

Waterfront horseback riding to close for the season



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The Fairfield Bridle Trails Association is a tenacious group with a long history of advocating for equestrian trails. But as the weather heats up and beachgoers flock to Penfield, a favorite horseback route on Fairfield Beach is closing for the season.

The town Parks & Recreation Commission permits dogs and horses on town beaches from Oct. 1 through March 31, and is the only town in southern Connecticut offering beachfront horseback riding.

The issue has been contended for years and Fairfield Bridle Trail Association members regularly attend town meetings to voice their rights.

Beachgoers have complained that horses pose a danger to children and dogs, and riders sometimes don't pick up after their horses.

Ariane Mermod, a Vermont native and co-president of the group, said it is mostly out-of-towners who don't respect rules of the beach, and the Bridle Trails Association encourages membership in order to educate proper horsemanship.

The town continues to allow waterfront riding under the following rules: riders must pick up after their horses on the beach and in parking areas; trailers are to be parked in the back of the lot opposite Penfield Pavilion, and horses must be taken past the high-tide mark and only at dead low tide; and a 50-foot distance must be kept from beachgoers, animals and properties.

The Fairfield Animal Control also enforces rules for dog owners, who must accompany dogs at all times and pick up and dispose of droppings.

The Bridle Trails Association is now comprised of about 75 members, many of whom are true enthusiasts.

Alice Fischer, for example, spent last fall with a horseback riding team on safari in Botswana.

In 1934, the construction of the Merritt Parkway, stretching from Greenwich to Stratford, cut through elaborate fox-hunting trails around Greenwich — but avid riders and hunters would not be deterred.

Members of the then Greenwich Hounds, a predecessor of the Fairfield Bridle Trails Association, commissioned the construction of large tunnels under the parkway to salvage their hunting trails.



There are still three tunnels under the Merritt Parkway today; two of the three are accessible only through the private land of Sabine Farm; the third is located on the east side of Greenwich near Butternut Hollow Road.

Unfortunately, the plan failed, and hounds continued chasing foxes across the dangerous parkway.

"No one told the hounds or foxes about the tunnels," said Chester Burley, a longstanding Fairfield Bridle Trails Association member.

Despite the end of the equestrian beach season, members celebrated the beginning of the spring season with a wine and cheese celebration March 20 in Southport.

The group plans to take advantage of its elaborate backwoods trail system, running from the Fairfield Hunt Club.

The mission of the group, in addition to promoting responsible horsemanship, is to maintain an elaborate trail system that runs 18 miles from Southport to Easton.

The trail system runs from the Fairfield Hunt Club on Long Lots Road.

The network includes trails in Greenfield Hill, the Fairfield Ridge community, specified trails of the Audubon Society, open space in Brett Woods and Lake Mohegan, and along the waterfront of Trout Brook and Hunting Park in Easton.

Members must be careful though, as hunting seasons conflict with riders' trail space.



They are cautioned to wear orange vests and helmets from Sept. 15 through Jan. 15 for bow-hunting season, and from Nov. 17 through Dec. 7, an active time for rifle hunters.

The group also has long served as an advocacy group within the community when issues involving horses, riders and zoning or open space issues arise.

Upcoming events include an April Fool's ride and tailgate, and the Laurel Blossom Ride through Huntington.

For more information on the Fairfield Bridle Trail Association, visit fairfieldbridletrails.com.

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