

Photo by Kari Schiffman, Bitter Root BCH

# Decker Dispatch



Mark Your Calendar!

## 2026 BCHMT State Convention *Historic Trails and Campfire Tales*

**March 27-29, 2026**

Hosted by Gallatin Valley Back Country Horsemen

Article by Molly Glenn

### 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.

Hello from the Gallatin Valley Chapter of Back Country Horsemen of Montana. The convention is just around the corner. It will be March 27-29, 2026 at the Best Western GranTree in Bozeman. Early registration ends on March 1st. Registration is \$150, which includes Saturday lunch, Saturday banquet dinner and Sunday breakfast. After March 1st, this will go up to \$165. There is a block of rooms at the Best Western GranTree and the Days Inn (next door) under Back Country Horsemen. There are additional rooms in a block at the Field and Stream Lodge (also next door), using the reservation code: BCHM2026. All three hotels will end the special pricing for the room blocks on 2/27/26. Hotel contact phone numbers and online registration can be accessed from links on the state website and the Gallatin Valley Back Country Horsemen website.

Along with Statewide business, we have Patricia Petrina giving reflective talk about her back country and front country pack trip from the Mexican border to the Canadian boarder. We heard about the start of her journey at the convention last March. In addition, we have confirmed three breakout speakers (a fourth is pending). Patricia will follow up in a break out session, talking about her work with starting her Mustangs...how she picked them and what she is doing differently with the one she just purchased. Tamara Erickson, who owns Sundown Saddlery, LLC, will be talking about saddle fitting. Jackie Stewart, from the Gallatin Sheriff's department, will be talking about starting a mounted unit in the Gallatin County Sheriff's department and sharing just a bit about her latest adventure, utilizing horses for search and rescue (scenting).

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# 2026 BCHMT State Convention

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We will have a keynote speaker Saturday evening just before our auction, Ryan (Cal) Callaghan. He is the current CEO of Back Country Hunters and Anglers and a consultant for Meateater.

The photo contest is always a highlight, as we get to enjoy amateur photography at its best! Our categories this year are:

- 1) At Work,
- 2) Scenery/Landscapes;
- 3) Fun and Family;
- 4) Mixed Media (new last year and a big hit!)
- 5) Old Timers/Historical (new category that waives the size and matting restrictions... let's see how far back our work extends! Dig out those old photo albums...)
- 6) Craziest Pack Load (another new category that is sure to bring some wild looking things that have been packed into the back country!)

Bring photos to the display area by 9 am on Saturday, labeled, so we can properly announce winners.

With all this mild weather, I hope folks are out practicing their crosscut skills for a grand competition. We will have a practice log set up for awhile on Friday and the competition will be Saturday afternoon, right after the breakout sessions finish.

The Atrium of the hotel will be FILLED with vendors and information tables. So be sure to bring a few extra dollars, so you can do some shopping.

There will be some live music in the ballroom Friday night, with some snacks and a cash bar for folks to hang out and get reconnected.

Things are really coming together for a great weekend! We can't wait to host everyone here in Bozeman. I hope all the chapters have been selling lots of raffle tickets! We worked hard to get prizes that would appeal to a wide audience. Remember, the winner does not need to be present to win.

So get your reservations and keep selling those raffle tickets. If your chapter needs more just send a note to Molly Glenn ([sedancowgirl@gmail.com](mailto:sedancowgirl@gmail.com)).

Any future updates will be sent out to chapter presidents. Keep an eye on those registration and hotel room block deadlines.



See you in March!



# Letter from the Chair

By Mack Long- Chair, BCHMT

Just a short note to say **THANK YOU** to all of our BCHMT members who have stepped up to defend our Public Lands. We've faced challenges from multiple fronts and at multiple times, and each time BCHMT has answered the call—writing letters, contacting our delegation, and showing up to make it clear that we stand strong for these lands.

We do this not just for ourselves, but for future generations—to ensure they have natural landscapes where they can play, fish, ride, hunt, hike, and camp. If we don't protect these places now, they will be lost forever.

This is our watch. This is our time to do our part to protect our American legacy lands. When we look back at those heroes who fought to keep some lands wild and accessible for all, we owe them immense gratitude. Without their efforts, we wouldn't have the opportunities we enjoy today.

My hope is that 50 or 100 years from now, our great-grandsons and great-granddaughters will still have wild and natural public lands to enjoy—and the inspiration to continue the fight.

Thank you for standing strong.

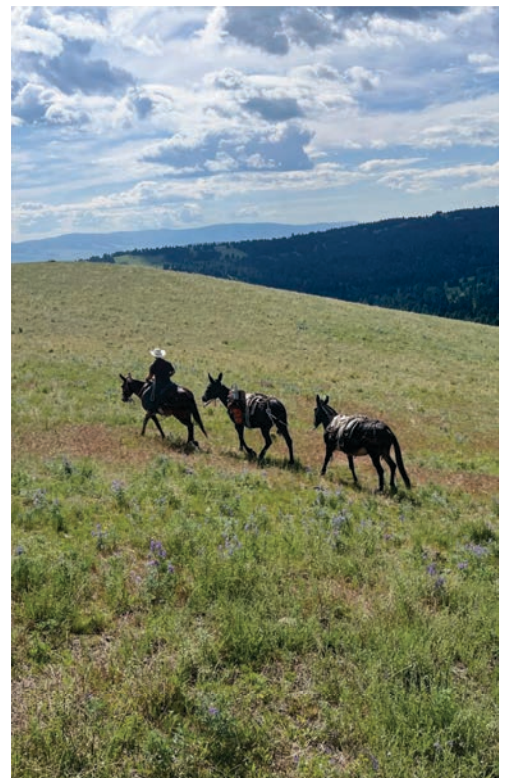
Mack



Bob Marshall Wilderness  
Photo by Gary Bailey, MHBCH



4-H Packing Clinic  
Photo by Gary Bailey, MHBCH



Gold Creek, MT  
Photo by Gary Bailey, MHBCH

# Safety Moment

By Wade Murphy, Mile High BCH - Circle Cross Equine

## Tools In Your Toolbox

Many years ago, I used to be a mechanic. I still remember how frustrated I would get if I didn't have the correct tool to do the job I was working on. There always seemed to be some special puller or gadget that I was lacking to do the job correctly. When I would finally get the correct tool for the job, everything was much easier. I have found that there is a direct parallel to this in our world of horses. The process of training horses is a series of building blocks where we build a foundation of skills so that both horse and rider can head out on the trail with confidence. I see all of these building blocks as "tools in my toolbox". Anytime I run into trouble on the trail I like to return to those basic tools to regain control of my animal and help them regain their confidence. When a rider finds himself in a bad situation on the trail, and does not have the tools to help the horse out of the situation, things can get dangerous very quickly.

I have a simple checklist of skills that I use when I am working a young or green horse. I start in a round corral. When they have enough basic skills, I progress to an open arena. Next, we work out in the pasture and work on obstacles. I slowly work the colt more and more away from the herd and continue to add challenges to give them confidence. In time they are able to travel out of eyesight of their herd mates and head out on the trail by themselves. This takes time and patience! Eventually I am confident enough that I am willing to ride this animal in the back country with a high degree of safety. At anytime during this process when the colt gets into trouble I go back to my toolbox and use basic exercises to help them relax and regain their confidence. Riding an animal that lacks fundamental training in the backcountry is very dangerous. I won't do it. The following is a list of things that the colt needs to be able to do relatively well as we progress through training. The goal for all of these exercises is to do them with minimal pressure with light and soft cues.



My "toolbox" of basics under saddle:

- Stand still while I mount.
- Light, soft, lateral flexion of the head with a smooth snaffle bit.
- A light, soft 1 rein stop.
- Good hip control at a standstill and a walk.
- Good front end control without forward movement.
- Light and soft movement off of my legs.
- A decent stop using my seat and minimal reins.
- Flexing at their poll to soft rein action.
- Good speed control. As they progress in training, I work on lots of different "gears". Speeding up and slowing down at all gaits.
- They should self-regulate their speed on a loose rein.
- A soft back up.

This is my personal standard for the basic skills that a horse needs to have before I head down the trail with them. This is a simplified list of things that I focus on when I work with people in my clinics. There is always risk in our chosen lifestyle of riding animals in the mountains, but we can greatly reduce that risk with quality training. I encourage you to do a self-evaluation of yourself and your horse. Find areas that you need to work on and set some goals. If you are not sure how to reach your goals, find someone that can help you. Spring will be here before we know it and it will be time once again to get out into the mountains. Beginning riders are trying to ride like intermediate riders...Intermediate riders are trying to ride like the advanced riders...

Advanced riders are focused on the basics...keep it simple...

Safe and happy trails,

Wade



# Canvas Castle Traditions

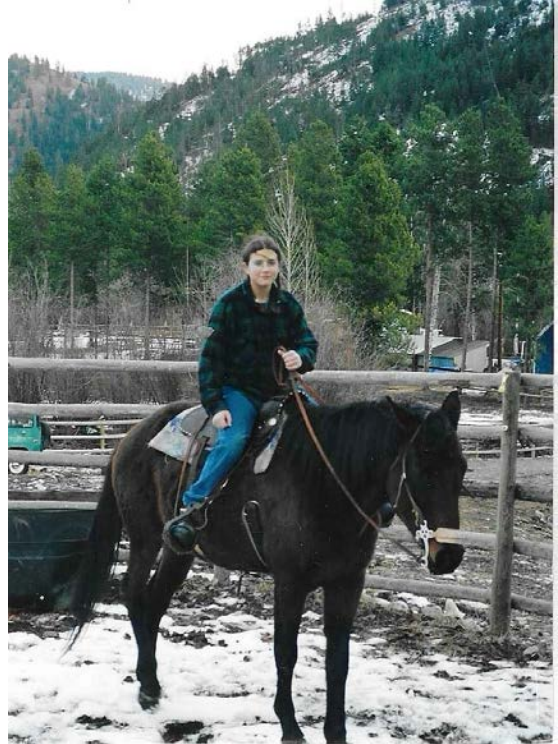
By Maria Rennaker, Selway-Pintler Wilderness BCH

I woke to the sound of tiny feet pitter-pattering across the straw bed and sleeping bag I was nestled in. The field mice were seeking refuge in our canvas castle as the snow blew sideways drifting outside. I lay there in my cocoon waiting to hear the men stir, but the snores drug on in a rhythmical fashion. I recognized the sound as both annoying and yet a safe and welcome melody in the dark wilderness which surrounded us. The soft neighing outside was an instant alarm clock to Allen, the horses were hungry. They had packed us in yesterday and spent the night standing on the highline fending off the spitting snow. I slithered to the top of my bag and dawned my headlamp, quickly slipping into my woolies and boots. I knew the chill wouldn't last as Allen was already stoking the stove. Dad and Freddie found their way out of their cocoons to join us by the stove. The men had sleep on their faces, but at 13 years old I could hardly wait. Opening day was here and this was my first year to tag an elk.

The next hour passed quickly as I helped my dad lead the stock to the creek and dance to keep warm as he cut the snow- and ice-covered water with an axe. After re-opening the hole to water the stock, we tossed them well earned alfalfa and grass hay. Dad side eyed me as I slipped Billy Boy, a stout 15.3 hand sorrel gelding, a little extra alfalfa. I smiled and reported "he will need his energy later". He was our best pack horse, and I intended on him doing work today.

We tucked our way back into the tent met by a fragrant wall of warm cinnamon applesauce pancakes and fried eggs. The fried egg was a luxury in elk camp. The crew on the highline tasked with not only the delivery of us and our gear but also for unbroken whole raw eggs. I impressed the men with my appetite, putting away three pancakes on my plate and the remaining two in the cook's stack, all while packing my lunch: a full sandwich, orange, chips, granola bar, trail mix, and jerky. I was ready for the hike and day ahead.

We headed out of camp well before daylight, headlamps on and my trusty Ruger Model 77 30.06 slung across my shoulder. For every stride my dad took through the fresh snow I took two not missing a beat. We headed north out of camp hitting an old outfitter's trail that climbed and climbed taking us out of the valley floor, through the timber disappearing as we started to move from pine to the edge of a mountain meadow. This is where we would sit and wait for daylight and the hope of elk grazing. I grabbed my heavy jacket and gloves from my pack, cleared the snow from the base of a tree for dad and I, and we sat.



Author at 13 and her mountain horse

Sunrise found the meadow and us, its light crept along the surface revealing waves of snow-covered grass but no elk. The sun continued to rise revealing the far edge of the meadow and the timber beyond. Hole punches of tracks could be seen across the meadow left behind by yesterday's elk. Yet we sat and waited. I leaned into my dad for warmth; waiting was a cold man's game. Finally, mid-morning he tucked his binoculars back into his vest, peeled off his heavy jacket and gloves and we started hiking. We passed through the meadow into the live pine and finally the burn beyond. The steps and miles drug on. Lunch came and went and still, no elk.

The sun peaked and headed for the west signaling that we had met our turnaround time. Dad and I headed back toward the meadow with the goal of sitting on the edge for the remaining light hours for an elk to present himself. Halfway through the burn he came to a sudden halt. My eyes shot around the timber ahead of me and landed on a dark anklered buck grazing 75 yards down the slope from us.

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# Canvas Castle Traditions

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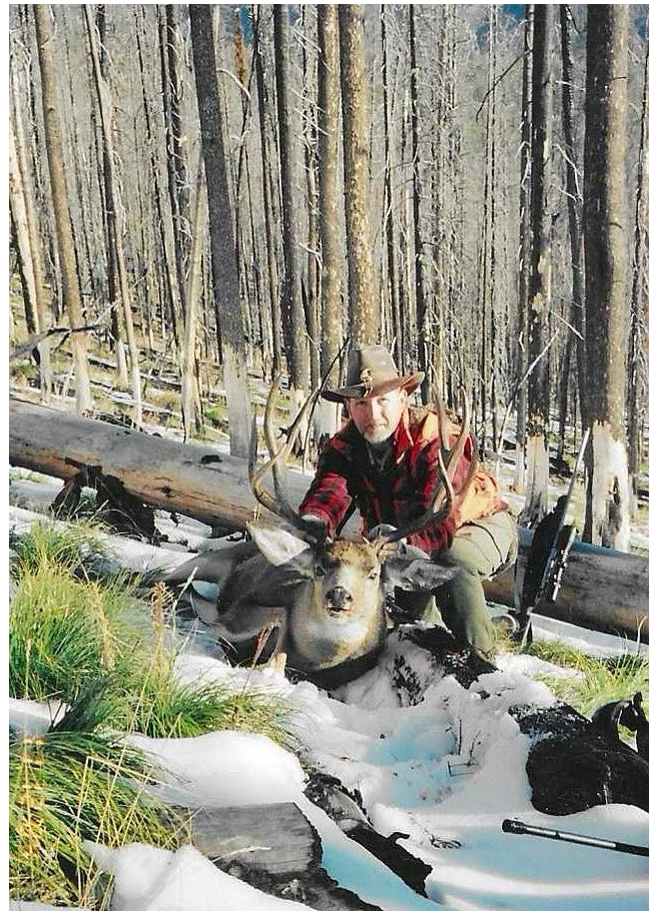
Dad glanced sideways and eyed a tree for me to lean and rest on. As I watched the buck I could see the depth of his forks, his wide frame and heavy base. He was a treasure for a public land general unit buck. I could see the excitement in my dad's eyes, for years he hunted hard and never had the opportunity to harvest a big muley buck. I looked up at my dad and nodded to him to take the shot. He did not hesitate and gracefully moved to the rest, raised his gun and took the shot. The buck dropped instantly. I congratulated him with a high five.

About two hours later we had the deer quartered and carried to the nearest trail when the welcome sound hit my ears. The clip clop of Billy Boy's feet climbing the trail fit with a decker saddle and manty ropes. Allen called out with his southern draw and quirky smile "figured I'd find ya'll here".

As Billy Boy trucked down the trail ahead of me, fully loaded with meat, I smiled to myself. It wasn't the hunt I envisioned but I couldn't imagine it any other way. My dad always put me first and it felt good to see him harvest a beautiful buck. As Billy Boy navigated the rocky trail and downfall, I marveled at his mountain sense and patience. He carried the clunky load of meat the same way he gingerly carried the load of eggs and supplies on the way in. He and the rest of the herd made this trip possible, so that we could be here making memories and creating traditions. He helped cement my passion for pursuing big game and spending nights in a canvas castle amongst the trees and starry skies with my dad.



Author's dad and Billy Boy on an a day elk hunt



Author's dad and mountain muley



# Beartooth Back Country Horsemen

By Robin Morris, Beartooth BCH

January 1, 2026: Hitting the trail on the first day of the year is a tradition. With mild weather in the forecast, it was a no-brainer—let's head to the Wilderness. My number one riding partner, Tara, rode the Stillwater Trail yesterday and reported reaching the Overlook, which is seven and a half miles in. She noted there was some ice and quite a bit of downfall, but everything was passable. I'd planned on joining her, but Beau's farrier rescheduled for the morning. I was grateful for her reconnaissance; it let the anticipation settle instead of the uncertainty.

When I stepped outside to feed at 5:00 a.m., the 24° air was still and sharp, biting lightly at my cheeks. The moon hung bright and unapologetic in a cloudless sky, throwing long shadows across the yard. The forecast promised temperatures climbing into the low 50s by afternoon. There was no rush; I knew that if I swung a leg over my mule, Beau, around 10:00, we'd have plenty of daylight to reach our destination and return comfortably.

I gathered snacks for myself, Beau, and Aghy, my Aussie mix and favorite trail partner, along with extra gloves, a warmer hat, and the pocket hand-warmers Tara gave me for Christmas. Experience has taught me that actual weather and forecasts are not always synonymous, especially in January.

Before catching Beau, I started the truck and cranked up the heat, the engine humming steadily in the cold. Aghy leapt in and claimed the passenger seat, eyes bright, tail ticking against the door in short, impatient beats. While the truck warmed, I fired up the Stihl leaf blower and sent a week's worth of dust lifting from Beau's coat. Mules love to roll, and he is no exception. Under the overhead light, the dirt rose in thick clouds before settling back on the mats covering the ground. By 8:30, Beau was tacked up, clean enough, and ready to load.

The roads were quiet, the kind of quiet that follows late-night celebrations and the collective decision to sleep in on New Year's morning. I knew I'd need fuel on the way home, and when I reached the turnoff at Fishtail and saw all the Rockin' J gas pumps glowing without a soul in sight, I took the opportunity. I knew they wouldn't stay that way for long.



Back on the road, Aghy sat upright, alert, her nose twitching as if cataloging every scent rushing past the cracked window. As we neared Dean, she planted her front paws on the dashboard, eyes fixed ahead. I could practically hear her question: Are we going to Island Lake?

"No," I told her. "We're headed to the Stillwater." Her tail wagged once or twice—measured approval—before she settled in for the rest of the drive.

I laughed when I pulled into the parking lot—five vehicles already there. Not surprising; New Year's resolutions tend to begin on Day One. The wind was howling, tugging at doors and jackets, so I swapped my ballcap for a wool hat and pulled the ear flaps down tight.

As soon as I swung a leg over Beau, Aghy launched into her signature siren, barking at full volume, announcing to anyone within earshot that she was ready to hit the trail. I rode past the parked vehicles—locals, judging by the plates—and laid a hand on a few hoods. The metal still held warmth. I figured I'd catch up with them within a mile or two.

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# Beartooth Back Country Horsemen

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Tara's report proved accurate. Not far up the Bypass Trail, we encountered ice—dull, gray sheets tucked into shaded corners. I skirted around it where I could and felt grateful to be traveling uphill rather than down. With rising temperatures and steady wind, it would likely be slush by the time we headed back. As we continued, downed trees began to appear. This section of the trail is narrow; any downfall is a deal-breaker. You either turn around or clear it. I could see where Tara had stopped and pulled out her saw several times—clean cuts, branches dragged just far enough aside.

After the Gorge, the wind finally eased as we slipped into the shelter of the trees. The sudden quiet was almost startling. With the gusts behind us, the trail felt indulgent—like riding royalty down a red carpet of pine needles, soft and fragrant beneath Beau's steady, rhythmic stride. The forest smelled green and cold, with just a hint of damp earth waking beneath the warming sun.

Beau's ears snapped forward—hikers and dogs. Lots of dogs. I counted eight hikers, all women, and nine or ten dogs, though with that much motion it was hard to be exact. Collars jingled softly, happy tails wagging. Every one of them was well behaved, stepping politely off the trail to let us pass. I offered a hearty, "Happy New Year!" and they answered in kind. Once again, I was genuinely impressed by the control these gals had over their off-leash pack.

Several water crossings were frozen solid, opaque, and webbed with cracks. I held my breath and gave Beau all the rein he wanted, trusting his judgment as he tested each step, hooves scraping lightly before committing. I was thankful for Beau's shoes, with Borium tips, heels, and rimpads to repel snow. The worst crossing was still ahead—a notorious runoff that fills a shallow pond and freezes slick as glass. In past winters, it was so treacherous I couldn't even cross it on foot, opting instead to bushwhack around. Today, an old-growth quaking aspen lay fallen straight across the pond, its pale trunk spanning the ice like a narrow bridge.



I coaxed Beau forward for a closer look. He didn't like it, and neither did I. Tara had cleared the vertical branches, opening a narrow passage, but the footing beneath was a mess: holes hidden under ice, scattered logs laid out for hikers to keep their feet dry, and jagged shards from the shattered crown of the tree. Two smaller aspens crowded the right side, making the passage uncomfortably tight—especially since the better footing lay to the right.

I urged Beau forward. He hesitated, backed up, then tried again. On the third attempt, he committed, edging right. I reached out and bent the aspens as far as I could, bark rasping against my gloves, sparing my legs the worst of it. I was grateful for my sturdy canvas pants. I imagined Tara's boots must have taken on water clearing this mess. We'll definitely need to schedule a trail-clearing sooner rather than later.

We encountered several more downed trees that forced us off the trail, some of them sizable. Next time, I'll bring the two-person crosscut saw. Along the river, ice draped itself over the rocks, forming clustered little islands that caught and scattered the light. The breeze picked up again, so I activated one of the hand warmers. Heat bloomed slowly in my palm—pretty nice. I alternated hands between the pocket and the reins, savoring the contrast.

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# Beartooth Back Country Horsemen

(Continued from Page 8)

We reached the Overlook just after noon, tied up, and pulled out our snacks while searching for a spot out of the wind. Though the sun felt warm on my face, the breeze off the water cut through quickly. Aghy and I settled on the east side of a rock ledge. She was thrilled to receive her midday dog bone, grabbing it and scooting away as if I might change my mind. After gnawing it down with noisy enthusiasm, she returned for her share of peanut butter crackers.

I kept our break short, wanting to be on our way before the sun dipped and temperatures followed. I fed Beau his crackers, slipped the bridle back on, and we headed toward the trailhead.

The ice we'd encountered earlier had softened considerably and no longer posed a hazard, now wet and granular underfoot. Just under four miles from the trailhead, I spotted a dog ahead of us wearing a backpack. I wondered aloud, "Where are your people?" Moments later, a couple appeared and quickly called the dog to their side as we passed.

As we approached Sioux Charlie Lake, I scanned the area for hikers, a popular turnaround point for many, but seeing no one, we continued. Soon, we met a lone woman and her dog. She grinned and said she was amazed—and delighted—by the incredible January weather. I had to agree.

I swung off Beau at 3:15, tired in the best possible way. The light had softened to gold, the wind had cooled, and the trail behind us held the story of the day in tracks, scuffs, and bent branches. Sharing the first day of 2026 with Beau and Aghy—ice crossed, obstacles negotiated, miles traveled in uncommon January warmth—felt less like a plan and more like a blessing, and precisely the right way to begin the year—time to schedule a trail clearing with the Beartooth Back Country Horsemen.



# Three Rivers Back Country Horsemen

By Graeme McDougal, Three Rivers BCH

The early riding season was a busy one for the 3 Rivers Chapter. We started the season with our long-time partners, Montana FWP, at Bannack State Park. On May 10 we had 8 members participate in Bannack clean up days and the installation of new hitch rails for horse use. This project was overdue, but we got it done before a catastrophe.

The first group ride of the year was at Sandy Hollow on the South side of McCartney Mtn. This has become an annual warm up ride, not too strenuous, of approximately 6 miles. The area has very unique geology and an opportunity to look at the Notch Bottom bison jump and to study the layout that made it work. We also took a ride later in May to Road Agents Rock on May 26. This was another pleasant ride with moderate elevation gains and losses. Because of scheduling conflicts there were only 3 members present at Sandy Hollow and 3 members with 3 guests at Road Agents Rock. We all had a grand time and enjoyed the rides and companionship.

Several projects followed soon after these warm-up rides. On May 30, 5 members joined Forest Service personnel for chain saw certification. All members were re-certified and 1 member was also certified as a faller. The next day 8 of us joined our Wild Montana partners and installed hitch-rails at the Mono Creek trail-head. We also did some trail clearing work in the immediate area and rebuilt a small portion of the Mono Creek campground fence.

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2025 Bannack Hitch Rail Project



Maude S trail Weed Spraying



Sandy Hollow Ride



Mono Creek Hitch Rails



# Three Rivers Back Country Horsemen

(Continued from Page 10)

On June 7, in conjunction with our Beaverhead County 4-H partners, the Chapter put on an open to the public packing clinic and a barbecue lunch afterwards. We discussed animal husbandry in the field and taught both Sawbuck with pannier packing and Decker with mantly load packing. We had enough equipment and "iron horses" that everyone got an opportunity to try both styles of packing. We discussed methods to maintain your livestock in the field and making your camp Light on the Land. Everyone enjoyed lunch and the conversation that followed. Approximately 12 4-H and members of the public attended.

In 2024 the Chapter adopted the Blue Creek trail in the West Pioneers for a trail maintenance project. June 4 was the first ride/maintenance of that trail. We encountered at few down trees and they were removed. This turned into a summer long project with the bug killed trees and the winds of the past summer. The last ride on the trail was September 10 and as usual more trees were removed from the trail.

On June 20, 4 members joined with the Mile High Chapter to pack water for the weed-spraying project on the Maude S trail on Butte's East Ridge. All went well. On August 11 we again joined our Wild Montana partners with a campground clean up at Waukena Lake. After riding to the lake folks spent the first day cleaning up the campground and taking out the fire rings. They then camped overnight and packed out the garbage the next day.

The Chapter closed out 2025 with a delicious Christmas dinner at the Blue Anchor Cafe at Twin Bridges on December 10 with 16 members and a guest from Australia present. We are all looking forward to the riding season in 2026.



Road Agents Rock Ride



Packing Clinic



Packing Clinic



Packing Clinic

# Trail Trials in the Bob Marshall

By Dan Mathis and John Errecart, Wild Horse Plains Back Country Horsemen

In February of 2024 a group of family and friends from Wild Horse Plains BCH were eating lunch on the front porch of the Monture Guard Station during our annual snowmobiling trip to Seeley Lake, MT. On our way in we had passed the Dunham Creek road access to the Lodgepole Creek Trailhead. This proximity led to discussion about a previously planned trip into the Bob Marshall via Jenny and Young's Creek trails that had been derailed by the 2017 Rice Ridge fire.

As chance would have it, shortly after the snowmobile trip, I saw Jack Rich (Rich Ranch Outfitting and Guest Ranch - Seeley Lake) getting a haircut at Cost Cutters. Knowing Jack was very familiar with riding in to the area from Lodgepole trailhead, I asked about the trail. His blunt response was "it's good". He then proceeded to elaborate about the phenomenal fishing in that corner of the BMW, and how the nutrient release following the Rice Ridge fire had enhanced fishing even more in Young's Creek. Soon afterwards, at the State Back Country Horsemen Convention, Smoke Elser recounted some of his experiences (Hush of the Land, Elser and Maggi, 2024). One of Smoke's recollections was of a trip to Young's Creek (Chapter 10, Hush of the Land) where he also talked about what he felt was the best fishing in BMW and when three of his wranglers had packed in rock climbing gear and rappelled into Hole in the Wall. Never accused of being the sharpest tool in the shed, even I couldn't ignore the calling for a trip to Young's Creek.

With the spring and early summer work projects completed, relatives and friends come and gone, it was finally Saturday - July 20th. As the summer progressed and the trip plan evolved, our group went through several iterations, but in the end we wound up with three riders and 7 head of stock. We made the 3 hour drive from our homes in Sanders County, MT, to the Lodgepole Trailhead with plenty daylight left to setup overnight highlines, open air cots and enjoy each other's company and a few beverages. Manties tied up, bear boxes and paniers filled; we were ready for a leisurely yet efficient start come morning.

Sunday - July 21st 7am. Coffee✓, oatmeal ✓, tacked up ✓. Time to load up and hit the trail. Not being our first pack trip, loads had been assembled and loaded on the stock back at home prior to the trip. Well, apparently there's a difference between a loaded bear box and an empty bear box. Once loaded on the horse that was to carry the second set of bear boxes, he decided it was time to unload the boxes and proceeded to do so, with a great display of enthusiasm. After a few failed attempts to reload we decided it wasn't the time or place to desensitize the gelding to aluminum bear boxes. After some head scratching, consolidating foods into the one set of bear boxes and packing the extra set of panniers brought along just in case, we were about ready.



Fishing Youngs Creek. That'll put a smile on your face!

One last stop at the SST (sweet smelling toilet). In hindsight, a hitching rail near the toilet would have been handy. Well, I found a place to tie up my two packers and ground tied my saddle mule (Ladybug). Normally, she's great ground tied! You guessed it, not so this day. Around the trailhead we go for another ten minutes until she thought I'd had enough exercise. Finally, about 11am and with no permanent damage or debilitating injury, and we were on the Lodgepole trail. Luckily we had planned a modest 10 miler for the first day, so no biggie. Daytime temperatures leading up to the trip had been in the low 90s and today was no exception. There are multiple springs along Jenny and Young's creek trails, so fortunately, there is no shortage of water, however, due to the 2017 wildfire there wasn't a sliver of shade. It was blazing, cook stove, and metal melting hot! Also, it occurred to me that a few less beverages the night before would have been a more prudent idea. The ride along the upper section of Young's Creek trail is sort of a good news/bad news story.

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# Trail Trials in the Bob Marshall

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The creek winds along clear and clean and carves out two spectacular gorges, but because it's out in the burn and the sun is cooking the ground around us we didn't stop to fish or take pictures. We took our time though and the stock did well, in spite of the heat, and our loads rode good..... that is, until they didn't! We finally locate a suitable camp spot on the other side of a ford. I entered the stream, looking back to check my stock, and there's Rosie (mule) smiling back, totally free of her two manties and her saddle sitting cockeyed on her belly. Imagine my surprise! Okay, it was time to unload anyway. I tied up my other two head, straightened up Rosie's saddle and wandered back up the trail for lost manties. No biggie, the first manty was close by. I had mentioned Ladybug normally ground ties good. Rosie normally ground ties well when saddling and loading, but when you walk off, so does she. In my preoccupation to find the missing manties, I'd neglected to tie up Rosie after fixing her saddle and back up the trail she went. Great! Luckily for me, she stopped at the second manty a few hundred feet up the trail, I swore through a forced grin, collected up the last of my gear and wayward stock and then proceed back to camp and my riding companions. Okay, with the first day kinks and organizational lessons out of the way, we're good to go.

We enjoyed a leisurely afternoon/evening, cooling off in the stream, grazing stock and getting the highline strung out on what few green trees remain in this part of the burn. With no rain in the forecast, we slept under the stars within hearing range of the highlined stock. As the night progressed, the stock, or at least one of our animals, started stomping and making all kinds of racket. Suspecting the worst likely possibility, we spent most of the night checking the perimeter armed with flashlights, bear spray and handguns. As the days progressed, we figured out it wasn't a bear, but a she-devil that would possess the only mare in our group each night as the sun would set.



Camp Comfort located along the South Fork of the Flathead.



Grazing stock at Camp Comfort.

Tuesday – July 23rd with another short mileage day planned, we were able to take our time grazing the stock for several hours followed by breaking and packing up camp. Once on the trail it became apparent, I had a problem with my manty load. Though scale weighed within a couple pounds, they refused to stay balanced. So, right there on the side of the trail, we swapped loads from one mutton-backed mule to one with a bit of withers. Problem solved for the interim. Later, after some team analyses, we discovered the knapsack with hobbles, tools and some other heavy items at the top of a duffle bag in the manty was the culprit. The heavy knapsack positioned high in the load, caused an exaggerated side-to-side, swinging action as the mule walked down the trail, eventually tipping the load off to the side. With the tool pack secured lower in the load, and closer to the mule, we had no further problems with the load.

Once to the confluence of Young's and Danaher creeks (Young's Creek Ford and the headwaters of the South fork of the Flathead River) we wandered around looking to find the route to the East Side of South Fork of the Flathead River trail leading to Big Prairie Cabin to the north and Basin Creek Cabin to the south. After talking with some folks that were there and poking around in the brush a bit, we found our way over to the Eastside Trail and headed toward Big Prairie. We found our "Camp Comfort" located on the banks of the South Fork of the Flathead just a couple miles south of Big Prairie Guard Station. The site provided green trees for our highlines, shade from the intense midsummer sun, ample graze and premium fishing. And yes, that night, the highline once again came down. This time it involved four head, the other three were on a separate highline.

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# Trail Trials in the Bob Marshall

(Continued from Page 13)

Wednesday – July 24th a layover day. Fishing, grazing, bathing, napping and a sightseeing trip to Big Prairie. Arriving at Big Prairie we were greeted by a gentleman sitting on the porch reading Packin' on Mules and Horses (Elser & Brown). Norm Kamrud, a former Missoula Smoke jumper of 83 years young, who performs maintenance on the radio system for the Flathead National forest in the Bob. When asked if he was travelling alone, he replied straight-faced “No, I’m with those three horses and the mule” I could only smile broadly and reflect inwardly at what was obviously a man in his element.

Back at camp that warm evening, I opened the windows and door covers in my tent before going to sleep, carefully rolling them up and toggling them back. Later that night I woke to an occasional flash followed by a rumble off in the distance. As the leading edge of the thunderstorm approached with a violent downwash of wind and rain, I rose to close the door and windows only to struggle to undo the toggles and get things zipped up as the tent walls whipped from side to side. All-along the sideways rain being driven through the screens pelting me as I fumbled with the toggles, as fast as my fingers would allow, in the dark. Even at that time, I found it humorous. A series of major thunderstorms passed over our camp that evening making for a very memorable night and some stressful days to follow. Later, after returning to our homes we’d find out the same series of storms had hit Missoula with wind speeds of 81mph, gusts up to 109mph, causing widespread damage, power outages and resulting in an executive order by the Governor declaring a disaster in Missoula.

Thursday – July 25th The storm had us wondering about trail conditions over coffee and oatmeal. We decided it might make sense to start working our way back just in case it took longer than planned to get out due to storm damage on the trails. We left our camp on Cayuse Prairie working our way to the Westside of the South Fork of Flathead River trail, near Gordon Creek. At Gordon Creek we met some rafters in their camp awaiting pick up by their outfitter the following morning. After a couple of daisy chain loops trying to relocate the main trail in this river-bottom flood plain, we continued along cutting deadfalls or working our way around other dead falls by going through the dense lodgepole regeneration from a previous wildfire. It got to the point of tying up the stock with two of us going ahead to clear the trail and one staying back with the stock. All along we wondered if we’d be able to get out to the Lodgepole Trailhead? If not, which trails might be opened first? How could we find out? If we had to come out a different trailhead we’d need to contact some folks to get our 3 vehicles moved. We slowly made our way along the Westside trail using our saddle saws and a small folding stihl handsaw.

Mid-afternoon found us at 3 large 14”+ larch across the trail and more in the trail up ahead. It was apparent we’d have to find an alternate route. We retraced our route back to a vacant outfitter camp and decided to take advantage of the corrals and empty covered hay storage area for the night. That evening we reached out to a spouse using an In-Reach communicator. We asked her to give Jack Rich a call to find out if he’d made progress accessing his camps via Pyramid Pass. We were relieved to hear Jack’s crew had made it to their Leota Park camp and would be clearing toward Young’s Creek Ford the next several days.



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Hole in the Wall located above Youngs Creek.



# Trail Trials in the Bob Marshall

(Continued from Page 14)

Friday – July 26th The Outfitter camp we'd stayed at ended up a short distance from the rafters' camp we'd passed the previous day. We recalled they had a satellite phone so one of us went to their camp to see if they had an update on trail conditions. Surprisingly their packers had arrived via Gordon Creek (Holland Lake Trailhead). We now had a viable alternate route to exit though we'd have to arrange for our trucks and trailers to be moved. We'd also decided to back track to Big Prairie Guard Station to see if anyone might be there with trail information. Upon arrival at Big Prairie we were met by members of the trail crew and offered the traditional orange Tang and cookies, which we gladly accepted. We found out the trail crew had come in from the Basin Creek Cabin the day before along the Eastside trail, clearing as they went. So, we now knew we had cleared trail along the Eastside trail to Young's Creek Ford and chose to head that way with plans to camp there and seek further trail info. Along the way we ran into a couple pack strings coming in from the North Fork of the Blackfoot River Trailhead. Things were looking up! If needed, we could get our vehicles moved there from the Lodgepole Trailhead, which was much shorter than the other alternatives. We arrived at Young's Creek Ford early afternoon and thought we'd venture up the Young's Creek trail to see what we'd face the following day. It wasn't far from there we came to the first deadfall across the trail. Freshly sawn! With plenty of daylight left we decided to press on toward Hahn Cabin and see if the trail was passable. Sure enough! There were plenty of step-overs and go-arounds, but we were able to make it to a great looking campsite at Otter Creek that we had earmarked on our way in. As we passed by Hole in the Wall on the opposite side of the river we recounted Smoke's Young's Creek story, tried to figure out where the Bull Trout hole he spoke of was and took a few pictures.

Saturday – July 27th We took a layover day at Otter creek Camp. With the stress from the past few days nearly gone, we once again spent the day fishing, bathing, snacking, napping....I'm sure you've got the picture. By this point everyone had settled into their routines, sharing the workload between the three of us. On this day however, one of our members decided to pick up more of the load and make coffee for the first time using the Jet Boil coffee press. Water ✓, coffee✓press ✓ignition✓. The intent was solid, however lacking supervision, the results not so much. The explosion resulting from the press pushed down on the grounds before the water had boiled was impressive. Hot water and coffee grounds filled the bottom of both open bear boxes and the contents. By now we'd already hatched the idea of an article for the Decker Dispatch, so another noteworthy event was almost expected. Thanks for contributing, Dan.

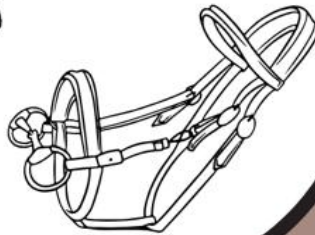
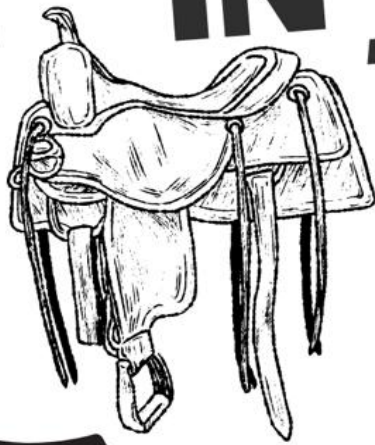
Confident we'd make it back to the Lodgepole Trailhead and a couple days still remaining on our schedule we contemplated what we'd do. We'd eyeballed several promising fishing holes along the Youngs Falls section we thought would be good to try. A check of the weather forecast and we found out a significant rain event was to move in Monday, ¾"-1" of rain predicted. Though prepared for foul weather the thought of riding in the rain all day, soaking saddles and the work to follow made our decision easy. So, we plan to head out tomorrow. Naturally, the she-devil once again appeared our last night, pulling down the highline again.

Sunday – July 28th, 5am. It's not quite light, but with coffee cups in hand we take the stock out to graze before the 16 miles back to the trailers. It only took a week to get an uneventful day under our belts. We're back to the trailhead by 2pm and there are still a few cool beverages in the cooler. Trixi's Antler Saloon is the tradition after a trip and going past Ovando. Sure enough the burgers, beverages and conversations were priceless. Let's do it again, with a few less events and more fishing.



Otter Creek Camp

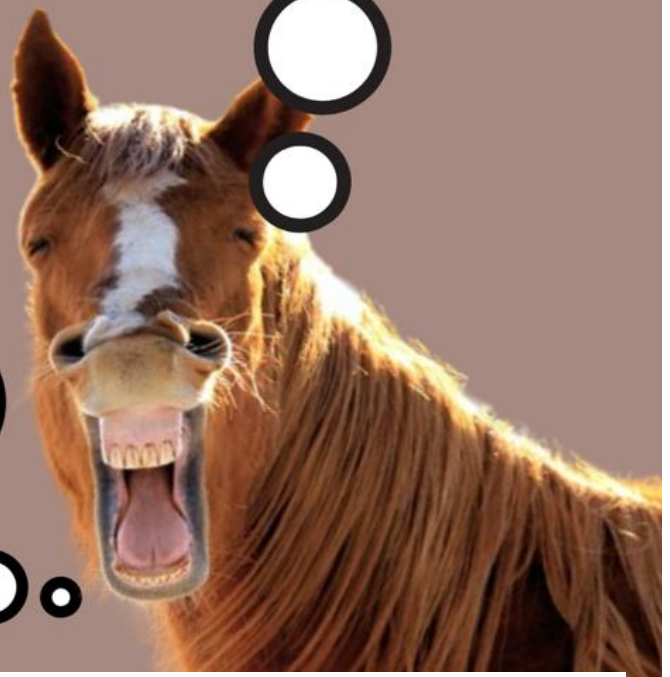
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*Winter Issue: articles due January 5th: Beartooth, Bitter Root, Cabinet, Mission Valley, Three Rivers, Wild Horse Plains, and convention hosting chapter.*

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