

## ***Hoofprints in the Sand: How Horseback Riders Gained Access to the Great Lakes Shoreline***

Experience the shoreline a whole new way! Splashing along the shoreline with the vast horizon before you and your horse is the dream of many people. This article is about a group of horseback riders in Michigan who made that dream a reality.

After riding horses along the shorelines of Mexico, Michigan Equine Trails Representative Jenny Cook was inspired to bring a similar experience for horseback riders along the gorgeous Great Lakes shorelines. Cook began researching shoreline horseback riding and discovered a 2014 Horse Illustrated Magazine article on shoreline beach riding in the United States. This article provided useful information on how to navigate your first shoreline ride and included a list of places to ride the Atlantic and Pacific shorelines. Cook contacted all the places listed to find tips and best practices.



*Photo credit: J. Klein Photos*

Cook then researched Michigan public lands with miles of shoreline. She began making inquiries with some of the local public land managers about possible horse access to the public shorelines. Cook was informed that several hurdles would need to be crossed. For example, a Special Use Permit from the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, approval from the County Health Department and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and a \$1,000,000 liability insurance policy would be needed to gain horse access to public lands that did not have horse friendly management plans.

Approvals were secured by speaking with an official at the local Health Department who was also the EPA representative. He declared his love of horses and admitted he would like to see them at the shoreline provided the horse owners had a plan to manage the manure to keep the public beaches barefoot friendly. All requests were completed, and the EPA approval was provided in writing to be shared with the public land managers. Public land management teams then began to evaluate the possibility of shoreline horseback riding in Michigan.



*Michigan Equine Trails Representative Jenny Cook and MDNR Event Coordinator Elissa Buck at Silver Lake State Park shoreline horseback riding event. Photo credit: Grace Adventures*

Cook took these findings and success stories to a meeting with the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (MDNR) land managers and the Equine Trails Sub-Committee (ETS). ETS members are a volunteer group, appointed by the Michigan governor, to advise public land managers about equestrian interests on public lands. (<http://michiganhorsetrails.com/>)

The ETS supported the shoreline horseback riding idea. After the encouragement of a few MDNR staff members, who had interest in participating in the shoreline rides, the management teams decided to try private pilot rides at selected locations on public lands. They focused on areas with one or more miles of traversable shoreline and ample parking for trucks and trailers. It was decided rides should take place during the extended season which is after Labor Day and before Memorial Day.

Equestrians invited public land managers to participate in these private and public pilot rides which were offered to the public land managers free of charge. According to the Michigan equestrians, offering horseback rides are inexpensive, but these experiences are so valuable because they allow land management teams to experience horses which may open the door to more partnerships and future opportunities. Quickly, the equestrians had six public land managers interested and for the first time they had the unique problem of needing extra mounts to accommodate the management staff. A local horse camp, Grace Adventures/Paradise Ranch, was contacted to see if they would be interested in providing discounted rides for public land managers. Much to the surprise of the equestrians, Grace Adventures/Paradise Ranch not only donated the horse rides, but also provided liability insurance and chuckwagon meals! The public land managers were asked to provide written reports about their experience with the pilot rides which were used to promote this activity throughout the MDNR.

Cook and her daughter Lynsey took these shoreline horseback riding examples to Indiana Dunes National Park, located along the southern coast of the Lake Michigan shoreline. They worked with Park Ranger, Penny Callahan, who had the same dream of riding along the Lake Michigan shoreline. Ranger Callahan and Cook organized morning and afternoon BYOH (Bring Your Own Horse) shoreline horseback rides by reservation, limited to 25 riders per session for \$25.00 per person to cover administration efforts and beach cleanup services. The best part was when Ranger Callahan invited her 87-year-old mother, Carla Callahan, to ride and relive her childhood days when she rode her horses along the sandy shorelines. Carla never stopped smiling. Indiana Dunes National Park continues to offer shoreline horseback rides with reservations on selected dates in the Spring and during their Outdoor Adventure Festival in September. These opportunities are offered on the Indiana Dunes National Park website.

<https://www.nps.gov/indu/index.htm>

Back in Michigan, ETS and MDNR partnered with the Back Country Horsemen of Michigan to provide the Special Use Permit and liability insurance for participants. Due to the limited available parking, three riding sessions (morning, afternoon, and evening) of 25 riders per session were organized to rotate trucks and trailers in a pull through fashion to provide the most possible ride opportunities since the Special Use Permit was only valid for one specific day.

A week prior to the pilot rides, land managers posted signs indicating that there would be an approved horse event the following week along the shoreline. On the day of the rides, DNR Event Coordinator Elissa Buck greeted each public beach visitor and informed them of the approved pilot shoreline rides. Because most people do not like surprises, informing visitors that there would be an approved horse event taking place was important to help ensure a successful event.

Management teams provided visitors, ride participants, and staff members with a survey asking a variety of questions about the event to gauge public input, participant opinions and staff remarks which generated favorable feedback. Asking the public for their opinion in the form of a survey made them feel they were part of the event and gave them an immediate voice regarding horses on the public beach. The public loved seeing horses with many visitors asking where they could rent a horse to experience shoreline riding. These surveys proved the public approval and desire for this activity.



*From front to back- MDNR Assistant Chief Jacklin Blodgett, MDNR Executive Assistant to the Chief Barbara Graves, MDNR Event Coordinator Elissa Buck and other riders at a Silver Lake State Park public pilot shoreline horseback ride. Photo credit: Grace Adventures*



*Strategic parking at shoreline public parks using a Parking Permit.  
Photo credit: Jane Croff*

Each ride participant was issued a no charge **Parking Permit** which provided general information, instructions, and driver identification. Drivers were required to put the Parking Permit in the dash of their vehicle indicating they were aware of the instructions and agreed to follow them. The State of Massachusetts Parking Permit was used as the template. The rider Parking Permit can be viewed [here](#).

Professional photographers were secured to document each ride which was well worth the investment as the photos were used in reports and social media to promote the rides. The photos were also greatly

appreciated by the participants as a memento of their unique experience.

The pilot rides were advertised mainly via social media with links to registration pages. The Michigan equestrians were happy to report that all the pilot rides were quickly filled, indicating the great interest among the equestrian community in shoreline riding. Special Use Permits and liability insurance for the rides were secured by individuals, a local business (Grace Adventures / Paradise Ranch), and non-profit organizations (Back Country Horsemen of Michigan and Michigan Horse Council). The fee to participate in the rides ranged from \$25.00 to \$40.00 to cover membership in one of the horse organizations or to reimburse for the cost of the liability insurance.

## Looking Towards the Future

While the Michigan equestrians were thrilled with the overwhelming success of the pilot rides, there is still more work to be done to secure long-term horse access to the shorelines.

MDNR, ETS, and Michigan Horse Council continue to have meetings focused on securing a permanent “Horse Friendly Season” for shoreline horseback riding at selected Michigan State Parks.

Furthermore, a pilot “Horse Friendly Season” at the Michigan Silver Lake State Park is planned for November 1- 14, 2021 with registration through the MDNR.



*Back Country Horsemen of Michigan volunteers for a shoreline horseback ride. Photo credit: Jane Croff*

Clearly what started as a dream of horseback riding along Lake Michigan shoreline is well on its way to becoming a reality for hundreds of riders and a successful model for other states.

## Tips for Success

If you are looking to gain access to public lands for equine use in your state, Michigan equestrians have the following advice to share.

- Identify other horseback riders in the area that will help form a “Horse Friends Group” to develop, maintain and sustain horse friendly areas.
- Do your research - locate facts, numbers, and successful plans in other parts of the country to support your ideas.
- Identify the decision makers and be prepared to present your request in an organized and professional manner.
- Identify “horse friendly” management team members within agencies that will be supportive of your interests.
- It is helpful to send in reports to administrators at least a week before meetings so the administration assistants have time to distribute your reports and managers can review your information before the meetings.
- Be consistent and early for meetings. Often more is accomplished or discussed off record before and after meetings.
- Offer horse education, access to horses and rides for management teams. This provides practical perspectives of your goals and builds allies.
- Keep an open mind and be creative when forming partnerships. You may be pleasantly surprised where you find support, like the partnership this Michigan equestrian group developed with the local horse camp.
- Be professional. Follow through on all commitments to build trust and consistency with land management teams.
- Try to thank others up front for whatever you would like from them. (I.e., “It’s a pleasure working with you, thank you for sharing your wisdom...”).
- Be patient. If developments do not go how you envision, find out the reasons why. There are many spokes in the wheel of a decision. Take a step back and consider that some factors may outweigh the most obvious and logical decisions. Be ready to provide solutions for their concerns.
- Notify the public there are approved horseback rides taking place to reduce the surprise factor.
- Start with small, private pilot rides to work out the details, then offer larger, public pilot rides. Finally, graduate to declared horse friendly areas or seasons.
- Be willing to share your passions with others and listen to their feedback. You could discover new perspectives and directions of research.
- Encourage participants to write thank you notes to the public land managers. These testimonies prove the desire and appreciation of the opportunities granted. Public land managers do not often receive positive feedback, so these thank you notes have wonderful, positive impact without great investment.
- Keep social media posts and reports positive and accurate.
- Secure professional photographers to document each ride. Include these photos in reports and social media. Also, participants appreciate the photos to commemorate the experience.
- Celebrate each step in the right direction as this helps sustain motivation and forward momentum towards the goal.



**Additional Resources:**

[EQUINE-LAND-ADVOCACY-A-BEST-PRACTICE-FOR-EQUINE-ACCESS : ELCR](#)

[Nurturing Land Management Relationships: ELCR](#)

[Considering Trail Closures on Public Agency Lands: U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service : ELCR](#)

[Can't We All Just Get Along? : ELCR](#)

[Sweat Equity and Cooperation Leads to Successful Shared Trails : ELCR](#)

[Webinar – Dealing with Opposition to Equestrian Trails – March 19, 2019](#)