

North London Outdoor Group

Fact Sheet 5: Walking in Britain

As North London Outdoor Group introduces people to walking in the countryside and on the hills, we would like everyone to be aware of walkers' rights and responsibilities.

a) Where you can walk

Roads

We try to plan walks to avoid walking on roads as far as possible but sometimes we need to walk on roads with no footpath or verge.

- In this case, the Highway Code advises walkers to walk in single file on the right so as to face oncoming traffic.
- It also states "It may be safer to cross the road well before a sharp right-hand bend so that oncoming traffic has a better chance of seeing you. Cross back after the bend."
- For safety, where there is through traffic it is important that everyone should be on the *same* side of the road in single file behind the walk leader.



Public Rights of Way

We walk on public footpaths, bridleways and other routes with public access as much as possible.

A public right of way is a route which you have a right to walk along but *it may not be a visible path on the ground* and there may be other more obvious paths or tracks that are not rights of way. The walk leader will lead the way but it should be noted that:



- There is no 'right to roam' in most lowland parts of England and Wales so we need to keep to the exact route of the right of way across farm land.
- Most rights of way are only wide enough for two people to pass so if you walk more than two abreast then someone isn't on the right of way.



Landowners may hold the walk leader responsible if a party of walkers strays off the right of way. The walk leader may need to pause to study the map from time to time so please do not go ahead of the walk leader unless the walk leader agrees and you are sure of which way to go.

Open Access land.

Open access land is marked on 1:25,000 Ordnance Survey maps.



Many areas of unfenced hill country in England and Wales are 'open access' land where you do have a 'right to roam'.

In lowland country some commons and woodland are 'open access' but most woodlands and fields are **not** 'open access' so we need to keep to rights of way.

b) Walkers' responsibilities - lowland country.

Since 2004, the Countryside Code states:

- Be safe - plan ahead and follow any signs
- Leave gates and property as you find them
- Protect plants and animals, and take your litter home
- Keep dogs under close control
- Consider other people

For full details of the Countryside Code see: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-countryside-code>

Gates.



Anyone who opens a gate should make sure that the last person knows whether the gate was open or closed and that they can fasten it properly. Walkers should not climb gates if they can be opened. If they cannot be opened, they should be climbed on the hinge side only one at a time.



Stiles.

Walkers should make every effort to find and use a stile to cross a fence or a dry stone wall as climbing a wall or fence is likely to damage it.

Keeping together

Small groups of four to six walkers tend to keep together quite easily. Larger parties need to pause and let everyone catch up especially after an obstacle such as a gate or stile.

The walk leader will need to keep everyone in sight and count the group regularly to make sure that no-one gets separated or left behind. Please do not go ahead of the walk leader unless the walk leader agrees as it makes it more difficult to keep the group together.

Plants etc.

Most land that we walk across is privately owned and we have no right to pick flowers or fruit or to pick up branches in woodland.

Dogs



If you have a dog it needs to be kept on a lead so that it doesn't chase livestock, stray off the right of way or disturb wild life such as ground nesting birds.

c) Walkers' responsibilities - hill and mountain country.

This section is not intended to be a detailed guide to mountain safety or to leading parties but introduces some of the main points. A useful booklet called "Safety on mountains" is published by the British Mountaineering Council. For walkers who are properly prepared and walk with someone experienced, hill and mountain walking is a very safe activity. The main points to be aware of are:

Route finding.

Weather can change rapidly in the hills and mist can come down suddenly. At least one person in a party needs to be an experienced map-reader and should know where they are at all times. Occasionally, because of bad weather or a mistake, hill walkers might descend to the wrong valley far from their intended destination. If this happens, they should try to contact anyone who is waiting for them by mobile phone and if this is not possible they should dial 999, ask the police for mountain rescue, give their names and leave a message to say that they are down safely so that the rescue team is not called out unnecessarily. *Many hill and mountainous areas of the UK have no mobile phone coverage.*

Keeping together.

Getting lost or separated from a group in hill or mountain areas could have serious consequences, so it is particularly important for the party to keep together, especially if there is any possibility of mist. It will be necessary to wait and allow the party to regroup after obstacles such as rocky ground.

Walking safely on the hills.

Here are some points which hill or mountain walkers should be aware of to avoid injuries or getting into difficulties:

- Suitable footwear. On rough hill and mountain paths, it is important to wear walking boots that give good grip and offer good ankle support.
- Care on the descent. Walkers should avoid hurrying downhill as there is more chance of an injury such as a sprained ankle on the descent.
- Falls. Straying off the walkers' path in some mountain areas can lead onto steep and difficult ground where there is a risk of a fall.
- Hypothermia. Hill and mountain walkers without adequate waterproofs or warm clothing risk hypothermia or exposure, particularly with the combined effect of wind and rain. It is also important to carry enough food for the day's walk together with some spare energy-rich food. Walkers should be able to recognise the symptoms of mountain hypothermia and know what to do if another party member is suffering from hypothermia.
- Benightment. This means not getting back before it gets dark, and is obviously more likely on short winter days. A good torch is essential for anyone still out walking after dark.

Responsible walkers in hill and mountain areas should leave word of their route and keep to it if possible to avoid rescue team having to search a large area if they need to be called out. It is also essential to report their safe return to avoid a false alarm.

The international mountain distress signal is blowing a whistle, flashing a torch or a camera flash: 6 flashes or blasts of the whistle, one every 10 seconds. Then there should be a one minute pause before starting

the next 6. The acknowledgement is 3 signals with 10 seconds between each.

Path erosion.

Many popular footpaths in Britain are seriously eroded. Walkers can reduce the amount of path erosion by keeping to the existing path, not walking on grass to the side of the path as this makes it grow wider and wider. Where mountain paths zig-zag, taking short cuts should be avoided as this is a major cause of path erosion, particularly when descending.

d) Winter hill walking - route planning

This applies to England and Wales. Winter conditions in Scottish mountains can be far more severe.

Weather.

Walkers should stay off the hills if a blizzard is forecast. Even a light fall of new snow hides paths and landmarks, calling for accurate use of map and compass.

Time.

With short winter days, it is important to make an early start and a realistic estimate of the time required for a walk with an adequate "safety margin" for unforeseen delays. If there is snow more than a few inches deep, the walk could take twice as long as normal.

Snow slopes.

A walking route that goes up, down or across a steep slope can be hazardous in snow, particularly if the snow is hard. Any rocky path requires care if the snow is packed hard or is icy because normal "Vibram" type soles do not grip under these conditions. Any route that involves scrambling should be avoided if rocks are icy.

Winter hill walkers should be prepared to turn back if they come across difficult snow or ice conditions.

Avalanches

These can occur throughout the UK particularly after a new snowfall or a thaw.

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