



Photo by Kari Schiffman, Bitter Root BCH

Decker Dispatch



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.

Letter from the Chair

By Sandy Himmel- Chair, BCHMT



Sandy Himmel and Bo

Summer has once again flown by way too quickly. Hopefully, everyone has enjoyed getting out. Mark & I have completed a few projects. As usual, others are not finished yet. We had a Texas BCHA member, Misty Valdez, stay with us for about a week. She joined in clearing trail. Hoover Creek did not disappoint in its magnificent views. Three days of trail clearing in Hoover removed about 100 trees. Misty did a fantastic job swamping.

Mark and I attended Chuck Miller's celebration of life. Chuck's daughter asked Mark to MC the storytelling. Mark shared memories of Chuck from the three past BCHA chairmen. Afterward, he opened it up to those attending the celebration. Several shared stories and memories of Chuck. There was music, dancing, hors d'oeuvres, an open bar, and dinner. I think Chuck planned this party. He was instrumental in the advancement of BCH and will most definitely be missed.

We have heard we will have more time to submit for mileage reimbursement. Keep in mind that the information needs to be submitted to Bonnie Kiser. She then has to compile it, and then I need to put it on the invoice with the supporting documents and get it to Albuquerque for processing. Only after all these steps are completed does Carol Hennessey have the ability to ok the invoice for payment.

We will be holding our December State Board meeting in Missoula at the National Museum of Forest Service History. Thanks to the donation BCHMT and BCHA have made, we are entitled to use the museum for our meeting.

Enjoy the last of summer.

Sandy

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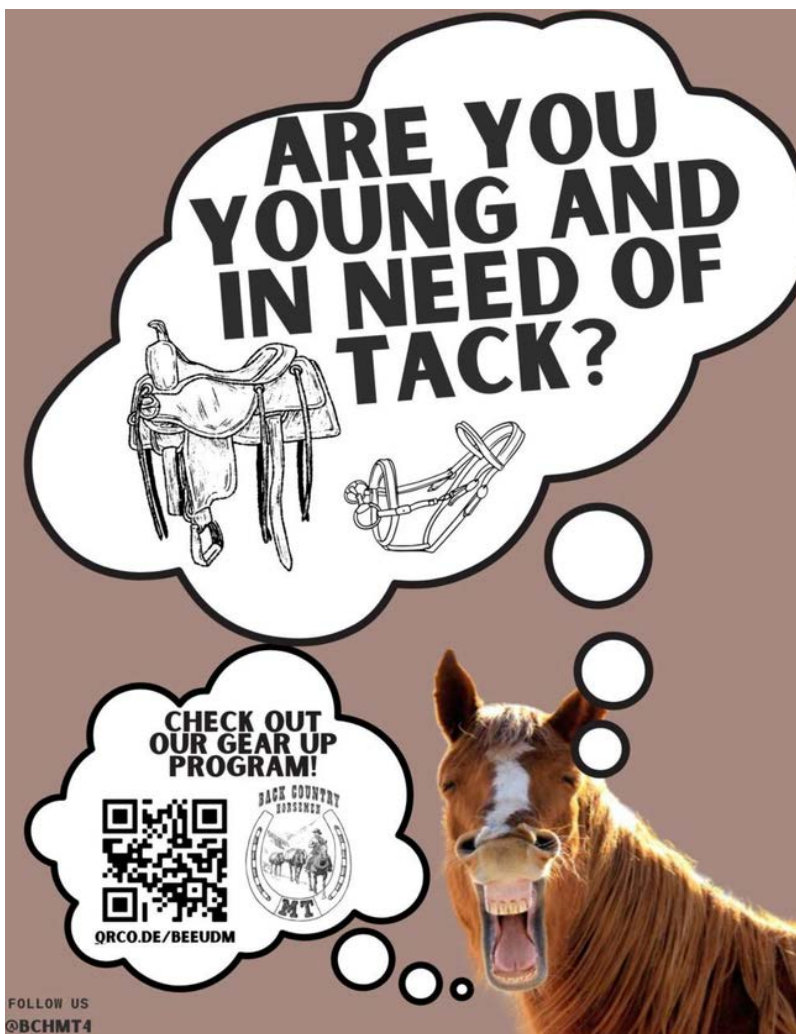
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Gear Up is a program to share saddles and other horse tack with people who need it. It is gear which is donated to BCHMT by its members.

for more information: <https://bchmt.org/wp/flathead/gear-up-program/>

Brad Pollman has been working with Chuck Miller's daughter, Katie Miller, since before Chucks passing. Katie is ready to sell all of Chuck's tack, pack saddles, and pack equipment. If anyone is interested, you can contact Katie Miller at 415-350-1760.

Mark your Calendars!!

The 2027 MT BCH Convention

On the Trail of Tradition

April 2-4, 2027

Billings Hotel and Convention Center

Hosted by Beartooth BCH

2026 MTBCH Challenge Cost Share Mileage Reimbursement

Requested to be submitted by October 1, 2026, to:

Bonnie Kiser at: bonniekiser@centurytel.net

Safety Moment



By Wade Murphy, Mile High BCH - Circle Cross Equine

“Stop before you get off” is a joke I use at my clinics. The first rule of the clinic is to always stop before you get off your horse. I use this joke to show the seriousness of preparing your equine to bend their body and disengage the hind end willingly, so that when they get into trouble, you have the ability to diffuse the situation safely. I don’t believe in a “bombproof” horse. Show me a bombproof horse, and I will show you a bomb that will scare it. A panicked horse, being pulled on with both reins, will often push right through their bit, and the pressure will add to their panic. Pulling a troubled horse with two tight reins gives them a claustrophobic feeling. In many situations, it can cause a horse to rear up and come over backward on you. With every single horse or mule I ride, the first thing I do is get them flexing and bending softly and get them to disengage their hind end. This means to step their inside hind foot underneath themselves in front of the outside hind foot. This is the equivalent of putting the horse in “neutral” or pushing in their clutch. They cannot bolt or buck with their hind legs crossed. I practice this over and over with my animals so they are very good at it before I take them into the mountains. I train this in a simple step-by-step process that I will break down:

1. From the ground, get your horse flexing left and right very softly. I start this with a rope halter and then progress to a snaffle bit.
2. Still from the ground, add a “button” where your calf will be when you are in the saddle. Your horse should move off this button to cross their near hind leg in front of their far hind leg.
3. In the saddle, get your horse flexing left and right very softly to slight rein pressure.
4. Bend your horse’s head either way. (let’s say to the left)
5. Shift your weight slightly forward to free up the hind end.
6. Apply your left leg, slightly back, and wait for your horse to move off your leg.
7. Take your leg off, sit back in the saddle, and hold the bend with your rein until your horse’s feet stop.
8. Repeat this dozens of times over multiple rides, both to the left and to the right, until it is automatic for both you and your horse.
9. Repeat these same simple steps at a walk to reinforce the one rein stop.

This lateral stop becomes deeply ingrained in any animal I ride and has saved me many times when trouble popped up on the trail. From hikers hiding behind trees, to bees, to dogs running up out of the thick brush, scary things are going to happen on the trail. When I feel my animal getting excited about something scary, I immediately disengage their hind end and face the scary object. At some point, you are going to have trouble on the trail. When the time comes, make sure you have the tools in your toolbox to help your horse through the situation.

Safe and happy trails.

Wade

Last Chance BCH, a 2026 Recap

By John Pavsek, President, Last Chance Back Country Horsemen

Here I sit at my kitchen table reflecting on the events of 2026. This year, we experienced some unusual weather, including periodic heavy rainfall and scorching summer heat. Especially impactful to our trail-clearing efforts were the December 2025 hurricane winds, some clocked at 80+ mph. These winds had a devastating effect on the already stressed beetle-killed forests. This year, we measured our trail work not by miles cleared, but by the number of logs cut. In this regard, we had a very successful logging year.

The 2026 season saw some significant organizational changes within our club, including swearing in our new board members, John Pavsek (President) and Mike McDaniel (Vice President). As many of our members are getting older and have passed on the torch, Last Chance BCH embarked on a campaign to increase our membership. Much of the club's efforts have focused on reaching out to younger horsemen and horsewomen, thanks to our talented webmaster and Facebook coordinators. To attract new members and make our monthly meetings more interesting, we've reinstituted the practice of having outside speakers present on a range of forest- and equine-related issues. A few noteworthy presentations include FWP law enforcement, search and rescue, bear-attack prevention, wildlife biologists, and logging-industry advocates. By applying best practices gleaned from other Montana chapters, we have added 17 new members to our roster.

Last winter, our club established an audacious goal to clear 74 miles of trails in our region. Although we did not reach that goal due to the condition of the forest trails (about 50 miles cleared), our sawyers cut a staggering number of logs from the trails. Special recognition goes out to club members who spent four days in the Gates of the Mountains Wilderness. With nothing but crosscut saws, they cleared nearly 13 miles of wilderness trails so that equestrians and hikers will have access to the backcountry.

And finally, our thanks go out to the volunteers and professionals who took the time to provide demonstrations on backcountry equine first aid, freeze branding, packing, and equine safety. There has been an outpouring of appreciation to these dedicated individuals.

Overall, it was a wonderful year for our Chapter, and we look forward to getting back on the trail in 2027.



Answering the Call

By Kristi Bailey, Mile High BCH

When people think of Back Country Horsemen, they usually picture trail crews clearing deadfall or leading pack strings into the wilderness for a weekend of camping. This year, the Mile High Back Country Horsemen of Butte reminded the community that their mission runs much deeper than recreation. Three times in recent months, chapter members saddled up not for a ride, but to answer a call for help. First, hauling water on Butte's East Ridge, and then two calls racing against wildfire to move hundreds of cattle to safety in the Pioneer Mountains.

Hauling Water to Maud S Canyon

The East Ridge above Butte is one of the community's most treasured public spaces. Since the Rotary Club of Butte began developing the land in 1984, the East Ridge Foundation has managed more than 200 acres around Maud S Canyon, turning it into a network of trails enjoyed by hikers, mountain bikers, and equestrians just minutes from downtown.

That kind of landscape doesn't take care of itself, especially in dry, high-elevation terrain where a truck can't always reach. When the East Ridge Foundation needed water hauled up into Maud S Canyon to support ongoing trail and vegetation work, they turned to an organization built exactly for that kind of job: horsepower that doesn't need a road.

Mile High Back Country Horsemen and Three Rivers members and their stock packed water up the canyon, covering ground that vehicles simply can't access. Over 20 animals made this event a success. It's the kind of unglamorous, physically demanding work that rarely makes headlines but is exactly why Back Country Horsemen chapters exist to partner with the land managers and community organizations responsible for keeping public and shared lands healthy and open, and to show up with the one resource a truck can't replace: a string of capable horses and riders willing to do the work.



Photos by Kristi Bailey

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Photo by Jamie Lode

Racing Wildfire in the Pioneer Mountains

Just weeks later, the chapter's skills were tested under far more urgent circumstances. In early August 2026, the Bobcat Lakes Fire and Sand Creek Fire broke out in the Pioneer Mountains southwest of Butte, eventually burning tens of thousands of acres and forcing evacuation orders across the Grasshopper Valley, Elkhorn Hot Springs, and the Maverick Mountain area. As the fires pushed toward the Pioneer Scenic Byway and closed in on grazing allotments across the Beaverhead-Deer Lodge National Forest, ranchers and land managers faced a race against time to get livestock to safety ahead of the flames.

Mile High Back Country Horsemen members rode straight into that effort. With escape routes narrowing as fire and downed timber blocked alternate paths, chapter members worked alongside ranchers, U.S. Forest Service staff, and state task forces to gather and move cattle off threatened grazing allotments and onto safe ground. In one stretch of the operation, riders pushed a herd roughly 22 miles to safety, moving through smoke with helicopters overhead and flames visible on the hillsides above them, before finally dismounting after dark, with tired horses, riders, and dogs accounted for. Across the full effort, the chapter played a key role in an evacuation that ultimately moved well over 500 head of cattle out of harm's way from forest grazing allotments during the height of the fires. It was long, hot, smoke-filled work, done on horseback because no other tool could get the job done in that terrain, on that timeline.

The Same Spirit, Two Very Different Days

A quiet water haul to support trail work on the East Ridge and a full-scale cattle evacuation ahead of wildfire look like very different jobs. But they come from the same place: a chapter of volunteers who show up, saddle their horses, and go do the work that needs doing, whether that means a few hours hauling water into a canyon above town, or a full day and night pushing cattle to safety ahead of a fire line.

That's the mission of the Mile High Back Country Horsemen, and Back Country Horsemen everywhere, who were founded to perpetuate the responsible use of horses in the back country, and to assist the agencies, landowners, and communities who steward it. This year, that mission looked like a canyon full of water barrels and a herd of cattle walking safely out of the smoke.

Who Ya Gonna Call?

By Wade Murphy Mile High BCH

Who are you going to call when a wildfire starts up in the national forest, and your cattle are in danger in their summer pastures? Reliable, competent ranch hands are in high demand these days. Most local ranch hands are extremely busy in the summer months putting up hay for the winter and doing a thousand other chores on the ranch. When the fire kicks up, time is of the essence. The cattle need to be moved immediately. Where can you find competent horsemen who have horses that are comfortable in the backcountry? Maybe BCH can help?

Week 1: Liz Jones is a 93-year-old woman who has been on her ranch in Wise River, Montana, since 1941. She lost her husband about 10 years ago, but she still continues on with her cattle and sheep operation. She has 3 people on the payroll, two part-time workers and a ranch foreman in a sling with a broken collarbone. The ranch produces hay for the winter months. During the summer, they rely on the forest grazing allotments to feed their cattle. 2026 is no different. Liz had 160 cow/calf pairs happily grazing in the rich pastures of the Pettengill drainage in the West Pioneer Mountains. On July 31st, a smoke report was received in a remote area of the mountains. By August 1st, the Bobcat Lakes fire was 225 acres and burning in heavy fuels. It was traveling right towards the cattle. They needed competent horsemen to help get the cattle out of harm's way. The local USFS packer was involved in the conversations and reached out to Mile High BCH members to ask for help. Corbin Walker, Josie Walker, and Wade Murphy were available and were at the trailhead early on the morning of Aug 2nd. The Pettengill drainage is a wide, swampy drainage full of willows and bogs. It is also littered with dead and down lodgepole. Great feed for the cattle, but very difficult to find the animals and get them out of. Most of the cows were found by sound rather than sight! The day was a success. 6 horsemen battled the thick country for about 5 hours to get the cattle out of the thickets and out onto the road. From there, they were pushed about 8 miles up the byway. The crew was in the saddle about 11 hours total, moving the cows more than 12 miles to safer pastures....or so we thought.

Week 2: The Holland family runs a large ranching operation in SW Montana. They had more than 500 cow/calf pairs in the summer pastures of the West Pioneers. The Sand Creek fire had been burning well to the west of their grazing area, but multiple hot, dry, and windy days pushed the fire hard. The fire was in difficult terrain and was burning in very heavy fuels. Once again, cattle were in danger from a rapidly approaching fire. The fire quickly exploded from a few hundred acres to over 30,000 acres. In two days of intense fire activity, the valley that is the normal route to take the cattle out of the mountains was now blocked by the fire. There was another trail route to get the cattle home, but the trail was full of blown-down trees. Jamie is the range rider for the Holland cattle. She is tasked with keeping track of the cows and rotating their pastures to avoid overgrazing. By Satellite, Jamie reached out to Mile High BCH on Wednesday to see if they could assist in clearing the secondary trail so they could get the cattle home. The plan was to clear the trail on Friday and then push the cattle through on Saturday. The fire exploded again! This proposed trail route was now directly in the line of fire. The Forest Service directed a third route that would get the cows to safety. This route was the exact opposite of the direction the cattle were used to going. This time the plan was to gather the cattle on Saturday to a holding area and push them out of the mountains on Sunday.

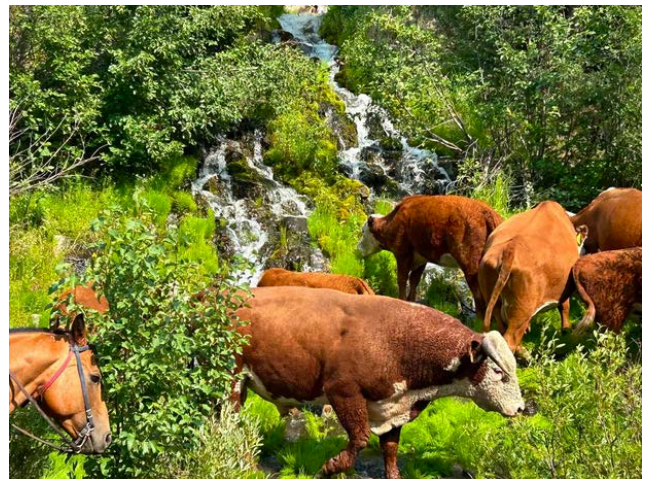


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Another day of intense fire behavior changed the plan yet again. The ranchers were told by the Forest Service that they had one day to move the cattle! The job was compounded by the fact that the Jones cattle from the week before had been migrating up the drainage into the area. So they were looking at pushing 650 pairs 22 miles on a hot day to get them to safety! Many of these miles were through thick blowdown and willows.

Mile High BCH members stepped in to help again. Josie, Corbin, and Wade were joined by Joey Dahl and Tim Mitchell to help for the day. Out of bed at 3:00 AM, meet at the ranch at 5, shuttle to the trailhead, and in the saddle by 5:30. With all of the early morning energy, the cows came out of the mountains very quickly. The calves, unfortunately, didn't keep up. Most of the pairs got separated, and the calves fell behind. The calves moved ok for about 4 hours, but then started trying to get back to the last place they last saw mama and had their milk. The horsemen had a brutal day of chasing calves and keeping them from heading back into the hills where the fire was still heading their way. As the cattle were pushed down the Pioneers byway, they had to go right past all of the flames that were on the East side of the Bobcat Lakes fire that was burning to the North. Most of the adult cattle made the 22-mile push. Many of the calves wore out after about 15 miles. The only option was to trailer the calves. These calves had never been in a trailer before, and we were in open country. Some of the exhausted calves were literally picked up and loaded into trailers; most had to be funneled into the trailer with a fence and lots of manpower. The day was hot and thick with smoke. We started in the saddle at 5:30 AM and ended at around 7:30 PM. Dogs, cows, horses, one mule, and people were all exhausted... But safe!

A few days later, a nice rain drastically slowed the two fires down. It took a few additional smaller drives, but the last of the cows were located and brought out to the safety of the valley. Every one of the Holland cows were accounted for. Other than scrapes and scratches, there were no known injuries to man or beast during this huge endeavor.



Hold That Saddle

By Dan Harper, Missoula BCH

Saddles on mountain trail horses and mules tend to slip forward on downhill slopes. Many mountain trail horses and almost all mules will benefit from a crupper or breeching. The breeching has the advantage over the crupper for holding the saddle, keeping it from going forward or from turning, especially in a horse with low withers, many mules, and all stock in very steep terrain. However, the crupper is lighter, easier to use, and adequate in most situations. The crupper has an advantage: most stock adjusted to the crupper will not mind a rope under the tail. Cruppers help prevent many packing problems. I'm of the opinion that all lead horses and mules should be trained to accept the crupper.

Cruppers are relatively cheap and readily available. The crupper attaches to the saddle with a snap. The saddle must have a ring or two rings for a crupper with a split tether. If the saddle does not have a ring for a crupper attachment, the ring can easily and inexpensively be added by a saddle maker.

Always acclimatize the horse or mule at home in a confined area, such as a round pen, prior to heading out on the trail. Saddle up with a breast collar attached. Then rub the animal around the base of the tail until he is comfortable. Then raise the tail and secure the crupper about two fingers below the base of the tail. Move the animal around at a walk, trot, and lope. Don't be surprised if the equine kicks or bucks at first. When he settles down, tighten the crupper so it is snug against the base of the tail, and tighten the breast collar so it is quite tight. Again, move him on. When he seems comfortable, make sure the crupper is snug against the tail, and then feed him on the ground. As he lowers his head to eat, he will feel increasing pressure on his tail, but with the reward of food, he will soon disregard the pressure. Depending on the animal's response, a second training session in a day or two may be necessary. When riding with a crupper, be sure to adjust it so that the crupper hangs no more than one or two finger widths below the base of the tail.

Most of us can easily think of a ride where a crupper would have been a big help in preventing a saddle from slipping forward or from preventing a buck due to a rope under the tail. Have a safe ride with a crupper, and the next time you head down a steep trail, your saddle won't be on your horse's neck.



Saving Sawtooth Trail: A SPWBCH Legacy

By Maria Rennaker

"This is why Sawtooth is worth it," I thought out loud on the edge of Sawtooth Creek as I observed the rush of the water crawling through the mossy rocks and heard the short chuckling of a western tanager flitting in and out of old-growth ponderosa pine and western cedar. Feet dipped in the water, pant legs rolled up, and sun beating down, we sat quietly appreciating the serenity of the wilderness around us—a deserving reprieve from the rhythmic swish of the crosscut. This unfolded on a hot June day after we had burned through our water and energy in an effort to push toward our goal of cutting 5.8 miles to complete our in-kind contribution. Unfortunately, the downfall was too much, and we had to return for our final push on a cold and rainy day later in the month with more members, stock, and people power.

Sawtooth Trail is located just south of Hamilton, Montana, and provides an unmatched, pristine wilderness experience for backpackers, backcountry hunters and anglers, and backcountry horsemen. The trail spans 11.4 miles within the Bitterroot National Forest and the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness. At the end of Sawtooth Canyon, anglers can ascend to Ingomar Lake. The trail is known to locals as one of the worst trails in the west-side canyons of the Bitterroot, but it also provides access to one of the best fishing lakes, Ingomar. Its rugged and challenging terrain is part of the appeal for the Selway-Pintler Wilderness Back Country Horsemen (SPWBCH).

SPWBCH began rescuing the trail in 2008. During log-out and brushing expeditions from 2008 to 2010, the group encountered several broken bridges, rotten puncheons, bogs, and dangerous rock talus slopes. SPWBCH addressed this through a \$10,450 Ravalli County Resource Advisory Committee grant in 2010 in partnership with the Montana Conservation Corps (MCC).

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A series of fires, the Sawtooth Fire in 2012 and Roaring Lion in 2016, left behind burned standing timber, downfall, eroded trail tread, and a heavy overgrowth of fireweed. By 2016, the trail had almost disappeared again. Determined to reopen it, SPWBCH applied for and was awarded \$17,868 from the Recreational Trails Program in 2016 to replace a pedestrian footbridge across Roaring Lion Creek with a robust stock bridge to access the Sawtooth Trail, with the goal of improving early-season access over high water and improving chances to gain access to the trail end.

From 2016 to 2025, SPWBCH partnered with various volunteers and organizations to try to reopen the trail, though they were unable to make it past mile 5.5. Many members expressed a desire to see the end of Sawtooth Canyon again before the trail disappeared, which seemed a daunting task for a volunteer-led organization. So, in 2025, SPWBCH applied for and was awarded \$36,039 through the MT FWP Trail Stewardship Program to hire a contractor to clear miles 5.8 to 11.4 of Sawtooth Trail. This grant was paired with an in-kind labor contribution from SPWBCH to log out and repair the first 5.8 miles.

In the spring and summer of 2026, SPWBCH crews and community volunteers donated \$7,710 in labor to achieve our in-kind contribution. This work was completed by the end of June, and the contractor began log-out operations on August 1 with the goal of completion by October 15.

In a world full of modern stress, trails like Sawtooth can offer us solitude, the awe of nature, and a little thrill. SPWBCH keeps coming back to Sawtooth in part because of the challenge of reaching a destination few people seek out, but also to work side by side with backcountry horsemen who share a common love for conserving the wilderness experience. The friendships and partnerships forged along the trail—between people and stock alike—make the work on both the front end and back end worth it.



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Schedule for chapter news article submissions.

Winter Issue:

Articles are due by the first Friday in January from the following Chapters:

Beartooth, Bitter Root, Cabinet, Mission Valley, Three Rivers, Wild Horse Plains, and the convention hosting chapter.

Spring Issue:

Articles are due by the first Friday in May from the following Chapters:

Charlie Russell, East Slope, Flathead, Gallatin, and Judith Basin.

Fall Issue:

Articles are due by the first Friday in September from the following Chapters:

Last Chance, Mile High, Missoula, North West Montana, and Selway-Pintler Wilderness.

Please submit all articles in a Word document with the author(s) clearly identified. Please submit any photos in JPG or PNG files with the photographer credited if different than the author. Articles should be around 500 words.

Article and photos need to be submitted to the Editor's email address: **GaryBailey406@gmail.com**

Please note the Editor reserves the right to edit articles.

For more information, please visit our website at <https://bchmt.org/wp/>