

**For Immediate Release: July 31, 2014**

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**Back Country Horsemen of America Helps Girl Scouts Earn Merit Badges**

by Sarah Wynne Jackson

Back Country Horsemen of America protects our right to ride horses on public lands through a wide range of projects across the nation. Some of their favorites include passing on their hard-earned equestrian and wilderness skills to others, especially young people. BCH folks understand that our children will continue our quest to keep trails open for horse use while practicing responsible recreation.

*Assisting Youth and the Back Country, at the Same Time*

The Mesa Verde Chapter of Back Country Horsemen of Colorado, based in Cortez, performs trail work to help maintain some of the trails in the San Juan National Forest and on BLM lands. They often work with other groups, such as the San Juan Mountain Association, in preserving the public's access to these wild lands.

Along with other members of the Mesa Verde Chapter, Latifia "Tif" Rodriguez, a MVBCH Director and State Representative, established a program for teaching their local Girl Scout Troop 1192, based in Dolores, about responsible recreation while giving them an opportunity to earn their Camping Badges.

*Learning and Doing*

The program began with a trip to the local Public Lands Office, where the girls studied maps of the region and learned the importance of knowing about the area in which we live. Chapter member Kathe Hayes is a Leave No Trace Master Educator and spoke about Leave No Trace outdoor ethics and passed out LNT reference cards. Bill Vicary, Head of the MVBCH Trails Committee, taught the troop how to tie a variety of knots useful for packing and camping. The Girl Scouts also learned how to build a safe mound fire and cook in the back country using lightweight packing stoves.

Finally, they put those lessons to good use on an overnight campout at Transfer Campground in the San Juan National Forest. They pitched their own tents and cooked one-pot meals over a campfire they had built themselves. The next morning, the troop hiked the Big Al interpretive trail, picking up trash. Following Leave No Trace principles along the way, they made sure the campfire was completely extinguished and left their campsite cleaner than they found it.

Despite some rain, thunder, and a terrific lightning show, the Girl Scouts enjoyed themselves, even with a 24-hour no electronics blackout period. The girls earned their Junior Camping Badges, along with four other patches for Leave No Trace Outdoor Ethics, Knot Tying, Cooking, and Campfire Safety.

### Taking the Initiative

Inspired by her mother, Tif's daughter Madison created a project of her own to earn her Bronze Award, the highest honor a Junior Girl Scout can earn. She and two other Girl Scouts volunteered 20 hours each at various public multi-use areas, trails, and dispersed campsites in the Four Corners vicinity. They hauled out 250 pounds of trash, recycled the metal and glass, and made sure the trash made it to the landfill. During the project they also mentored a younger Daisy Girl Scout.

### Keeping a Good Thing Going

The Mesa Verde Chapter of Back Country Horsemen of Colorado has plans to expand this very successful program. Their next step is to help older Cadette Girl Scouts earn the more advanced Trailblazing Badge, which requires them to learn adequate outdoor skills to safely stay at least one night at a backwoods or primitive site. MVBCH has purchased a variety of equipment for each participant, including maps from the local Public Lands Office and the San Juan Mountains Association, mess kits, survival whistles, and compasses. Some of the girls would not otherwise have the opportunity to own these items.

### Making a Difference

A grant from the Back Country Horsemen of America Education Foundation made this project possible. This nonprofit 501 (c)(3) corporation provides financial support for qualified programs that meet the BCHA Education Foundation's specific objectives and purposes: to promote education programs that benefit the horse and other stock users, and to promote cooperative interaction with other user groups regarding safety, care, and the protection of our back country resource. Although a number of grants go to youth programs, the Education Foundation supports a wide array of public interests.

While educating girls about responsible recreation and instilling in them a love and respect for America's wild places, the Mesa Verde Chapter of Back Country Horsemen of Colorado also cleaned up Narraguinnep Reservoir State Wildlife Area, Scotch Creek Trail, and a number of dispersed campsites in the town of Dolores, on the San Juan National Forest.

### About Back Country Horsemen of America

BCHA is a non-profit corporation made up of state organizations, affiliates, and at-large members. Their efforts have brought about positive changes regarding the use of horses and stock in wilderness and public lands.

If you want to know more about Back Country Horsemen of America or become a member, visit their website: [www.backcountryhorse.com](http://www.backcountryhorse.com); call 888-893-5161; or write PO Box 1367, Graham, WA 98338-1367. The future of horse use on public lands is in our hands!

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