

Group shows public how to pack horses best at EquiFest

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For the past decade, the Back Country Horsemen of Central Arizona, headquartered in Prescott, has worked to ensure that the state's public lands remain open for equines to travel through while preserving those spots for future use.

Saturday morning during the Arizona EquiFest at the Prescott Rodeo Grounds, a few group members showed horse owners and interested others the best ways to pack and outfit horses for short, safe trips into the wilderness.

Back Country Horseman Spike Hicks demonstrated the proper way to hitch ropes for strapping down two orange pannier boxes with 50 pounds of feed on both sides of his quarter horse, Roseanna. Afterward, he placed a bag on top of the horse, which he filled with a tent, sleeping bags and clothes, as well as a two-burner stove and a pair of folding chairs. He covered all the equipment with a 6-foot by 7-foot canvas to protect it from inclement weather.

"You want the pack to lay flat, balance your load and learn the right hitch," Hicks said.

Before a trip on a trail, Hicks said he encourages riders to buy the right trail maps and topographic maps and talk with experienced folks who know the area.

Riders should choose the trail appropriate for the expectations of the journeying group while preconditioning its members and animals for the trip's challenges.

Among other things, this means riders must condition their horses or mules for water crossings, trail hazards, trip length and altitude; use the appropriate saddles, equipment and tack; and bring along a Western hat or safety helmet, riding boots with smooth soles, a multipurpose knife and a flashlight for themselves.

The Back Country Horsemen also teach horse owners how to plan ahead and prepare safely for camping trips, particularly in the national forests.

They provide packing support for agencies and other volunteer service organizations, as well as conduct various trail projects in wilderness and remote areas across northern Arizona.

"We work the trails, put up gates and volunteer to take supplies to trail crews," said Jim Parrish, a Back Country Horseman from Skull Valley who has been a member of the organization for two years. "We have a good corps of volunteers and close to 100 members."

In the future, the Horsemen plan to support U.S. Forest Service trail repair crews in wilderness areas where trails have sustained major fire and erosion damage over the past few years.

On those trail rides and others, they tell riders to travel and camp on durable surfaces, clean up after themselves, properly dispose of what they can't pack out, leave what they find, minimize the use and impact of fire, and respect wildlife and others.

The horsemen sponsor trail projects with the approval of the U.S. Forest Service or the Arizona Game and Fish Department. They blaze trails and open trailheads while improving campsites.

Most of the horsemen often do their work on the [Prescott National Forest](#), which has eight wilderness areas, including Granite Mountain, Juniper Mesa, Apache Creek, Pine Mountain, Sycamore, Woodchute, Castle Creek and Cedar Bench.

The group's Central Arizona chapter was formed in 2000 and for several years served as the lone chapter in the state. Today, Arizona has two additional chapters and a state organization.

For more information about the Back Country Horsemen of Central Arizona, log on to its website at www.bchcaz.org. The site keeps members current on upcoming events and allows them to report volunteer hours and keep their membership information updated.