

## James River Dos and Don'ts

*For the Richmonder who enjoys being outside but prefers not to eff it up by polluting, destroying, or dying.*

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Photo by Heaton Johnson V.

On a warm Monday morning, I headed out on the first paddleboard trip of the season with [Riverside Outfitters](#).

<sup>1</sup> After unloading the equipment from the trailer, I watched as an off-leash dog charged out from a trail towards a man and his leashed dog. I could tell the man was nervous and when the off-leash dog approached, a small scuffle ensued. The off-leash owner just traipsed towards his car, and nonchalantly called his dog over. There was no apology and no real attempt to retrieve his canine friend.

The next day, after returning from another paddle boarding trip, my phone had been bombarded with messages from concerned friends and family. They had heard about a woman's body found near Manchester Bridge, drowned after going over a low head dam.

That afternoon, my kids and I visited Belle Isle and were appalled at the amount of trash, especially considering there are trashcans and recycle bins all over the island. We started at

First Break rocks and walked all the way down to the foot bridge. In just under an hour, we picked up five (yes FIVE) plastic grocery bags full of litter. This included everything from glass beer and liquor bottles, to styrofoam fast food containers. My daughter yelled upon throwing away our final bag, "This is unacceptable!" and I can't help but agree.

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*The author's daughter, being disgusted.  
Do not make this adorable little girl pick  
up after you.*

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In those first days of Spring Break—my first days of many spent at the James and in the park—I was already frustrated with the bad behaviors of Richmonders. I get it. The weather is warming up, which means more and more people are coming out to enjoy the mighty James and the surrounding park system. **But It is the responsibility of every single one of us to do better if we want to continue increasing the health and vitality of the river and the surrounding parks.** For more information about the health of the river, check out the 2015 [State of the](#)

To do your part, follow these *TOP TEN RULES* when enjoying the park and the river to make everyone's experience stellar. If you want the dirty deets, keep reading.

1. Keep your dog on a leash; it's the law.
2. Clean up after your pet, which is also the law.
3. Don't use the trails when muddy (24 hours for every inch of rain).
4. Never take short cuts, even if it looks like a trail.
5. Yield to other users on the trails (made easier and safer when you aren't listening to headphones)
6. Don't litter. No butts.
7. Glass or alcohol are forbidden.
8. If the signs say you need a lifejacket, you do. And if it says the river is closed, it is. No exceptions.
9. No fires in the park, ever.
10. Be kind.

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## 1. KEEPING EVERYONE'S BEST FRIEND ON A LEASH

I know, but Rover likes to run and he is just the most mild tempered sweet little thing anyone could ever know. I believe you. But, the City of Richmond *requires* your dog to be on a leash when off of your own property.

2

This isn't because the City is big and mean and hates Rover. It's because the park is for everyone. On a nice day, hundreds of people are on the trails walking, running, and biking. A dog running up can topple a biker, and scare a runner or walker. Worse, Rover could run up to another dog who is skittish or who maybe isn't as kind and gentle (but who is on-leash) and start a fight. I've seen it happen and it sucks. If your dog needs to run free, I would suggest one of the many dog parks in the city.

3 Otherwise, you could be slapped with a \$250 fine.

It is worth noting that the [James River Park System website](#) states that dogs aren't actually allowed in any parks except Barker Field dog park, Chimborazo dog park, Byrd Park and Forest Hill Park. Nathan Burrell, the Superintendent of the James River Park System, confirms that this is inaccurate and the most up-to-date information should be accessed from [Jamesriverpark.org](#).

## 2. CLEANING UP AFTER ROVER

And...I can't believe I need to tell people this, but after seeing the most gigantic pile in the middle of the walkway at Belle Isle and needing to save my eight-year-old from toppling into it, I'm going to shout it at you...CLEAN UP YOUR DOG'S POOP. It is also the law.

4

Besides being gross and inconvenient for pedestrians, pet excrements can run off into the water. This waste contains bacteria, protozoa, and roundworms which can infect humans and affect our drinking water supply. According to the Department of Environmental Quality, pet waste is the largest contributor of E.Coli in the James River. Nobody, and I mean nobody, wants to wade, swim, or paddle in E.Coli infect-

ed water.

### 3. LEAVING NO TRAIL

James River Park System and [RVAMore](#), a local trail advocacy group, follow the International Mountain Bicycling Association guidelines for trail use, which states to stay off of the trails for 24 hours per inch of rainfall.

According to RVAMore board member Blake Puhack, “...hiking on a muddy trail can result in clumps of mud sticking to boots and leaving shoe sized divots in the trail. This leaves an awkward and uncomfortable trail surface as well as collects pools of water that take longer to dry and will eventually expand into larger mud pits. Cycling on muddy trails leaves ruts in the trail which channels water down the trail rather than shedding it off of the trail. This can significantly increase the amount of erosion on the trails and we want to prevent as much erosion...since we want to be good stewards of the environment and so that there is less maintenance to be done.”

#### **If you are leaving any print (foot or tire), the trails are too wet to use.**

James River Park system has a [nice video PSA](#) from City of Richmond Trails Manager Michael Burton. For up-to-date trail conditions, you can check out the [RVA Trail Report](#) before you head out for a romp in the urban wild.

### 4. STAYING ON THE TRAILS

Taking shortcuts up hills creates fall line trails (down the steepest part). Puhack said any rain that falls on “these types of trails has nowhere to go other than to follow the trail and (the water) will pick up speed as it moves downhill, increasing the rate of erosion as it goes.” We know those long hikes can be tiring and it can be tempting to take a shortcut. We also know you are trying to be nice by moving out of the way of oncoming trail users, and it seems like the right thing to do to just shimmy up that shortcut to avoid being in the way. Unfortunately, these well-intentioned actions cause damage.

Puhack stated that if too much damage is done to trails, the local land managers could decide to close the trails to users. And no one wants that.

### 5. SHARING THE ROAD...URM...TRAILS.

More than once, I’ve been out on the trails running or hiking and been confronted with the decision about what to do when I come face to face with another user. Without stop lights or signs, knowing who should yield is left up to the common courtesy of the users. RVAMore tells mountain bikers to yield to all non-motorized users. Bikers should slow as they approach hikers or runners and wait for the ok to pass. Puhack said it is all about the faster moving person maintaining control of themselves or their bike during the pass. “It’s all a matter of courtesy and respect – if you’re approaching another trail user, say hello and let them know that you’re there and that you see them,” Puhack said.

We can’t ask for much more than that from our fellow trail users, can we? You may hear a biker or runner say “on the left” which means, move over to the right. If you are hiking or running the trails, move to the side to let bikers pass. If you are hiking, moving over for a runner to pass is also pretty awesome. Do your best to stay on the trail though, for all of the same reasons we noted above.

This leads us to one last point about sharing the trails. *Wearing headphones is dangerous* because it can prevent you from hearing another user coming up from be-

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hind, or worse, if someone is up to no good, you may not hear them sneaking up. But if you must listen to music (and we suggest you don't at all...it's nature, be present), leave one earbud out.

## 6. PACKING OUT WHAT YOU PACKED IN

The impact of litter on the watershed is detrimental, not only to the James River, but also to its tributaries, the Chesapeake Bay and the Atlantic Ocean. It negatively affects water quality, harms and kills wildlife, impacts human health and hurts the economy. According to [a report from Longwood University](#), the types of aquatic debris vary little from year to year, but have long lasting negative impacts on our waterways. These include cans, bottles, cigarette butts, bags, and food wrappers.

There are trash cans placed all over the parks, at each trailhead, river takeout, and on the islands. Also, the James River Park System is the only one that recycles ([Thanks Ralph White!](#)) Anything you take with you into the park system should be disposed of in a trash receptacle or taken out of the park system and disposed of properly. This includes at the river, on the trails and in the parking lots. Max Posner, Vice President of the James River Outdoor Coalition stated, "We are trying to get this message out to the residents of Richmond in an effort to spread the word about keeping the park clean, because we've noticed, along with park staff, that so much trash is being left in the park..."

<sup>5</sup> Check out his [Pick Up Your Trash PSA](#).

## 7. DRINKING (ALCOHOL) IS NOT OKAY

Nothing screams Richmond like heading out to the rocks for a cold brew on a hot summer day. But drinking in the park is forbidden and strictly enforced. Buzzkill, right? But a buzzkill is better than real death, which can be the unintended consequence of drinking at the river. Every year, the mix of alcohol and a powerful river lead to drowning deaths that could have been prevented. Leave the brews at home and just enjoy the beauty of the park.

## 8. SWIMMING IS FINE, BUT FOLLOW THESE RULES (AND LAWS)

Spring is upon us. Kayakers rush by and rafts punch the rapids full speed. Soon, more and more Richmonders will head to Belle Isle or Pony Pasture for a swim. Take heed. Every year, the James River claims at least a few lives.

I spoke over the phone with Ben Moore, the Paddleboard Program Lead at Riverside Outfitters. Moore, who has been a raft guide for more than 15 years and a waterman most of his life, said, "Every spring, there are deaths that come with the advent of warmer weather and the water still being higher from over the winter."

He said one of the most common mistakes people make as they head out is expecting to find the same conditions from the previous fall. Water levels are much higher in spring and early summer than they are in the fall. Don't be fooled, though. Most (if not all) of the deaths have nothing to do with the experienced boaters.

<sup>6</sup> Many involve alcohol, weak swimmers, and/or people who simply don't understand the way the river moves or changes with the seasons.

Many inexperienced rivergoers don't understand the hydrology or levels of the river and this leads to accidents that could have easily been avoided. Moore explained that the majority of the river in the city is whitewater. Even when you're in what seems to

be flatwater, there are still current and rapids downstream. “It looks safer than it is. It’s deceiving. If you’re not used to reading it, then flat water looks like flatwater. Flatwater’s a lot of current, like Tredegar Pool– when it’s eight feet high, it still looks like flatwater. It’s deceiving. There isn’t a lot of room for error.”

Another example is up near Hollywood Rapids, a popular spot to hang out and jump rocks. A once reachable rock in low water, seems easy enough to swim to. Once you reach it, it’s unlikely you will be able to swim back upstream to the same place you started. Jumping in can lead to the rushing water sweeping you over a rock into a hydraulic. Pair it with alcohol, and these accidents can be fatal.

Moore had two major pieces of advice for those looking to cool down in the James. First, he said, “Pay attention to water level signs that the park puts up.” These signs are posted at all of the major river entrances – including Belle Isle, Tredegar, Pony Pasture and Reedy Creek. When the river is over five feet, everyone in the water must wear a lifejacket. Over nine feet, and no one is allowed in the river without a high water permit.

<sup>7</sup> High water permits cost \$10, but you are unlikely to get one unless you have a lot of experience.

Second, he said that if you really want to spend time on the river, book a raft trip with one of the local companies in town. Going out on a raft trip will give you access to people who spend a lot of time on the river and know how to read it. Tell them what spots you like to swim at and ask them what to look for in terms of the current. “It’s not a formal course, but you could probably add a lot of stuff to the knowledge you and your group of friends use to stay out of trouble just by listening to people who know what’s going on talk about it,” Moore said.

## **9. BURNING THINGS ISN’T ALLOWED**

The park system does not allow open fires outside of park fireplaces and grills. In other words, all those fun bonfires people are setting at Texas Beach and Belle Isle are HUGE no-nos. Why? According to the United States Department of Agriculture Forest Service, fires become problems when people fail to fully extinguish a fire. Wind blows sparks to surrounding grass or fallen pine needles, which can spark a fire that has the potential to burn miles of forest. The Virginia Department of Forestry states that anyone in violation of the law regarding outdoor fires could face a \$500 fine, and if the fires spread, would be responsible for the costs of fire suppression.

<sup>8</sup>

## **10. BEING KIND**

This one is easy. The river, the rocks, and the trails are going to grow increasingly busy this spring and summer. The park system has over 1.3 million visitors a year, and inevitably, a majority of those are during the warmer months. When you cross paths with other users, no matter how they look or how old they are...Say hello. Be polite. Share the space. Spend some time playing an active role in making the park better. Pick up litter. We are all part of the same amazing river city, let’s act like neighbors and prove to each other how great this town is.

## **IN SUMMARY...**

There is no shortage of activities that one can partake in by or on the river.

9 If you are more of a land creature, you can rock climb or visit one of the many trails that run alongside the river and through the park system to hike, run, bird watch, or mountain bike. If you don't mind a little splash, there's an abundance of things to do, like rafting, paddleboarding, kayaking, canoeing, swimming, or fishing.

While everyone is encouraged to get out and enjoy the beautiful parks and river, these are all very important things you should keep in mind before you visit. Some are friendly reminders, some are law, and some could save your life.

1. Here is where I tell you that I've just completed raft guide training with Riverside Outfitters. I'm not an employee, yet, but I signed up for this opportunity because of their more than amazing service and their expertise on the water. [↗](#)
2. City of Richmond Sec. 4-243 states that "The free roaming of dogs is prohibited. All dogs must be kept under restraint or confined in an enclosure. Dogs must be walked on a leash when off the owner's property." [↗](#)
3. The Richmond Times Dispatch offers a [list of RVA off leash dog parks](#). [↗](#)
4. City of Richmond Sec. 4-90 states, "City residents are required to clean up waste from both cats and dogs in all public places and private property. When not disposed of properly, pet waste seeps into rivers and contaminates our drinking water." [↗](#)
5. Quote posted on the Friends of the James River Park website. [↗](#)
6. The limited data I was able to find on James River deaths in Richmond spanned about 7 years and confirmed that most of the deaths are not experienced paddlers. [↗](#)
7. These are actually laws. You can be fined. If you are in need of a rescue over 9ft and you don't have a high water permit, the cost of rescue will fall on the victim. High water permits can only be obtained at from Fire Station 13 at 411 E. Commerce Rd., call 804-646-8296. [↗](#)
8. More information can be found on the [Outdoor Fire Laws](#) page for the Virginia Department of Forestry. [↗](#)
9. But of course, all are done at one's own risk. [↗](#)



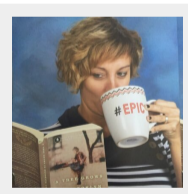
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