

# Forest Guided Walks

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Most articles written on guided walks deal with the subject matter to be discussed at various stops along the trail. Few articles deal with the psychological needs of the forest guide. It is hoped that this contribution may help in this area.

It has become common for a forester to be asked to guide a group of visitors through his forest. If such a request comes your way the first thing to do is to decide on *the best route for you*. Successful guided walks are very much a matter of confidence. To sustain this confidence the route you choose should favour discussion on subjects or aspects of forestry that interest you.

At the same time be clear in your mind why visitors want to come for a walk in your forest. They come for enjoyment. They come out of curiosity. They come for a pleasant walk and with the hope that the guide will tell them something of interest about the natural world. And if the guide is good enough he can, on occasion, lift his audience to revelations about matters that lie above the ordinary plane of daily living, the visitor has not come to have his brain filled with facts and statistics and economics — these he can get in a library.

Before the big day, walk the route. Never assume that you are so familiar with your forest that you can forego this ground check. Conditions change, and it is the new occurrence, the fallen tree, the fresh growth of fungi, that draw attention to themselves and prompt questions.

If your walk is an open invitation to the general public assume that your audience will range from small children to relatively old folk. Therefore temper your proposed walk time and length of walk with this in mind. For the same reason stay clear of steep gradients.

It is reasonable to expect that few in your audience will have had training in forestry — so avoid technical language. Keep it simple. Don't talk down to your audience; you may be an expert in forestry but the people in front of you are knowledgeable in their own fields. Sometimes, it appears, guides feel that their standing in the eyes of

the audience is enhanced by the use of technical language. In most cases the opposite proves to be the case. Your business should be that of *communications* and not ego building. Probably the best attitude to adopt is that of the whole group, leader included, setting out on a quest of discovery together.

This matter of technical language is too important to leave without making some comments. Too many walk leaders founder on this rock. By your training, forestry words are familiar to the point that they become part of your daily vocabulary. This is not the case with your audience.

'Symbiosis' and 'photosynthesis' are obviously technical words, but to the lay-man so also is 'compartment'; 'ride'; 'humus layer'; 'frost lift'; 'ribbon planting'; 'yield class'. Using words which demand explanation slows the natural flow of conversation which should exist between the guide and his audience. In the end communications begin to slip. You are in danger of becoming a bore. So it is worth repeating — don't try to impress, cut out the technical, keep it simple.

On the day of the outing you should not be responsible for the general organisational problems of signposting, carparking etc. Arrive well before the walk is due to start. There is wisdom in this in that it allows you to meet and mix with visitors as they arrive. This informal contact is important in that it helps enormously to dispel any shyness that the walk leader may have. At the same time it allows him to evaluate his audience, and they in turn can more readily accept him as the leader of the group when the time arrives.

When the time does indeed arrive to start the walk gather the group together. Identify yourself and establish the length of the walk and the time it will take. A walk of about 1½-2 hours and covering about 1½ miles (2.4km) is about right. People have not come for a hike, they have come to hear you explain something about the countryside.

What do you do if it is pouring rain? Under these circumstances the leader will have to use his own initiative. If it has been raining all day and people still turn up it is reasonable to assume that they are prepared to go on the walk come hell or high water! But if it starts to rain just when the walk is about to commence the situation is different. You may have a large percentage of visitors who may not willingly like to walk in the rain or who may be inadequately prepared for wet weather. In this case ask their views. State emphatically that you are quite prepared to go on the walk if sufficient people are interested. Ask them for a show of hands to continue with the walk. If you get a small handful of people still willing to go, start on your walk after you have offered regrets about the weather conditions to the remaining visitors. Suggest that they have probably made a wise decision since you see that quite a few

are inadequately dressed for wet conditions and suggest that they might visit your forest when conditions are more pleasant etc. *Then gather up your remaining willing visitors and start your walk.* You have to be courteous but firm here and keep a tight rein on circumstances. Never forget that you are the boss. It is then up to them to decide if they wish to join the walk. Indecisiveness here on your part can spoil the outing for the numbers still willing to go.

The best group size, from my experience, is around 20-25 people. If the group runs to over 60 people you have a problem on your hands. At this density, even when you are clearly visible to the people at the back of the group, the dividing distance and the crowd of people between makes effective contact impossible. the use of a 'loud-hailer' does not solve the problem — you merely become as a barker at a circus and you destroy any close communication that would have been possible with those visitors at the front of the group. There is a danger indeed of the whole outing becoming trite, whimsical and self defeating.

It is best therefore to try and anticipate the size of the crowd and to have an additional guide on hand if the need arises. If circumstances force you to conduct a large crowd then you must simply live with the fact that the group is too large for the shared sense of discovery that is necessary for a satisfactory forest walk.

Now that you have gathered the group together set off on your walk. Don't hurry. One of the common mistakes at this stage is that the leader strides off into the woods with a half dozen vigorous people at his heels. The rest of the group become strung out like a necklace of beads behind. The problem is then made worse by the guide immediately launching into whatever it is he has to say at his first stop. By the time he has finished making his observations perhaps only half of the group will have gathered about him, and off he goes like the hare again. This state of affairs is completely unsatisfactory.

It is my observation that the problem is always that of nervousness. So steady up and slow down if you feel that this is happening to you. Take your time between stops. Consciously reduce the length of your stride. On the way from one stop to the next talk to those around you. When you reach your next stop wait until the bulk of your group arrive. Talk generalities about forestry or wildlife, or football if necessary, while you are waiting. When most of the group are gathered around break away from the small talk and launch yourself into whatever it is that you want to say about this new area.

If you are asked a question to which you don't know the answer be honest and say so. Indeed such an admittance can help break the ice and allow the group to warm to you. As you become experienced

you can introduce humour into your delivery and open up your personality a bit more. Humour can be a dangerous commodity unless you know how to handle it. If you lack the confidence to carry it through, humour can easily backfire and simply make you look silly.

It is often the case that you will have an 'expert' in the group. He normally gets his chance if you make a wrong pronouncement. You hold up a piece of 'sheep sorrel' and call it 'wood sorrel'. A pained look passes across the face of the 'expert'. He now waxes, if not eloquently, then certainly at length, on the subject most dear to his heart. When he has had his say, quench the feeling of the need to strangle someone, and thank the guest for his help, repeat the question and offer a condensed form of the answer. Once this is done change the subject as prudently as possible. Get back on to your strong suite.

The reason for this tactic is that on occasion an 'expert', once encouraged, may try to be of further assistance at every opportunity that arises. It is important that you remain firmly in control of the group at all times. Don't let part of this control slip away to another person. You cannot function at your best under these conditions so make sure that they don't arise.

In communicating with your audience *explain out their understanding*. Probably the best examples of effective communications are the parables in the Bible where everyday situations are used to explain difficult concepts in the simplest of terms. Don't talk of cubic metres of wood, talk of kitchen tables and floor boards, talk of the number of rafters locked up in a 50 year old spruce. Talk of the number of spruce needed for the wood requirements of an average house. In a word don't use statistics where you can paint word pictures.

At the concluding stop on the walk don't simply peter out in your delivery. You must leave clear signals with your audience that the walk is now over. You might mention the main points that you made during the walk. Present these now in a wider framework and draw some definite conclusions from the day's outing.

Your walk is now over. Your audience will start to disperse. It is wise at this point not to suddenly dash off to your car and roar out of the forest as though you cannot stand the place. Stay around for a few minutes and make yourself available. Some of your audience may have been too shy to ask questions while on the walk; they may now approach you. Others may want to know more general information on forestry. For the sake of such questions be available for a few moments at the end of the walk.

#### A FINAL NOTE

For those leaders who might feel themselves dreading the arrival

of the big day; who are convinced that they will be shy and awkward and wooden, remember that all the people in your audience are human like yourself. Talk to them as though you were leaning over the garden wall talking to your next door neighbour. And above all remember that they are appreciative of you giving your time to explain something about the things which give you a great measure of contentment. So go out there, relax, go for a stroll with your audience — and enjoy the day!