



24 October 2023

Warning to drivers on New Forest roads

Motorists are being advised to expect the unexpected when driving on Forest roads this autumn after only a quarter of speeding drivers knew what to do if they were in an accident involving New Forest ponies and other free-roaming animals.

The warning comes in the wake of 37 ponies, cattle, sheep and pigs being killed or injured in road accidents in the New Forest during 2023, compared to 39 the previous year. Incidents occurred on both major and minor Forest roads. November and December, when weather and light conditions are very unpredictable, were the deadliest months for accidents.

Several hundred drivers have been caught speeding over the last two years by Operation Mountie, a multi-agency road safety project led by Hampshire Police and supported by New Forest Road Awareness, Forestry England and the New Forest National Park Authority. In over 20 days of action, speeding motorists were stopped and either given tickets or education about driving to the conditions and the behaviour of Forest animals near or close to the roads.

Despite it being a legal requirement to report an accident involving Forest animals to the Police as soon as possible and within 24 hours, only 26% of motorists stopped were aware of this.

Gilly Jones from New Forest Road Awareness, said “Animals roaming across the New Forest have right of way and can be extremely unpredictable. Drivers need to be able to react quickly and if the worst does happen it’s essential that they know what to do. If you are involved in an accident with a Forest animal, please call 999 immediately even if it runs off as it may have an internal injury.”

The vast majority of those caught speeding were on their daily commute and only 5% were visiting the area. Two-thirds of all drivers stopped lived within the boundaries of New Forest District Council.

Of the hundreds of drivers stopped, the team found that no particular age group was more likely to speed with drivers represented evenly across all ages. The vast majority of those spoken to said they had not fully considered the risks presented by animals on or nearby the road and that they had learned something new from the education they were given.

Charlotte Belcher, Community Manager for Forestry England, said: “As the light fades and the weather starts to become more unpredictable all of us travelling through the Forest need to take extra care. Many of those we speak to are aware of the risks but think it won’t happen to them. It’s not worth taking that risk, it can happen to anyone and we all need to drive safely through this special place.”

Sue Westwood from the Verderers of the New Forest said “Please pass wide and slow when approaching ponies and other animals on the Forest verge. This is especially important during the autumn and winter months when it is dark, foggy or raining or you are blinded by oncoming headlights or a low sun. Expect the animals to walk out in front of you, they have no road sense.”

Forest organisations are encouraging people to carry a hotline card with essential phone numbers to call if an animal is killed or injured and asking people to help raise awareness by displaying a new animal safety car window sticker made from eco-friendly materials.

Hilary Makin, New Forest National Park Authority Communications Manager, said the NPA has invested £8,000 in the three-year campaign with the Love the Forest charity contributing a further £2,000.

‘We’d like as many people as possible to carry one of the credit-card sized hotline cards, so everyone knows who to call if an animal is killed or injured. Alternatively, you can take a photo of the numbers to keep on your phone or add them to your contacts.’

Animal accidents cards and car window stickers are available at many petrol stations and community outlets throughout the New Forest as well as from the New Forest National Park Authority office at Lymington Town Hall, Avenue Road, Lymington SO41 9ZG.

The Police-led operations to tackle speeding will continue at a variety of locations across the New Forest in the coming months.

Sergeant Robin Blake, Totton and New Forest Heart Neighbourhood Policing Team, Hampshire and Isle of Wight Constabulary said: “Operation Mountie aims to improve road safety for drivers and animals across the Forest. Incidents can cause major harm and distress to animals, their owners, and to the drivers involved. It is really important to be aware that driving conditions throughout the year change and can have a significant impact on Forest roads especially during hours of darkness and in poor weather. Remember, a speed limit is exactly that - a limit. Not a target.”

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Notes to Editor

1. Forestry England manages and cares for the nation’s 1,500 woods and forests, with over 291 million visits in 2022/23. As England’s largest land manager, we shape landscapes and enhance forests for people to enjoy, wildlife to flourish and businesses to grow. We are continuing the work we have already started to make the nation’s forests resilient to climate change and by 2026 we will:
 - create at least 6,000 more hectares where we integrate wilding activities in our productive forests.
 - increase the diversity of visitors to the nation’s forests and have one million hours of high-quality volunteer time given to the nation’s forests
 - plant at least 2,000 hectares of new, high quality, predominantly broadleaf woodlands
 - For more information visit forestryengland.uk Forestry England is an agency of the Forestry Commission.

- **About the New Forest National Park Authority**

Protect - Enjoy - Prosper

The New Forest National Park Authority’s statutory purposes are to:

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- Conserve and enhance the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of the Park - **Protect**.
 - Promote opportunities for understanding and enjoyment of its special qualities
 - **Enjoy**.

We also have a duty to:

Seek to foster the social and economic well-being of local communities within the Park - **Prosper**.

The New Forest National Park was designated in March 2005. Its unique landscape has been shaped over the centuries by grazing ponies, cattle and pigs which roam free. Majestic woodlands, rare heathland and a spectacular coastline provide fabulous opportunities for quiet recreation, enjoyment and discovery.

Visit www.newforestnpa.gov.uk to find out more.