics to guide users of the outdoors in how to conduct themselves in a manner that leaves as little impact on the environment as possible. With more and more folks getting out and enjoying the outdoors in various ways, these guidelines are becoming not only a good choice but an imperative one.

Leave No Trace was incorporated as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization in 1994, though the Forest Service developed the concept in the 1960's. In the 1990's the Forest Service and the National Outdoor Leadership School worked to develop "hands-on, science based minimum impact education training for non-motorized recreational activities" to quote from the Leave No Trace website.

Except as specified in the *Superintendent's Compendium*, the use of an e-bike within Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park is governed by state law, which is adopted and made a part of the compendium. Any violation of state law adopted by this paragraph is prohibited. The maximum speed on designated routes within the park is 15 mph.

Horseback Riding

Horseback riding is a unique way to enjoy the canal. Horses are not for rent along the canal but there are opportunities for horse owners to enjoy the park.

For the most up to date regulations on group overnight rides, please consult the *Superintendent's Compendium* Section 2.16, which specifically addresses horses in the park.

1. Horseback riding is not allowed between Georgetown (Mile 0) and Swains Lock (Mile 16.6) or from Offutt Street (Mile 181.8) to the canal terminus (Mile 184.5). Horses are not allowed in the Paw Paw Tunnel. Riders must take the tunnel hill trail that goes over the tunnel instead.
2. Riders may not exceed the speed of a slow trot.
3. Riders must dismount and walk their horses across aqueducts. Horses may not cross wooden footbridges, which are not designed to carry their weight.
4. Trail riders are responsible for hauling manure away. No grazing is permitted in the park. Bring in feed for horses. Do not water, clean, or tether horses near park wells. **Hikers and bikers must yield the right of way to horses on the towpath.** Access from private property is prohibited. Horses are not allowed

in drive-in campgrounds, picnic areas, or adjacent parking lots. Riders may camp at hiker-biker campgrounds but must tether horses at least 50 feet from the area's boundaries for sanitary and safety reasons. Owners must prevent horses from damaging trees or undergrowth.

Other Animals

Dogs are allowed in most park areas, but are required to keep their humans on a leash no longer than 6 feet in length. Some areas, such as Billy Goat Trail A, are closed to pets. Service animals are permitted without exception.

Trail Users with Disabilities

Many sections of the C&O Canal towpath are accessible to wheelchairs and adapted bicycles. Wheelchair users can use the trails along with "racing chairs" (wheelchairs adapted for sporting use), or a powered chair with wheels or caterpillar treads. Wheelchairs are about twice as wide as a bicycle and are less maneuverable than a bicycle.

Please be aware that a trail user with a disability may not have an obvious handicap. They may have hearing or vision problems. Some may have a problem with their balance.

Trail users with a disability may need an extra bit of courtesy when they interact with horses and riders, bicycles, and groups of walkers since they cannot ambulate without the vehicle, so they can't yield off the trail.

General Hiking Guidance from the NPS Website

Hiking is one of the best ways to spend time in the great outdoors. With more than 400 national parks across the country, the opportunities to get out and take a hike are nearly

Bike Bells

Bells, though recommended, are not required on the C&O Canal towpath. As stated in the conclusion of *Recognizability and Perceived Urgency of Bicycle Bells*, (a scientific paper by Frohmann, Weger, and Holdrich, of the University of Music and Performing Arts, Graz Austria), the best bicycle bell is one that sounds like a bicycle bell. This is not as silly as it sounds. This conclusion was reached by testing different types of bells and horns in both soundproof rooms and in traffic. These bells were evaluated with both instrumentation and test subjects in traffic. What these intrepid music scientists found was the response of listeners was more of a psychological nature than just a physical warning. The "briing briing" or "ding ding" sound of a classic bike bell was associated *with actually* being an approaching bicycle. Sounds that were louder or perceived as better in some way acoustically but did not sound like a bike bell were perceived as "something else," causing slower response times on the testers. Granted this study was done in Austria, and Europeans are much more cognizant of bicycle traffic rules, but I think it says a lot. (Note that this was the only scientific research that I could find on the subject.)

The simple thing is bike bells work, they are inexpensive, and fun to use.



Far left – Classic "briing briing" bell by bike accessory company Zefal. Cost is about five dollars. Near left – "Ring type" bell has a very pleasant "ding ding" sound. These are about 10 to 15 dollars from your preferred internet merchant. Right – My personal favorite – the Incredibell Spring. This bell mounts to the stem cap of your two wheeled conveyance. It makes a "ding ding" sound that is louder if you push the spring mounted striker harder. It's about 20 dollars at your local bike shop.



endless. Whether you're hiking alone or in a group, be sure to follow the written and unwritten rules of the trail. Proper hiking etiquette helps instill respect for other trail users, and it promotes stewardship of the land.

The best thing you can do when hiking is to remember the "golden rule": treat others the way you would want to be treated.

Here are some main points of hiking etiquette:

Know your right of way. Check signage for the trail you are hiking, and follow the correct right of way yields. Signs may vary from park to park, but these are the general guidelines of yielding on the trail.

Hikers coming uphill have the right of way. If you're descending the trail, step aside and give space to the people climbing up.

Bicyclists yield to hikers and horses or other pack stock. Come to a full stop and step to the side to give the right of way. Be mindful of the plants or animals that are near the trail if you must step off the trail. Bicyclists should always ride within their abilities. Before your visit, check individual park regulations to see if biking is allowed.

Hikers yield to horses and other pack stock. Slowly and calmly step off to the downhill side of a trail. If you approach from behind, calmly announce your presence and intentions. Horses and other pack stock can frighten easily, so avoid sudden movements or loud noises.

Make yourself known. When you encounter other hikers and trail users, offer a friendly "hello" or a simple head nod as a greeting and acknowledgment. This helps create a friendly atmosphere on the trail. If you approach another trail user from behind, announce yourself in a friendly, calm tone and let him/her know you want to pass.

Stay on the trail. Don't step off trail unless you absolutely must when yielding. Going off trail can damage or kill certain plant or animal species, and can hurt the ecosystems that surround the trail. Always practice *Leave No Trace* principles: Leave rocks, vegetation, and artifacts where you find them for others to enjoy.

Do not disturb wildlife. They need their space, and you need yours, too. Keep your distance from the wildlife you encounter. Some parks require you to stay a certain distance from wildlife, so check park regulations before your visit. Never leave the trail

to try and get a closer look at an animal because it can hurt the habitat and the animal and put you in danger. For more information about safely viewing wildlife, check out *7 Ways to Safely Watch Wildlife*.

Be mindful of trail conditions. If a trail is too wet and muddy, turn back and save the hike for another day. Using a muddy trail can be dangerous, damage the trail's condition, and damage the ecosystems that surround the trail.

Take time to listen. When hiking in the great outdoors, let nature do all the talking. Be respectful of both nature and the other users, and keep the noise from electronic devices at bay. Not only will other visitors appreciate the peace and quiet, but so will the wildlife. Many wildlife species rely on natural sounds for communication purposes, and disrupting those sounds can hurt their chances of survival.

Be aware of your surroundings. Always be aware of your surroundings when hiking in our national parks. It will help keep you and any members of your group safe, and it will help keep wildlife and their habitats safe and healthy. Know the rules for *Hiking in Bear Country* and know what to do if you encounter a bear on the trail.

These are some hiking etiquette guidelines that will help you have a safe, fun, and relaxing trip next time you go hiking in a national park. When in doubt about something just remember the "golden rule" — treat other trail users how you want to be treated, and respect the wildlife and lands of our great national parks.

Some Things to Remember That Are Just Common Sense and Courteous

- » If you are on a bicycle and are approaching a large group of walkers consider dismounting and walking past them. This can save all concerned a bit of trouble or prevent an accident.
- » If you want to use the towpath for speed training on your bike – please go somewhere else. The 15 mph speed limit is there for a reason; don't be a safety hazard to other park users or yourself.
- » Carry a small first aid kit, and if you take regular medications it is also wise to have extra with you just in case.
- » Don't give park maintenance staff any trouble for doing their job. Their tasks are hard enough as it is.
- » Be cautious around fishermen; fishing rods and distracted casting can be a hazard.

» The C&O Canal is not a place to play loud music; use your ear buds and be aware that your hearing will be compromised. If you like to walk or ride listening to music consider a rear view mirror for your bike or helmet. Walkers can use a bicycle type helmet mounted mirror clipped to a hat for the same purpose.



Emergency Information

For law enforcement or emergency services call **911**

NPS 24 hour emergency number **866-677-6677**

Report hazards on the park at **CHOH_Hazards@nps.gov**

References and Internet Resources

Towpath Guide to the C&O Canal (revised edition), Thomas F. Hahn, Harpers Ferry Historical Association, Harpers Ferry, W.Va. 2015

Chesapeake and Ohio Canal Official National Park Handbook, C&O Canal Association, 2015

Recognizability And Perceived Urgency Of Bicycle Bells, Lisa Frohmann, Marian Weger, Robert Holdrich, Institute for Electronic Music and Acoustics (IEM), University of Music and Performing Arts, Graz, Austria, Scientific Paper, 2018

Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historic Park – www.nps.gov/choh/index.htm

National Park Service – www.nps.gov

Superintendent's Compendium – www.nps.gov/choh/learn/management/superintendent-s-compendium.htm

Code of Federal Regulations 36 CFR Part 4 – www.govinfo.gov/app/details/CFR-2000-title36-vol1/CFR-2000-title36-vol1-part4

Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics – www.LNT.org.

7 Ways to Safely Watch Wildlife – www.nps.gov/subjects/watchingwildlife/7ways.htm

Hiking in Bear Country – www.nps.gov/articles/hiking-in-bear-country.htm

MIPS Protection, developers of the Multi-directional Impact Protection System – www.mipsprotection.com

And many thanks to Grace Zarate for being my head wear model.

Helmets

When you are born you are issued with one head, (only one, you can't return it and get another). Your head contains many important things that you need to stay alive. Protect your head.

According to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission in 2013, U.S. emergency rooms treated 78,740 bicycle head related injuries, 13,597 of these were concussions.

Any Department of Transportation approved bicycle helmet will provide protection, but not all helmets are created equal. Bike helmet technology is changing due to better research into head injuries, vastly improved testing methods and innovative design. The best bike helmets currently on the market now are Multi-Directional Impact Protection System (MIPS) helmets. Research has shown that rotational forces involved in a bike crash can do some really bad things to your brain. The MIPS system was devised to alleviate this by acting like your skull and brain act during an impact. If you take a blow to the head, especially one that involves rotational motion, the slight fluid layer between the interior of your skull and your brain slide slightly in opposition and this motion absorbs the energy safely. A MIPS helmet duplicates this wonder of evolution and adapts it to higher speeds. A liner/support system allows the foam lined shell of the helmet to rotate slightly during impact absorbing energy as well as protecting your noggin from straight-line impacts from any other direction. Also keep in mind if you should crash and your helmet does its job of keeping your head in one piece you should replace it. A serious crash usually damages a helmet past the point where it will continue to protect you.

Get a helmet, wear it, protect the only head you'll ever have.



Giro Fixture MIPS helmet, note the yellow MIPS trademark logo. A good helmet is designed to protect the back and sides of your of your head from straight line impact and the MIPS system protects you from rotational impact.