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Back Country Horsemen of America Keeps Youth Involved

By Sarah Wynne Jackson

Back Country Horsemen of America highly values the historical tradition of traveling and enjoying this great land by horseback. They also recognize that our youth are key to perpetuating that tradition. For that reason, BCH groups from coast to coast make special efforts to get kids involved with their activities. These projects also fulfill BCHA's mission to teach common sense use and enjoyment of horses in our back country and wilderness.

High School Students Learn to Pack in the Back Country

Recently, a group of 16 students from Flathead High School in Montana spent a day with Back Country Horsemen of Montana learning how to pack horses. Held at the H.E. Robinson Vocational-Agricultural Center in Kalispell, Montana, the class was led by Andy Breland (vice president of Back Country Horsemen of the Flathead, a chapter of Back Country Horsemen of Montana) and Chuck Allen (a member of the BCH of the Flathead board of directors), with assistance by Janet Holter, also of BCH of the Flathead.

The morning began with instruction on packing equipment and safety. Then each student learned how to wrap and tie a straw bale into a load ready to be placed onto a pack horse. The kids were quick learners and threw half hitches and tied knots very well. By lunchtime they were ready to start slinging loads onto the horses.

The afternoon activities brought out the children's competitive side with a timed event. Each student had to prepare a load complete with three wraps of the rope and a half hitch over the last knot in the least amount of time. Ropes flew and cheers rang out as the contest progressed. The instructors

were impressed as some kids could prepare a pack in less than one minute when they had never done it before that day.

This class entails various units of instruction in different areas of skill. Some members of the class are also pursuing a defensive horsemanship certification along with the study of chainsaw and crosscut safety. Future plans include a spring fishing trip at the end of the fly fishing unit. Students who own horses will ride and pack gear for the rest of the class who will hike.

Back Country Horsemen enjoy opportunities such as these to pass on their riding and packing skills to a younger generation. The instructors stated that the most rewarding part of the day was when several students asked if they could join them on a pack trip into the wilderness.

Youth Adventure Includes Leave No Trace Training and Mule Packing

After two days of Leave No Trace ethics instruction and learning how to pack gear on mules, seven Back Country Horsemen of Virginia young riders helped pack a deer camp for hunters up the White Rock Mountain trail in Smyth County. A total of eleven kids, ages 4 through 13, attended at various times throughout the three-day adventure.

The two training days took place at Lost Creek Farm/Virginia Mountain Outfitters, Inc., in Buena Vista, Virginia, in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Deborah Sensabaugh, chairman of the Back Country Horsemen of Virginia board of directors, president of the Golden Horseshoe BCH (a chapter of BCHV), a Leave No Trace master educator, and owner of the farm, headed up the efforts. Lisa Prye, the farm's trainer and newest packer, assisted.

After their training, the group rode around the farm to choose their campsite for minimum impact. Back at the barn, everyone worked together weighing all their gear and effectively packing it on the mules. Gear included their tents, sleeping bags and duffels, as well as kitchen, camp, and Leave No Trace items. The group laid out their campsite area, including a scrim floor for their common tarped area and a Leave No Trace campfire well away from trees.

The next morning, the kids and Prye re-packed their gear. Sensabaugh reminded them of the Leave No Trace practices they had learned, such as cleaning up every bit of trash, putting out their campfire, and replacing the

earth and rocks in the fire pit. When everything was picked up and packed, the kids scattered leaves over the site. The children put their knowledge to use so well that, except for one piece of firewood that was packed out, there was no evidence they had been there.

Tomorrow's Back Country Horsemen

Children who take part in BCHA educational opportunities such as these experience great physical, emotional, and mental benefits. They learn good basic common sense, a logical order of doing things, an awareness of their surroundings, and empathy for other living creatures and the environment. Working with other children on these projects promotes leadership skills, teamwork, independent thinking, and the satisfaction of a job well done.

These qualities stay with the children as they grow into adults, giving them a leg up in every area of life. The kids also carry with them a deep appreciation for America's wild lands and the tradition of enjoying them from the back of a horse. 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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