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Back Country Horsemen of America Gives Youth a Leg Up on Tomorrow By Sarah Wynne Jackson

Across the nation, Back Country Horsemen of America leads the campaign of saving trails for horse use. They cherish America's equestrian heritage and seek to preserve our right to ride horses on public lands for many generations to come. The next generation is here with us now; children of all ages who are fascinated with horses, love the outdoors, and are eager to learn new skills.

Back Country Horsemen love to share their knowledge, expertise, and experience, especially with young folk. For that reason, BCH groups from coast to coast look for innovative ways to work with kids. These projects also fulfill BCHA's mission to teach common sense use and enjoyment of horses in our back country and wilderness.

Putting Experience to Work

Sixteen-year-old Tyson Poulsen Bird, a member of the Eagle Rock Chapter of Back Country Horsemen of Idaho with his parents, demonstrates the strong work ethic prevalent in most Back Country Horsemen. For 12 years, Tyson has been as involved with the chapter's activities as his age would allow.

Tyson loves the wilderness and enjoys working alongside the adults, trimming brush, moving logs (almost as big as he is), nailing bridges together, and posting trail signs. Tyson enjoys hunting, fishing, camping, and horseback riding. He respects the outdoors and promotes Leave No Trace principles. He is also an avid Eagle Scout.

When it came time for Tyson to choose an Eagle Scout project, he consulted Dave Woodcock, the Caribou-Targhee National Forest Service Director. Dave suggested constructing a much-needed bog bridge in Tie

Canyon by Swan Valley, Idaho. Over the next few months, Tyson and Dave formulated a plan for a 62 inch wide, 37 foot long bridge. They decided how much lumber and which tools would be needed, and how many people and the number hours would be required to accomplish the job.

Despite a hot work day, 26 people drove up to 60 miles to participate in Tyson's project. Not only was the bridge construction completed in one day instead of the projected two days, three people from Tyson's work party also cleared brush from the trail and repaired another bog bridge. Tyson said he was humbled by all the effort and support that was given him by his friends, family, and the Eagle Rock Chapter of Back Country Horsemen of Idaho.

Learning New Skills

Every year, several members of Back Country Horsemen of the Flathead, a chapter of Back Country Horsemen of Montana, teach a one-day packing clinic to a group of students at Flathead High School in Kalispell, Montana.

Instructors begin in the Voc-Ag workshop with an overview of the qualities that make a good trail horse and a good packhorse, and the equipment necessary for packing. They explain the various requirements the US Forest Service has put into place, such as bear resistant food storage containers and protecting trees from horse damage. The safety portion of the clinic covers handling horses, lead ropes, sheaths on crosscut saws, and more.

The high school students also learn how to pack a load and distribute weight evenly on the packhorse, as well as how to manage high lines and the various knots needed when packing in the wilderness. Outside, the students work with seasoned trail horses, fitting them with saddles and packs. Instructors demonstrate ways to pack odd-shaped loads on the horses, such as an elk or lumber.

The Back Country Horsemen of the Flathead Chapter instructors recently visited with a few past students, who expressed appreciation for the opportunity to learn these specialized skills. Past students have gone on to

become members of trail crews, wranglers for a local outfitter, and even smoke jumpers.

Back Country Horsemen of Tomorrow

The youth who participate in these educational opportunities experience a wide variety of benefits. They learn sound judgment, self-sufficiency, methods of doing things in a consistent manner, thoughtfulness of their surroundings, and an appreciation for animals and wild lands. Working together with other children on these projects promotes an aptitude for leadership, problem solving, cooperation, and the fulfillment of learning a new skill.

Planting the seeds of these qualities in today's children promotes those qualities in tomorrow's adults, giving them a leg up in every area of life. The kids also take with them a new respect for the value of America's wilderness lands and our tradition of enjoying them by horseback. When today's generation is gone, these youngsters will continue the fight to preserve our right to ride on public lands.

About Back Country Horsemen of America

BCHA is a non-profit corporation made up of state organizations, affiliates, and at-large members. Their efforts have brought about positive changes regarding the use of horses and stock in the wilderness and public lands.

If you want to know more about Back Country Horsemen of America or become a member, visit their website: www.backcountryhorse.com; call 888-893-5161; or write PO Box 1367, Graham, WA 98338-1367. The future of horse use on public lands is in our hands!

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