

# Mud in the Foothills – and Your Responsibility



The combination of higher soil moisture content, shorter days and lower air temperatures in the Fall, Winter and early Spring all conspire to keep trails muddy, even weeks after it rains. Riding or hiking in muddy conditions is bad for trails and equipment, and it's poor trail etiquette—don't do it. This article focuses primarily on mountain biking and walking; however, it is important to note that all trail use on erosive muddy trails is unacceptable.

How can you predict whether the trails are too muddy before you get to the trailhead? Ride or walk on a patch of exposed dirt in a garden or flower bed. If you can see your tracks sinking in, chances are the trails are not yet ripe for riding or walking.

When you get to the trail, a good rule of thumb is to observe if mud is sticking to soles and tires:

*If mud sticks, it's too wet.*



## Why Stay Off Muddy Trails?

We've all seen TV ads featuring trail users ripping it up in muddy conditions. Some of us have also lived in other parts of the country where muddy trail use is not terribly damaging (due to soil type and other factors). But if you are thinking about hitting the Boise area trails when it's muddy, here are some facts to consider before you do:

- ⊗ When you hike or ride in the mud you are significantly contributing to trail erosion. Once a trail is damaged from wheel ruts, it deteriorates even if nobody rides it anymore, with ruts acting like channels that send water down the trail, making it worse and worse.
- ⊗ Walking or riding in the mud harms the quality of the trail surface. "Pock-marks" (from footprints and hoofprints) and ruts last for months after the trail dries out.
- ⊗ Using muddy trails contributes to trail widening. When users go off trail to avoid puddles and ruts, they trample and destroy vegetation, widening the trail as a result. Grasses and other foothills plants are especially vulnerable when conditions are wet.
- ⊗ Many Foothills trails travel over private land with temporary easements generously granted by the landowners. In many cases, these easements are less than 24 inches wide. Widening trails risks violating the terms of the easements, thus endangering access to trails.
- ⊗ Trail damage and erosion are primary reasons for closure of trails on public land. You shouldn't be surprised to find a trail that has been ridden or hiked in the mud one day closed another.
- ⊗ Mud harms your bike. It is even more abrasive than dirt, causing moving parts to wear down faster. It's better for your bike to ride in dry conditions. A lot of people don't realize this. They just see the cool ads, buy the bike and ride through mud because they don't know any better. Muddy equipment leads to rusty chains and contaminated cable housings and bearings.

# Ride and Hike Early to Avoid Mud

From late November through February, early birds can avoid mud by riding or walking in the morning, while the ground is frozen. These hearty trail enthusiasts can avoid mud if they plan on doing the entire trip while the ground is frozen—the earlier the better—but beware, by mid-morning things get soft and sticky quickly. Even when the air temperature is below freezing, the sun warms the trail surface to above freezing by late morning.

## Where to Go When Trails are Wet

The Foothills are a combination of soil types comprised of lakebed sediments, basalt formations and sandy/granitic soils. Of these three types, the Basalt and lakebed sediments are “no go” areas when muddy. Some areas are dominated by one of these soil types, whereas other trails traverse two or more soil types. With experience, trail enthusiasts can learn to distinguish clay vs. sandy soil types.



If mud sticks to your tires or boots, the responsible choice is to avoid the dirt and ride or hike on the greenbelt or find an area where the soil is not sticky when wet. Some of the most popular Foothills areas are also some of the muddiest when wet—Central Foothills, Military Reserve, and CastleRock/Table Rock are notable for producing sticky gumbo during the cooler, wetter parts of the year. On the other hand, the Rocky Canyon area soils are predominantly decomposed granite and sand, without as much clay. Therefore they serve as a good wet day option.

### No Go (Lakebed and/or Basalt):

- ⊘ Military Reserve
- ⊘ Central Foothills
- ⊘ West of Bogus Basin Road
- ⊘ Castlerock/Tablerock

### Better Choices (Sandy/Granitic):

- 🐾🚲 Rocky Canyon Road/Three Bears Complex
- 🐾🚲 Camel's Back/Hull's Gulch
- 🐾🚲 8th Street

This doesn't mean that you have to hang up your mountain bike or walking shoes until Memorial Day. It only means that you'll have to think of alternatives to sodden, single-track trails. Consider taking the short drive out to the Owyhee Front Country, Wilson Creek area. Or travel on primitive two-track roads. Dirt roads can handle more abuse than trails can, and they're already wide. If you don't think dirt roads offer enough challenge, try some of the steep old mining routes on public lands pocked with potholes and bulging with boulders.

Use mud season to build fitness by putting in some serious “base miles” on the road. If you don't have a road bike, buying some skinny slicks will make you feel super-charged, and the fitness you'll develop will make your trail riding that much more pleasurable later on. Do some urban or suburban assault rides. Explore the neighborhood for ramps, steps and other challenges that can hone your technical skills.



Once mountain bikers were encouraged to ride around obstacles, now the message is: If you can't ride through it or over it, then portage your bike and walk around and over it, but even this rule has its exception. If it's a puddle on a hard trail—some water sitting on a hard surface—then ride through it. But if you ride through bog that's saturated for several inches, you'll leave ruts. So when you're riding, you have to ask yourself: Do I ride through it or walk? That's where responsibility comes into play.

**It is a difficult thing for people to accept, but mountain biking and hiking are not necessarily year-round sports. There are times when the trails need to be left alone. Horses need to stay off them. Dirt bikes need to stay off them. Hikers need to stay off them. Mountain bikes need to stay off them.**

A message from   
and  
Boise Trail 

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