



# Pony Tracks

The San Juan Back Country Horsemen newsletter

Dedicated to Keeping Trails Open for All

January/February 2024

## President's Message



John Nelson

It's been an average winter in Pagosa so far, with some nicer, dry weather and some decent snowstorms that have us all getting our snowblowers, tractors and shovels out to keep the path to the barn open. But already we're talking about spring being just around the corner, though we know there will likely (hopefully) be some decent storms coming through yet that get our snowpack in the mountains just right so we can look forward to nice flowing creeks and good summer riding the back country.

I was thinking about backcountry riding the other day and reflected on a time about 40 years ago when I was working on

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## SJBCH Volunteer Hours Add Up to Best Year Ever

By Donna Fait

You can make a difference on our Pagosa Springs backcountry trails.

It's a lot of work! It's a lot of fun! And it's what this Back Country Horsemen chapter is all about. 2023 was SJBCH's best year yet with 1,487 hours of volunteer work. That translates to a \$73,485 value to the agencies with whom we partner.

This year let's break that record. We can all help:

1. Plan a trail ride.
2. Invite a fellow SJBCH member to go with you.
3. Take along a saddle saw, folding saw, pruners and shovel (chainsaw or crosscut saw if you have training or if you are with someone who has that training).
4. Ride or hike the trail and do the work that needs to be done.
5. Report what you have accomplished on the SJBCH website. (Just go to [sjbch.org](http://sjbch.org) and click on "Volunteer" to complete the brief form.)

Even if it is as small as picking up trash at a trailhead or trimming back brush that is encroaching the trail, *all of our work counts*. We just have to remember to report it.



## CPR and First Aid

are offered every other month through the [Colorado State University Archuleta County Extension Office](#) at the county fairgrounds. CPR and first aid are required for any SJBCH member seeking crosscut or chainsaw certification.

(President's Message cont.'d)

the old Mormon Lake Ranger District south of Flagstaff, Ariz. It was early spring, and we hadn't had the horses back from winter pasture long. We were anxious to hit the trails, but one morning, my amigo Doug Epperly and I were having trouble loading a Forest Service horse in one of those old, small two-horse Hale bumper-pull trailers that better fit the smaller horses of years ago—not the 16-hand Fox Trotters we had. The horse didn't want to go in, and things got so curly that at one point the horse almost went to his knees rather than step into the trailer.

We decided it was time to take a break, tied the two horses to the trailer and walked over to our old Navajo friend John Williams, who had been quietly watching us from the front of the barn—one boot heel up on the side of the barn, his arms crossed and the slightest trace of a smile on his face. John Williams was a cowboy raised on the Navajo Reservation north of Flagstaff in the 1920s and '30s, was a World War II combat infantryman in the Pacific and then spent a long career driving spikes on the Santa Fe Railroad across northern Arizona. Now retired, he was working for the Forest Service under a special "Senior Citizens Employment Program." We knew John as a good man and a hard worker.

John was very spare with his words, but knowing he knew a lot about horses, we walked over to him that

morning and asked him what he thought. His response in that great Navajo accent he had was "Big-time cowboys." We laughed and asked him what he would do to load this horse. "Big trailer," he said. "I wish we had one," I told him. "What should we do today to get the horse to load?" And he said, "Touch your horse every day." "What?" I asked. Well, as I said before, John didn't talk much, but when we pried it out of him that morning, he told us we should have worked out loading issues before that morning, including by touching or working with the horse every day—or at least recently—and maybe we should have gotten a bigger trailer.



"Touch your horse every day"—John Williams, Navajo cowboy. (Photo by Kelli Day)

I reflected on this for many years after that—and still do today—and for me, what John said applies to everything we do with horses, including now, as we look toward spring and getting our animals out on the trails in the high country. Before winter ends, "touch your horses every day," be around them, halter them, walk them around the neighborhood, do some ground work—whatever—just touch them. Then when you step into the saddle for the first time this spring to take the rust off, maybe things will go better. And build from there as you head up into the mountains. That's what we're going to do. I miss John Williams and will remember him this spring as we get started riding.

## Donors Show Support for SJBCH Mission

San Juan Back Country Horsemen owes a big "Thank You" to donors who have stepped up in support of our mission to keep trails open for everyone.

La Plata Electric Association recently awarded SJBCH a \$2,500 LPEA Round Up Grant. The grant program advances and supports causes within the LPEA service territory to "improve the quality of life in our community." The grant program "rounds up" a member's bill to the nearest dollar, and that amount is donated to a

local charity in the LPEA service area. SJBCH invites its members to participate in the [round up program](#) in support of non-profits in Pagosa. The chapter also thanks SJBCH Trails Lead Ron Toland for securing this grant.

Another \$2,500 was donated to SJBCH by John and Jane Mancuso, friends of SJBCH board member Janie Gray and her husband Gary. The Mancusos made the contribution to support our efforts to secure contract help for much-needed tread work on trails. The chapter is most grateful to the Mancusos for their generosity and to Janie for securing the donation.

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**(Donors Show Support (cont.'d))**

Ron Toland also solicited donations of \$500 each from Galles Properties Real Estate and San Juan Veterinary Hospital. This is the second year in a row that San Juan Vet has contributed to SJBCH's trail efforts. And in breaking news, the Rotary Club of Pagosa Springs announced it is awarding SJBCH a \$500 sponsorship for trail work in the Upper San Juan watershed in response to a presentation by Ron to the Rotary group.

Also, Sherwin Williams paint company donated seven gallons of high-quality paint for our sign painting work (*see story page 6*).

SJBCH President John Nelson noted, "SJBCH is indebted to all these donors who understand the vital importance of ensuring that the trails we all enjoy on the national forest Wilderness are maintained for all of us and for future generations to come."



**Cleared and maintained trails means that recreationists of all types can enjoy our public lands. (Photo by Tonya Lambert)**

## Members Share Ideas and Needs for 2024

**By Lisa Nelson**

The chapter had a productive general meeting on Feb. 19 during which several ideas were shared about what members would like to see in the future and how members can contribute to the continued success of the chapter.

First and foremost, the chapter needs someone to organize the monthly general meetings. Annie Pack has done a tremendous job in this role for the last several years. The group suggested that a speaker was not necessary for every meeting. Additionally, whoever steps into the role of organizing the general meetings could ask other members to solicit guest speakers. The group also suggested alternatives to the meeting potlucks, such as preordering pizzas or Subway sandwiches.

**Unless folks step up to help with the general meetings, the chapter will need to reconsider the substance and frequency of the meetings.**

The group also discussed trail work and offered the following suggestions:

- Identify the trails that need the most work.
- Utilize youth conservation corps crews where possible.
- Train people to be able to supervise crews.
- Use the SJBCH-adopted Anderson Trail and other trails for one-day, skills-training opportunities.
- Pursue crosscut saw and chainsaw certifications for interested members.
- Develop a shareable calendar for activities and projects.

In addition, the group discussed activities for youth involvement in the chapter. Our SJBCH Youth Ambassadors Elle Candelaria and Jenavieve Betts have applied for a \$500 Youth Grant from Back Country Horsemen of America. The grant would help fund a project on the Rio Grande National Forest to rehabilitate a connector trail from the 30-Mile



**The chapter plans to continue the trail work started almost 10 years ago at the 30-Mile Stock Unloading area on the Rio Grande National Forest. (Photo by Lisa Nelson)**

## Members Share Ideas and Needs (cont.'d)

Stock Unloading Area to access Weminuche Wilderness trailheads. The connector trail provides safer access to the trailheads than the narrow and busy Rio Grande Reservoir road.

The chapter also has initiated a project to restore and repaint Forest Service signs on the Pagosa Ranger District. Members Edie Brogan and Annie Pack volunteered to contact local schools to solicit student volunteers. Potential new member Sherry Pouyer also volunteered to contact Centerpoint Church about getting youth involved and to develop a flier on youth opportunities in SJBCH.

## ❁ Help Wanted Needed ❁

The chapter needs a couple of members to step up and help move the group forward. As mentioned previously, we need someone to organize the monthly general meetings, including identifying a speaker when desired and determining the format of the gathering, e.g. potluck or other options.

We also need someone to work with the board on fundraising. Ron Toland has been filling that role with great success, but he already has a lot on his plate as the trails lead for the chapter. The larger donations are critical so we can secure matching funds for grants to make a larger impact with the backlog of trails that require maintenance.

Please know, you won't be alone. The board is there to help and make this a team effort.

Those willing to get involved and make a difference can contact SJBCH President John Nelson at [ftvalleyps@aol.com](mailto:ftvalleyps@aol.com).

## Trail Tails

By Ron Toland

SJBCH Board Member and  
Trail Committee Lead



## Who Are We?

As a kid in Pueblo, I lived next door to my grandparents on a 10-acre hobby farm. My uncle still lived at home, was only 11 years older than me and didn't mind a second shadow following him everywhere. I tagged along to Elmer's pool hall and sipped a Nehi grape while he shot pool; I followed him into the field to hunt turkeys; he took me to the state fair to see Ken Curtis (Festus from *Guns, Smokes*); and I recall one afternoon when I couldn't tag along as he was going out with some friends. Now my grandma was no fool. She had a pretty good idea what teenage boys and their buddies do on a Friday night (I'm sure he could blame his older brother for that!). I remember clear as day as he walked out the

door, she called after him in a stern but worried voice: "Don't forget who you are!"

Grandma's advice, I think, is something for all of us to ponder from time to time. Take BCH for example. Who we are is summed up in our mission statement. In short, we work to 1) ensure public lands remain open to recreational stock use; 2) assist government and private agencies to maintain trails and backcountry infrastructure; and 3) educate, encourage and solicit active participation in the wise use of the backcountry resource. It's important to note there is no mention of potlucks, barbecues, Christmas parties or social rides. Now those things are certainly important for group cohesiveness and team building but should not be the focus of our activities. Folks should, however, leverage their association with BCH members to get together on their own and have a grand time riding, packing and whatever else suits them. I just think it's important our chapter doesn't devolve into a saddle club.

Now I wrote on this topic a year or two ago, so why did I bring it up again? Well, I was reading "Backcountry Horsemen of America – The First 25 Years" by Lloyd

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**Trail Tails (cont.'d)**

Fagerland, a BCH member and advocate who served in many offices in local, state and national BCH organizations starting in 1974. He chronicles many challenges BCH had to overcome to get to where we are today. He compares the journey to a trail ride in unfamiliar territory. “At each fork in the trail, they would stop and have a long and sometimes noisy discussion about which trail was the right one and would take us to the destination we wanted to reach.” Thinking about our chapter, that unfamiliar trail sounds awfully familiar! Something else he said prompted this story:

“We tend to think of our enemies as those rabid, anti-horse types who are continually trying to force us from public lands. While these people can be a nuisance and an aggravation, they can’t really hurt us. The people who can mortally wound us are good people, horsemen, BCH members who lose site [sic] of our purpose. They become so wrapped up in the social aspects of BCH that they forget that it has a more serious purpose.”

Let’s don’t forget who we are so we can continue to do the good work our organization is designed to do. I don’t know about you, but however onerous that sounds, I’m having a lot of fun doing it!



**SJBCH members Frank Collins and Stephanie Fluke cut a log on Archuleta Trail—doing their part to help clear trails. At the Feb. 19 general meeting, Frank talked about the hard work involved in cutting out downfall, and in the same breath he said he couldn’t wait to get out and do it again. (Photo by Donna Fait)**

## Community-based, Long-range Trails Plan on the Horizon

**By Lisa Nelson**

The need to develop a community-based trails plan for recreation on the Pagosa Ranger District was front and center at a Pagosa Area Trails Council meeting on Jan. 25.

In light of the recent U.S. Forest Service denial of a proposed mountain biking trail system at Jackson Mountain, Josh Peck of the Pagosa Ranger District, said, “Pagosa is lacking a long-term process for (trails) planning.”

The district ranger noted, “We have a very limited landscape. We need to have a goal of what we’re aiming for. Pagosa is changing, and we need to collectively determine where we want to go,” Peck said, adding, “If we move forward with something, it’s going to be at the expense of something else.”

About 30 people representing hikers, bikers, equestrians and motorized users attended the meeting to share a variety of suggestions, issues and concerns. These included:

- better education on how to recreate responsibly
- the proliferation of non-system trails and resulting resource damage
- potential new trails or trail connections
- the desire for a mountain biking trail system
- concern about turning the forest into a “Disneyland” experience
- overuse of popular trails
- the viability of trail user fees
- deteriorating tread on system trails and significant loss of trails



## Trails Plan (cont.'d)

- better communication between the various trail user groups to share information
- improve trailhead access and parking
- include considerations for trail users with disabilities
- involve the town and county in the long-term planning

SJBCH President John Nelson suggested to the group that a long-term trails plan is needed, but he also recommended a short-term plan to take care of current trail needs. He urged the



group to utilize a professional facilitator to help guide the group on developing a long-range trails plan.

Nelson also encouraged opportunities for the various groups to work together on projects to get to know one another better. He told the group about the SJBCH effort to rehab weathered Forest Service trail signs. A sign-up list for sign painting was passed around, and members of different groups already are collecting signs for painting this winter. *(See related story below)*

Bob Milford, president of PATC, said he would soon set up a small working group of the PATC board of directors and representatives from trail user groups to begin the trails planning process from the PATC side. The trails council will work with the Forest Service to determine how PATC might help move the process forward.

In other action, SJBCH Trails Lead Rob Toland was introduced as a new PATC board member, joining SJBCH members Dick Ray and Larry Smith on the PATC board.



## What's Old is New(er) Again

By Lisa Nelson

A couple of old, weather-beaten Forest Service signs were given more years in service thanks to a crew of volunteers who repaired and repainted the Turkey Creek signs at the turnoff from Highway 160 east of town.

The initiative was sparked by an invitation from SJBCH President John Nelson to the various recreation groups of the Pagosa Area Trails Council to join the chapter in helping restore signs on the Pagosa Ranger District in need of attention. SJBCH began the sign renovation initiative in 2023 with the U.S. Forest Service entry sign at Coyote Hill and at Treasure Falls.

“It’s the ‘broken window’ principle,” Nelson said. “Studies have shown that if broken windows in empty houses and businesses are left in disrepair, vandalism becomes more prevalent in the area. People are inclined to respect areas more that are well taken care of. The same holds true for our national forests.”

The recreation groups at the PATC meeting were quick and eager to join in. Seven individuals from Dust2, San Juan Outdoor Club, Wolf Song Adventures, Pagosa Nordic Club and SJBCH got together on Feb. 15 to work

on the Turkey Creek Road destination sign and the sign indicating the “weed-free hay” requirement.

The Turkey Creek sign needed a fair amount of TLC. Nelson dubbed it the “Franken-sign,” which was brought back to life with sanding, repairing wood rot and painting.



The sign crew included (from left) Kevin Daugherty, Dust2; Logan Hart, Dust2; Steve Earle, San Juan Outdoor Club; Anne Fleming, Wolf Song Adventures; John Nelson (kneeling), San Juan Back Country Horsemen; and Bill Milner, San Juan Outdoor Club and the Pagosa Nordic Club. The group agreed that the work not only makes a difference out on the ground but also with recreation user group relations. (Photo by Lisa Nelson)

What's Old is New(er) Again (cont.'d)



In addition to the group work day, Mike Cianciolo from San Juan Outdoor Club completely rebuilt two trailhead register boxes that were falling apart.

At the end of the day, the volunteers not only felt good about making a difference on the ground but also appreciated getting to know one another a little

better. The enthusiastic group is ready to tackle more signs, and more volunteers are always welcome.



Photo at Far Left—Repainting sign lettering are (from left) Kevin Daugherty, Bill Milner and Anne Fleming. (Photo by Lisa Nelson)

Photo at Left—A newly built register box was installed Feb. 24 at the Piedra River Trailhead by Steve Earle and Mike Cianciolo. Even the registration sheets are new. (Photo courtesy Steve Earle)

## BCH Chapters and Agencies Discuss Partnership Opportunities

The Rio Grand National Forest, Bureau of Land Management and Back Country Horsemen had an opportunity to discuss partnership possibilities at a volunteer planning meeting Feb. 6 in Del Norte.

The meeting was organized by Katie Goodleaf, the San Luis Valley programs manager with Volunteer for Outdoor Colorado, who coordinates volunteer agreements with the land management agencies. Representatives from the USFS Divide, Conejos and Saguache ranger districts signaled their interest in strengthening communication and partnerships with Trail Wise Back Country Horsemen (Del Norte) and San Juan Back Country Horsemen. Joint projects could include invasive

weed identification, archaeological site monitoring, improving trailheads and trail signage, trash cleanups and packing support for a VOC project on Archuleta Trail July 22-26.

SJBCH Trails Lead Ron Toland shared work our chapter has done on Archuleta Trail, Canon Rincon and South Fork Conejos, and SJBCH President John Nelson noted the chapter's renewed focus on youth outreach and engagement.

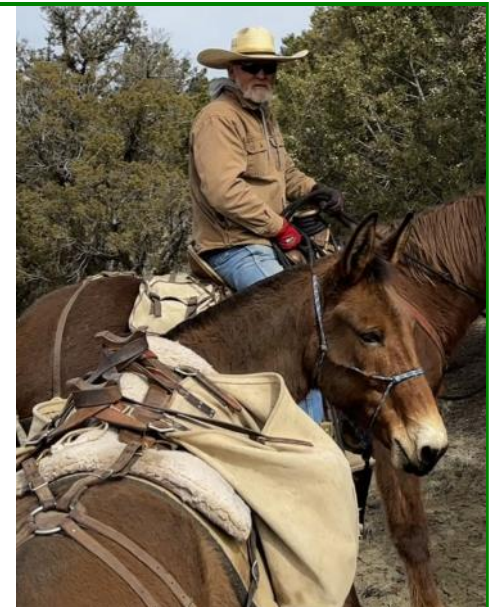
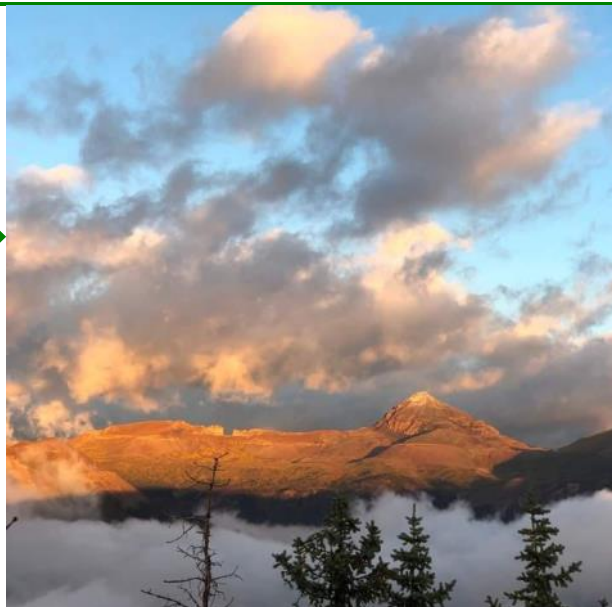


It was a good turnout at the volunteer planning meeting in Del Norte. (Photo by Lisa Nelson)

## Pic(k)s of the Month

Photo Far Right—Kelli Day took this photo of Rocky Day while they were enjoying a winter ride in Aztec, N.M.

Photo at Right—Gabe Candelaria captured some wonderful light on the Rio Grande Pyramid (with the keyhole to the left).



# Thank You to Our Generous 2023 Donors



**John and Jane Mancuso**



**San Juan  
Veterinary Hospital**

**Ash and Trish Tully  
Sundown Outfitters/Rio Grande Outfitters**



**Sherwin Williams**

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