



Walk safety

This leaflet contains some basic information about preparation and safety on walks. It doesn't cover everything, but it does give you a few pointers for what to look out for. If you are unsure about anything, look up more information or seek advice, for instance from the National Park Centres on Exmoor. The Rambler's Association (www.ramblers.org.uk) also has some good information on walk safety.

Clothing, equipment and preparation

In summer some shorter and more straightforward walks can be done in trainers, outdoor shoes or even walking sandals if you are used to them (but see the note about adders under 'keeping safe'), and they require no special clothing or equipment apart from weather protection – perhaps sun block, sun hat and sunglasses, and a light packable waterproof. Shorts and short sleeves can be fine in warm weather, but exposed limbs are more vulnerable to the sun, thorns and nettles, as well as biting insects and ticks. Many walks include uneven, stony paths, mud, and sometimes shallow fords, where the added support and protection provided by walking boots becomes almost essential. Gaiters can be useful in (or after) heavy rain or in boggy areas. Make sure you have enough water – half a litre is a minimum for anything more than a short stroll, a litre or more in hot weather – and food, particularly on longer walks where there are no intermediate refreshment stops.

In cold weather a warm layer such as a fleece or jumper plus a windproof and waterproof outer layer are essential – and add a warm hat and gloves. A stick or hiking pole can be useful for steep or slippery descents, and two provide more stability and take weight off the knees. If you are heading on to the open moor, or more remote sections of the coast path, consider taking an emergency shelter or survival bag in cool or wet conditions. A small first aid kit (add some treatment for bites and stings, a tick remover or pair of thin forceps, and perhaps some blister plasters), a compass (essential on open moorland walks), and a loud whistle for attracting attention are useful additions, plus a torch if there is any possibility of being out after dark. If you are walking alone, consider how you would call for help and let the emergency services know where you are, and who could raise the alarm if you are not back in a reasonable time. Calling '999' or '112' picks up any signal that is available, and you can also register your phone so that you can text '999' if needed (start by texting 'register' to 999). A GPS app or device is also useful (though the signal can be poor in woodland).

Weather, terrain and tides

Check the **weather** before you set out, and be prepared for adverse conditions. There several things to be aware of here. Loss of visibility in fog or heavy rain can make navigation more difficult particularly on the open moors, when a compass becomes essential. Cold and wet weather in remote locations comes with a danger of exposure and hypothermia, particularly if you have inadequate clothing, with the strongest risk when cold and wet or windy conditions combine with exhaustion or an accident. Wet weather brings an increased danger of slips and falls, particularly on steep and narrow paths. After heavy rainfall Exmoor acts like a sponge, absorbing water until it is full, then any surplus rain cascades off the top of the moor turning the rivers and streams into raging torrents. At their most destructive these flash floods can sweep cars and buildings away, as happened when parts of Lynmouth were destroyed in 1952. Moorland walks, and those that cross or run alongside rivers and streams as they come off the hills, are unadvisable in flood conditions, and don't try to ford fast-moving watercourses: at best you will get very wet. Finally don't underestimate the force of the sun in summer, even on misty days: it is easy to get sunburnt through the mist.

Several walks involve stretches of **open moorland** where there are no defined paths. The conditions on these vary depending on time of year, recent rainfall, and how much they have been walked previously. Do be prepared to navigate carefully (with a compass or GPS where indicated), pick your way carefully through vegetation and bog, and take care to avoid disturbing wildlife particularly during the nesting season (March to July). Heavy rain, and sometimes strong spring growth, can make some stretches of moorland impassable or very difficult to negotiate: be prepared to turn back or find an alternative route.

A few walks have **short tidal sections** that can only be done near low water. Check the tide times before you go. There is local advice in individual walk instructions, but in general the 'window' for walking on tidal paths is 2 hours either side of low water. This means being off the path or beach at least 4 hours before high water, so make sure you have enough time to complete the tidal section before you set out.

Keeping safe

Exmoor is relatively safe walking country given common sense and suitable clothing. Watch out for **ticks**, that can attach themselves to bare skin that is in contact with vegetation; they can carry Lyme disease, which can lead to debilitating complications if left untreated. Particularly in the summer there is a chance of encountering an **adder** (viper) in scrub or bracken or among rocks, but unless cornered or stepped on it is more likely to flee than to bite. Bites are very painful and can cause severe nausea and paralysis. They should be treated as a medical emergency, but they are rarely deadly. Be aware of **cattle**: skirt around cows with calves, don't walk between cows and a bull, and be particularly careful when walking among cattle with a dog (if a cow or bull does charge at you, both you and the dog will have a better chance of avoiding injury if you let the dog go).

Otherwise, the main danger is from the landscape itself, and of course traffic. Many paths are uneven with stones and tree roots, and descents can be slippery particularly after rain and in late autumn and winter when they are covered in fallen leaves. There are also a few paths (indicated in the walk descriptions) with unprotected drops to one side. The rule for these is to focus on the path, slow down and step carefully, and stop when you want to admire the view or take pictures. If the path becomes too difficult or starts to look dangerous, turn back. When walking on lanes, keep a good lookout, and walk on the right-hand side of the road except when approaching a blind bend: cross to the open side of the bend in good time to allow traffic to see you. On narrow lanes where the vehicle needs to 'squeeze' past, it is safer to stand on the driver's side - usually your left as you are facing the vehicle. If you are walking in a large group, keep in single file on narrow lanes and divide into groups of no more than four walkers. Fluorescent or bright clothing, particularly for the first and last walkers, aids being seen; if there is a possibility of being out after dark, also take a good torch.

Particularly on more remote walks, if you haven't arrived at a feature or waypoint in a reasonable amount of time and you are unsure where you are, return to the last known point and refer carefully to the map or walk instructions; this is where a compass or GPS can be useful. Do make allowances for changes, for instance marker posts and signs can fall down or be removed, and stiles can be replaced with gates. More major changes such as new roads and housing developments are relatively rare, but footpaths are sometimes diverted and the addition of a new farm driveway or forest track can make paths appear different from how they are shown on the map or described in route instructions.

A Country Code

Any rural area is first and foremost a home, a workplace and a habitat. Following a simple country code, such as the one below that is based on the more detailed Countryside Code, does much to protect the landscape and avoid conflict between the different users of the countryside.

- Respect local people and visitors using the countryside. In particular, when driving slow down and wait for walkers, cyclists, horses, livestock and wild animals, and whether you are driving, riding or on foot, don't hinder people at work.
- There is no blanket speed limit on Exmoor or the Quantocks other than the national one, but 40mph (as on Dartmoor) is a sensible limit on the open moor. On the other hand, don't crawl along trying to drive and admire the view at the same time.
- Park considerately. Particularly if you are walking as a group with several cars, leave enough spaces for local people – for instance to visit shops, post offices and churches. Get permission before leaving your car in pub or café car parks while you walk.
- Keep to designated paths and access land, and avoid actions that could cause damage – such as walking on crops or historic sites, and climbing over walls and fences. If you have no choice but to climb over a gate, use the side next to the hinges.

- A right of way means that you have a right to pass through, not to hinder people who are working or taking part in other leisure activities, or to invade privacy for instance by stopping to eat your lunch overlooking a house or garden on the route.
- Leave gates as you find them – or as indicated on signs.
- Take litter home with you, or put it in litter bins where they are provided.
- Don't remove or damage plants, trees, wildlife or rocks.
- Be careful with naked flames and cigarettes – fires can be devastating to plants, wildlife and farming.
- Ensure that dogs are under control and do not worry livestock or wildlife, including ground nesting birds. On access land, dogs must be kept on a short lead from the beginning of March to the end of July. Clean up any dog mess.
- Respect any local orders and variations – for instance when footpaths and access land are closed, or there are temporary restrictions on dogs. Follow any local advice and signs.
- Make sure you are well-prepared for the activity you are planning to do. In particular, check the weather forecast and where appropriate the tide times, and go equipped for the conditions – as well as any unexpected changes.

There may be the odd occasion where you need to assert your rights as a walker. Avoid doing this in a way that is aggressive or obstructive – if you get a less than civil response, you can always report it (along with any obstructions to rights of way) to the National Park Authority on Exmoor, the local authority's Footpaths or Rights of Way Officer elsewhere, or the police if you are threatened.

Finally, the disclaimer

The information on this site is provided freely and in good faith to help users explore the Exmoor and Quantocks region. I'm not a professional walk leader, none of it is guaranteed in any way, and there will be errors and omissions. It is your responsibility to use the site sensibly, to read and take note of the warnings relating to specific walks or walking in general (including use of GPX files), to assess how suitable each walk is for you, and to take into account (among other things) your level of fitness, surefootedness and head for heights, as well as the weather conditions and where relevant the tide times. I sincerely hope you don't have an accident or injure yourself, get lost, experience hypothermia, dehydration or sunstroke, get cut off by the tide, arrive at the café just as it shuts, or miss the last bus (or find that it's been withdrawn from service), but I can't take any responsibility if you do!

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