

Next-Generation Packers

The NorthWest Montana chapter of the Back Country Horsemen has partnered with 4-H to teach horse packing to up-and-coming riders

BY MICAH DREW SEPTEMBER 15, 2021



Judah Westpahl and Melanie Totten of the NorthWest Montana Back Country Horsemen ride through Herron Park as part of a packing demonstration on Sept. 11, 2021. Hunter D'Antuono | Flathead Beacon

On a summer evening, three horse packers rode into the Bob Marshall Wilderness north of Lincoln to pack out a trail crew. The crew had been packed into the wilderness by a

different group of horsemen and was awaiting the string of animals that would haul out their gear the next morning.

“Generally when you go to meet someone at a trailhead or on the trail who’s a packer, it’s an outfitter or someone from a backcountry horsemen chapter — an older guy or older woman,” said Rick Mathies, president of the NorthWest Montana Back Country Horsemen chapter. “But then these 15-, 16- and 18-year-old kids come along and pack the crew out and they know how to do it really well.”

“The group was kind of shocked,” Mathies added. “But it’s a pretty cool experience for the kids to be able to do that for adults and do it on their own.”

The kids Mathies referred to are Melanie and Seline Totten and Judah Westphal, three members of the 4-H Trail and Packing program, a first-of-its-kind partnership between the local 4-H extension office and the Back Country Horsemen.

The Flathead Valley Back Country Horsemen Chapter was founded in 1973, and swiftly grew large enough to help found chapters in states across the West and merge into a national organization dedicated to educating and inspiring like-minded individuals about stock use in the backcountry and aiding government agencies in maintaining and managing backcountry areas.

“A lot of those members are aging out,” said Mathies, who picked up packing when he was in his 50s. “There’s not a lot of younger people coming into the organization, so some of those packing skills are being lost.”



Rick Mathies, president of the NorthWest Montana Back Country Horsemen, pictured in Herron Park on Sept. 11, 2021. Hunter D’Antuono | Flathead Beacon

In 2015, Mathies and a group of similarly minded horse and backcountry enthusiasts decided to create a new chapter of the Backcountry Horsemen of Montana, the NorthWest chapter, geared towards youth and families.

“We wanted to do things a little different way and try to figure out how to bring young folks, youth and families in the backcountry,” he said. “We wanted to concentrate on passing on what we could to the next generation.”

Mathies said there had been some discussions in the past about starting a packing group in 4-H, so it was a natural progression to start the conversations about a partnership. Other than a little bit of packing curriculum from a group in Bozeman, there wasn’t much existing framework to build out a horse-packing program, but in 2016 the program launched with 14 kids.

“It helped that three or four of the kids were already within our chapter and their families were involved,” Mathies said. “They gave us a lot of good feedback about whether we were communicating with the kids the right way or just a bunch of old guys talking a lot.”



Patrick Totten and other members of the NorthWest Montana Back Country Horsemen ride through Herron Park as part of a packing demonstration on Sept. 11, 2021. Hunter D'Antuono | Flathead Beacon

The program curriculum is based around a series of clinics during the packing off-season that teach youths the basics of horse packing. Members advance through five levels that cover the basics of horsemanship, manly preparation and pack loading, culminating in leading a multi-day packing trip and teaching another group or member how to pack.

Thirty-four youths signed up for the program in 2020, and Mathies said 27 were involved this year, including Westphal, who advanced through all the levels in a single year.

The Totten sisters, along with their brother Patrick, first started packing with their father when they were around 11 years old and then joined the 4-H program when it started up.

“Even with our parents dragging us in to it, we learned all the basics from 4-H,” Melanie, 18, said. “How to make loads, how to put the saddles on, how to take care of the horses. All our basics, how to deal with what’s going to happen on the trail came from 4-H.”

Melanie, Seline, 15, and Judah, 17, put their skills to use this summer packing for the Bob Marshall Wilderness Foundation as a team.



Melanie Totten, left, and Seline Totten of the NorthWest Montana Back Country Horsemen prepare packs as part of a demonstration in Herron Park on Sept. 11, 2021.
Hunter D'Antuono | Flathead Beacon

“It’s super relaxing out there,” Melanie said. “Yeah, stuff happens, the horses can react differently than in 4-H, but we can handle it. We can handle anything that happens to us out there.”

Over the summer, the team packed in dozens of volunteer groups and trail crews, gaining a reputation among for their skills in the backcountry, which is bolstered by their youth.

“We planned each trip ourselves — we funded them, we planned them, we carried them out,” Melanie said. “All summer we had the support from the Back Country Horsemen, but it was on us entirely and we did it.”

Mathies says the 4-H program has done exactly what it was envisioned to do: ignite a passion in the younger generation and pass the packing torch forward.

“I’m not going to lie, we’ve started talking about next year,” Seline said. “We’ve all decided we’re quitting our jobs and we’ll be back packing next summer.”



NorthWest Montana Back Country Horsemen jacket hangs on a fence post in Herron Park on Sept. 11, 2021. Hunter D’Antuono | Flathead Beacon