

Photo by Kari Schiffman, Bitter Root BCH

Decker Dispatch



Riding Into the Future

By Mack Long- Chair, BCHMT

OUR PURPOSES

- To perpetuate the common sense use and enjoyment of horses in America's back country, roadless back country and wilderness areas.
- To work to ensure that public lands remain open to recreational stock use.
- To assist the various government and private agencies in their maintenance and management of said resource.
- To educate, encourage and solicit active participation by the general public in the wise and sustaining use of the back country resource by horses and people commensurate with our heritage.
- To foster and encourage formation of new state Back Country Horsemen organizations.
- To seek out opportunities to enhance existing areas of recreation for stock users.

Take a minute and picture your favorite outdoor experience. Maybe it's a mountain peak or trail you rode, a quiet lake you found, or a trail where the smell of pine is so thick you could taste it. Maybe it's a light fall rain in a remote valley with a bull elk bugling. Now, picture yourself getting there. What made it special? Was it just arriving there or was it the total experience. Driving up to it would not be the same. You would miss the smells, the connection with the land, the "wow" when you cross the ridge. For most of us, we enjoy the added benefit of the connection we have with the horse or mule we are riding.

Riding horseback into the heart of the backcountry is a time-honored partnership that has shaped the history of our public lands. It's a journey taken on horse or mule with a pack animal or pack string. This is not about a motorized shortcut; it's about a symbiotic relationship, a way to tread lightly and go deeper into our wild landscapes than many can on foot. This is a path that needs your voice.



For generations, horses and mules have been essential to accessing and protecting our most remote public lands. They helped build and maintain the trails we ride and hike today. They are a vital tool for rangers and volunteers who need to pack in supplies for trail work, conservation and public safety. This is the legacy we are fighting to preserve—a heritage of responsible use and access that is being challenged and is at risk of being lost.

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Riding Into the Future

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Some may see the horse as a relic of the past, but I see it as a key to our future. Here's why you should, too:

1. You are fighting for a living history.

America's public lands are full of human stories. The trails horses travel is a reminder of the explorers, settlers, and Indigenous peoples who first navigated landscapes. When you support stock use, you aren't just advocating for an activity; you are celebrating a tradition and protecting a skill set—the art of horsemanship and wilderness packing—that connects us to our national heritage.

2. It builds character and a conservation ethic.

Learning to pack with a horse or mule is not a passive activity. It teaches you responsibility and discipline at a level you won't find on a day hike. You learn patience, communication, and empathy for another living creature. It fosters a deep appreciation for the land itself, as you become intimately aware of your footprint and the resources needed to sustain you and your animals. You become not just a visitor, but a true steward.

3. It's an issue of equity and access.

Some landscapes should be maintained in a natural or pristine condition so future generations can experience "true" nature. As more and more land is developed, the need for a place to "get away" will only increase. We owe it to future generations to keep and properly manage our Public Lands.

Our public lands are a birthright, but they are also a responsibility. This is not a passive legacy we've been given; it's an active one that requires our engagement. Let's make sure that for generations to come, the sound of hoofbeats on a backcountry trail is not a sound from history, but a sign of a vibrant, inclusive, and protected wilderness.

It's your turn to get in the saddle and ride into the future of public land protection.



So, what can you do?

- Educate yourself. Work to preserve trails and access. Learn about the specific issues in your region.
- Raise your voice. When you see policy decisions affecting public lands, participate in the process. Submit comments, call your elected officials, and make sure they know that horse use matters to current and future generations.
- Get involved. Volunteer for a trail maintenance project with your BCH chapter. You can learn valuable skills and help keep these historic routes open for everyone.
- Share your story. Post your own backcountry photos and stories, showing the responsible, low-impact (Light on the Land) joy of stock-assisted travel. Show the world that this is a relevant, important part of our modern wilderness culture.

Rendezvous Recap

BCHMT gathered on the Beck Ranch in Gold Creek Montana for the 2025 summer Rendezvous June 26-29. The “dredge pond” camp is full of cottonwood trees that provide lots of shade and also good highline anchors. The event was hosted by the Mile High chapter. Thanks again to Mike and Trish Foster who brought their smoker and cooked up some amazing food for the Saturday dinner. We had around 85 people at the dinner and members brought about 50 horses for exploring the ranch. The weather was perfect for the gathering. The Mile High folks flagged a loop trail to the old dredge and the ghost town of Pioneer. The rest of the ranch was open to ride and explore as people chose. There are multiple wild horse herds on the ranch. Many riders reported having some great encounters with the wild ones. There were also some close up wildlife encounters with elk, deer, moose and bear. The ranch is a great place to ride and explore. There are miles of rolling hills with lots of open country. There is also a lot of mining history to explore.

By Wade Murphy, Mile High BCHMT
Photos by Gary Bailey, Mile High BCHMT



wild horses



Pioneer Ghost Town

Gold Creek History; Gold Creek was one of the first major gold discoveries in Montana. The Stewart brothers were prospecting the area and found the creek full of Gold in 1858. The mining in the valley grew until there was eventually around 3000 people there in the 1890s. It was placer gold. That is gold that is scattered around in the ground, not in veins. The placer miners would wash the hill sides away and run the debris into their trammels to separate the gold. Eventually two large dredges were brought in to work the valley. Most of the workers lived in the town of Pioneer with their families. Eventually the mining profits would taper off and the era of mining ended. As the mining company was pulling out the Beck family bought the land for ranching. At that time the town of Pioneer was still very much intact. The state of Montana was charging the Beck family taxes on the buildings of Pioneer. Many of the buildings were torn down, burned or relocated. There are still enough remnants left to make the ghost town fun to explore. It is fun to ride through the area and imagine a miner's life 100 years ago. There is still gold in Gold Creek. The late Don Beck used to say “I have 30 million dollars in gold in the ground of my ranch but it would cost 40 million to dig it up.” Mother nature is slowly healing the land but many scars still remain from the mining. Thank you to all who attended rendezvous 2025. It sounds like we will be headed back to Monture for rendezvous 2026.

A Trip in the Bob

By Sherri Lionberg, Last Chance BCHMT

We all have our favorite places to ride and pack, and mine happens to be Headquarters Pass up the South Fork of the Teton in the Bob Marshall. This year a trip had been planned first to the Absarokas, cancelled, then to the South Fork of the Flathead, cancelled, and finally to my favorite place over Headquarters Pass. While it is my favorite place, it is also one of those places that I rather dread running into other pack strings due to very few places to either turn a string around let alone actually get off the trail far enough to pass anyone. My packing group was also a bit worried about the heat when we were packing in – on our stock and our dogs. Roughly 15-20 years ago 3 of us from this same group made the trip when it was 103 degrees in Helena. My dog blistered the entire pads of both her front paws, which forced us to camp in one spot, then pack her 72#s out of there in a box, rather sedated with bute. (Yes I now know that isn't safe to give dogs, but it did work...). However, that's another story.

Our trip this time was excellent as we ran into absolutely no one on our way in. We were a little short of feed the first night down near Rock Creek when 13 mules wanted to wander excessively looking for the proverbial greener pastures. (Why do they always wander when its time to eat supper??!!) The night was rewarded with a bit of wolf serenade, so all was well. We packed up and headed back towards Gates Park to look for better feed but close enough for some fly fishing downstream. Again – every night and morning we were serenaded by both wolves and sandhill cranes, reminding all of us why we love packing in the Bob Marshall.

Fishing day (bear story there), trail ride, do nothing day, and too soon, it was time to pack up and head back up over Headquarters Pass, again hoping for meeting no one. Alas, such was not the case as I rounded a corner and met up with riders pulling strings – thankfully in about the only place we could all manage to work around each other. The best part – most of them were also from Last Chance Back Country horsemen and all friends! It is always nice to chat with strangers on the trail, but even better to see friends going to enjoy the same place we all love.

The icing on the trip was having our mules notice the 23 goats on the hillside as we ate lunch just under the pass. We all hope to enjoy many more.

Hanging Out at the Trailhead

By Greg Schatz, Flathead BCHMT

Photos by Ally Pike and Beth Vallieres

August 22-24 Montana Conservation NextGen partnered with the Back Country Horsemen of Montana Youth Program to host a campout at the Monture Guard Station. NextGen is a branch of Montana Conservation Elders and BCHMT members Smoke Elser and Greg Schatz are on the board of MCE. Our goal for the campout is to help the next generation of packers and conservationists take small steps to becoming BCH members.

I remember being in my 20s and walking into a BCH meeting. It was a bunch of old people and it was terrifying. With NextGen we are building a community of like minded people who love the outdoors. As one young person said as she left Monture “this was amazing”. By building community it lessens the fear which helps young people take the first step towards belonging to BCH.



Decker Dispatch

Letter from the Chair

By Mack Long, Chair BCHMT



First, let me thank all of you who have followed and been engaged in trying to protect and maintain our public lands from sales and transfers. We were successful in the first round of keeping our public lands because of your efforts.

Public lands in Montana and across the nation are facing a new round of challenges due to federal agency reorganization and significant budget cuts. These cuts are already affecting trail maintenance and jeopardizing programs essential for managing remote wilderness and backcountry areas.

The U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and National Park Service are undergoing major restructuring that includes substantial personnel reductions. This has led to a decrease in the number of trained trail crew members, a change that will result in a growing backlog of trail maintenance.

The problem will only increase as time goes on. The restructuring could lead to the loss of experienced personnel, which in turn could result in trail closures and diminished public access to wilderness and backcountry areas.

A critical concern facing us in the future is the potential loss of the federal agencies' stock programs, which use horses and mules to manage remote landscapes. These animals are invaluable for trail maintenance, maintaining structures, and public safety in wilderness areas where technology and heavy equipment are not viable options.

From the perspective of budget analysts in Washington D.C., these stock programs may appear costly. However, managing public lands from a computer cannot replace the on-the-ground expertise and tools needed to maintain these areas. Preserving these stock programs and the skilled personnel who run them is critical for keeping wild lands accessible for future generations.

Thanks again to all of you who wrote letters, made phone calls and talked to our Montana Congressional delegation and made your voice heard. Thanks to our Congressional Delegation for hearing us. Understand our work isn't done and we need to continue to pay attention and stay involved.

Mack

Contact Mack at alpenglowranch.mack@gmail.com

Mile High Reflects on 2025

By Gary Bailey, Mile High BCHMT

Photos by Gary Bailey and Wade Murphy

With the crisp mornings of fall upon us, we find ourselves reflecting on the earlier months of 2025 where the Mile High Chapter enjoyed a solid year of growing, learning, riding, and serving. A lot of miles were covered this year with members enjoying each other's company and the beauty of Montana.

May found the Chapter hosting its annual packing clinic in Butte. With beautiful weather, the members were able to share their knowledge and passion for packing.

This year, the Mile High Chapter had the honor of hosting the annual Montana BCH Rendezvous held at Gold Creek, Montana. Lots of good riding, good food, and shared stories helped to create a successful event.

Mile High members once again provided service by participating in the annual Maud S Canyon water haul in Butte, MT. This service included the Mile High and Three Rivers Chapters teaming up to pack around 250 gallons of water for the Rotary club out of Butte. The Rotary Club then uses the water to spray weeds on their trail system East of Butte. The Maud S Canyon trail system connects to the Continental Divide Trail System.

In addition to the annual water haul, the summer months found Mile High members clearing numerous trails in the Pioneer and Pintler ranges, as well as providing some much-needed bridge work on a well-used Pioneer trail. The culmination of service work found several members helping biologists pack 800 fish into a high mountain lake.

Overall, it was a great year for our Chapter and we look forward to hopefully enjoying a pleasant fall as we head into the brrrrr months ahead!



Safety Moment^{By}

Wade Murphy, Mile High BCH - Circle Cross Equine

Can your horse find peace?

Is your horse (or mule) at peace around you and while you ride? Do they enjoy being with you? A horse that can find peace in its work is a much safer horse. We work our animals very hard, but we always try to let them find peace as the work. As I work with horses and mules I like to present things to them and let them make the decision to do the right thing. If I can get my horse to make it his idea to do what I am looking for we both win. There is a very common saying in horsemanship "make the right thing easy and the wrong thing difficult". That is a very good rule to use around horses. Another way to think about that is "make the right thing peaceful and the wrong thing stressful". Horses seek what is peaceful in their lives.

I have been working with a mule for a client. I'm getting it ready to be used as a saddle mule. She is a tall mule with a smaller rider, so she needs to be willing to stand quietly by rocks and logs for mounting. To train them for this I use the 'right thing peaceful / wrong thing stressful' approach. I will work the animal with busy feet away from the mounting block. I keep their energy up, but I do it calmly to keep their adrenaline low. When I see that they are ready to stop, I invite them to stop by the mounting block. They get a choice. They can have busy feet away from the block or stand quietly beside the block. They quickly learn to find peace standing at the block. With repetition they soon learn how peaceful and easy it is to stand with the rider above them for mounting. I teach this to all my riding animals. You never know when you might need to load an injured rider onto a horse for a rescue. It also seems like my horses get taller every year.

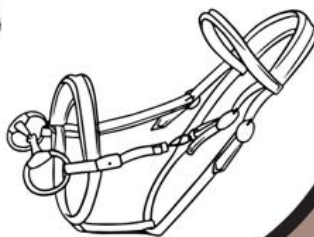
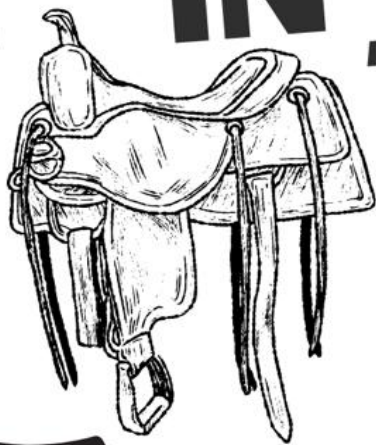


We got to spend last week with our 17-year-old, horse crazy niece. She brought a couple of her horses to our house so we could work on them together. She has been having trouble with her rodeo horse. The mare has very high energy and is always busy footed. Our young niece was following advice from the wrong people and was causing the horse to be very stressed out. She was using an aggressive leverage bit with a nose band, a chain around the chin and a tie down to keep the head down. She was also riding with a tight rein. The mare could never find relief from pressure. She couldn't find peace. We put her into a simple snaffle bit, removed her tie down and worked with the niece to get her riding on a loose rein. After about 10 minutes of riding she saw a major change in her mare. The horse quickly relaxed and was softly trotting around the arena with her head down. I also showed her the importance of pausing with the horse and letting it "soak" and relax between exercises. The mare was finally able to find peace under saddle. The smile on the teenager's face was priceless. Too often the problems that people have with their animals are caused by the rider. Ironically, they are causing the very problems that they are trying to fix with their horses. As you progress with your horse, I encourage you to help them find peace as they work. You will enjoy a much quieter and more relaxing ride.

Safe and happy trails,

Wade

**ARE YOU
YOUNG AND
IN NEED OF
TACK?**



**CHECK OUT
OUR GEAR UP
PROGRAM!**



QR.CO.DE/BEEUDM



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Gear Up is a program to share saddles and other horse tack with people who need it. It is gear which is donated to BCHMT by its members. For more information go to <https://bchmt.org/wp/flathead/gear-up-program/>

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If you would like to join us, please contact
a chapter in your area.



Schedule for chapter news article submissions.

Submit 400-500 words, photos in separate .jpg files (not in Word)

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Editor reserves the right to edit articles.

Winter Issue: articles due January 5th: Beartooth, Bitter Root, Cabinet, Mission Valley, Three Rivers, Wild Horse Plains, and convention hosting chapter.

Spring Issue: articles due May 5th: Charlie Russell, East Slope, Flathead, Gallatin, and Judith Basin.

Fall issue: articles due September 5th: Last Chance, Mile High, Missoula, North West Montana, Selway-Pintler Wilderness.