



Pony Tracks

The San Juan Back Country Horsemen newsletter

Dedicated to Keeping Trails Open for All

November 2024

President's Message



Ron Toland

It's time for San Juan Back Country Horsemen to close out another year. Time to celebrate accomplishments, recognize members, thank donors and make plans for next year.

First and foremost, I want to thank John Nelson for his outstanding leadership as president for the last three years. John literally saved the chapter from disbanding when he took over as president in 2022. Not only did the chapter survive, his commitment, mission focus and insights re: Forest Service perspectives helped us to arguably become the most productive chapter in Colorado. He also fostered community outreach by inviting other trail user groups to participate in Forest Service sign restoration and our annual Treasure Falls cleanup. After John's tutelage, the stage is set to continue

our good work; to promote BCH mission and values; to protect and enjoy the backcountry experience.

In 2024, SJ BCH members cleared more than 300 trees and donated over 900 hours of volunteer time. Four grant applications resulted in four awards. We also secured donations from several local businesses and individuals; our local community recognizes and appreciates the value we bring. Our fundraising efforts collected ~\$16k and, in conjunction with the Pagosa Area Trails Council, we pledged \$18k toward a

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Local Author Brings Blanco Basin Road to Life

James R. White Jr., retired U.S. Forest Service civil engineer, shared how "old roads lead to good stories" when he spoke at the Nov. 18 meeting of SJ BCH.

Jim spent his Forest Service career in design, construction and maintenance of roads, bridges and trails. He became interested in the "forensic study of old trails and roads," which culminated in his book *Stories of the Blanco Basin Road: Road to a Thin Place*. But, as Jim is quick to point out, "This is not about the road; this is about the people who homesteaded up there (Blanco Basin, where Jim lives)."

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The annual SJ BCH Christmas Party is Dec. 9 (see details page 3)

(President's Message cont.'d)

Colorado Parks and Wildlife grant as part of a \$300k trail maintenance initiative. We enlisted the aid of a local Amish community to clear Fish Lake Trail. Our third annual weeklong pack trip into the South San Juans saw us complete trail clearing on 10+ miles of the Canon Rincon/Conejos River loop—over 400 trees in total not counting those cleared just to get in every year. We packed out a trail crew on Archuleta Creek and trash from abandoned camps. Not bad for a small-town group of backcountry enthusiasts!

As with most organizations, every success seems to have a corresponding challenge, and SJ BCH is no

different. The most pressing challenge is member engagement. The same people step up time and again to fill necessary roles, organize training, plan and support trail projects, raise funds and generally run the organization. Putting the burden on the same individuals inevitably leads to burnout. One can't help wondering why participation is so paltry. I invite each of you to reach out to me or another board member to let us know what we can do to make SJ BCH a more engaging organization AND what you can do to help. I'll read your e-mail, take your call or meet for coffee or a beer—I'd love to have that conversation!

(Blanco Basin Road cont.'d)

He read from his book one of his favorite stories about the wedding of Ada Tiernan and Joseph Hager at Square Top Mountain. Ada was born in 1899, and her family homesteaded in the Blanco Basin. She was a horse breaker and trainer, and Joseph lived a few miles down the Blanco River.

In October 1918, the wedding party headed up an old sheep herder's trail and eventually came to the steep cliff face of Square Top. The bride and groom had brought a ladder to help the wedding party up the final, vertical ascent. The officiating reverend, however, decided that climbing the rickety homemade ladder was too much, so the wedding party climbed back down the ladder to the cliff face for the couple's nuptials.

In another chapter, Jim describes the establishment of early U.S. Forest Service ranger stations, where the rangers lived year-round, including Square Top Ranger Station. Accounts describe the ranger stations as uninsulated with no central heating and often with no running water. Groceries were brought in by pack horses, and families would run sleds up and down the road during the night to maintain a trail in snowstorms as they had no snow-plowing equipment.

Jim's book also describes an incident in which Ed Wiseman, a licensed packer/outfitter, was guiding a bow-hunting trip in the South San Juan Wilderness and was

attacked by a bear. Wiseman survived but apparently killed the last known grizzly in Colorado in "hand-to-hand combat with an arrow."

During his career, Jim worked with Ron Decker,

retired USFS wilderness ranger, who attended the November SJ BCH meeting. They worked together on building the West Fork bridge, which Jim described as the "tinker-toy bridge," as everything had to be packed in piecemeal by mules.

Jim ended his presentation with an explanation of the book's subtitle, "Road to a Thin Place." In his book, Jim describes the Blanco Basin as "a string of breathless meadows, mountains towering high in the background, little stream meandering thru, a sight to behold for a soul looking for the peace that passes all understanding...a natural creation and begs protection...having a history worth preserving." He writes: "The ancient Celts worshipped in such places...In the

Celtic tradition, there is not a great gap between heaven and earth." These places they called Thin Places, "where heaven surely comes close to the earth."

Jim White's book is available at Two Old Crows, Made in Colorado Gift Shop and Terry's Ace Hardware



Jim White reads a passage from *Stories of the Blanco Basin Road*.

(Photo by Lisa Nelson)

Chapter Warns of Major Consequences to Funding Cuts

By John Nelson

Back Country Horsemen across the country need to be aware of the impending elimination of seasonal U.S. Forest Service employees nationwide in 2025 and the threat that poses to already degrading trails and resources on national forests. Hiring of seasonal fire personnel is exempt from this action.

The SJBCH board of directors is taking action to avert what would constitute a crisis not only on the San Juan National Forest but on all national forests. In a letter to our congressional representatives, SJBCH notes that for more than 40 years, Forest Service budgets for trails, recreation and other non-fire disciplines have been cut and have not kept up with the increasing public demand on these invaluable resources. And each year, those same resources have continued to degrade. The problem is compounded on the Pagosa Ranger District by the massive die-off of tens of thousands of beetle-killed trees that continue to block and

damage trails and impact other resources.

The letter describes how volunteer groups across the country have worked hard to help maintain those resources through their own contributions of (literal) sweat equity and fundraising. But we have made only small headway as the job is too big for us alone, and each year the condition of the forests worsens and declines as resource budgets are continually cut. This isn't only about trails to hike and ride; it's also about protecting our resources—the wildlife, soil, water and other assets of our national forests.

The letter urges Congress to fund the Forest Service seasonal workforce adequately in 2025 so we can start

addressing the huge backlog of maintenance and reconstruction needs on our national forest lands across the country. It is the obligation of us all to take care of our forest resources.

The SJBCH board will keep members apprised of the situation and also will provide talking points and the addresses of congressional representatives so your voice might also be heard.



Volunteers from SJBCH and several other volunteer organizations joined forces to clear trees off Archuleta Trail in 2024.

Time to Get in the Holiday Spirit

'Tis the season, and Santa's helpers Tonya Lambert and Annie Pack are planning another fun and delicious SJBCH Christmas Party on Dec. 9.

Here are the details:

San Juan Back Country Horsemen Christmas Party

Monday, December 9, 2024

6 - 9 p.m.

Timber Ridge Clubhouse, 31 Shooting Star Drive

Donations to pay for chapter Christmas Party:

Single: \$15

Couple: \$20 (includes children)



(Holiday Spirit cont.'d)

The chapter will provide turkey, ham, dinner rolls/butter, water/ice with cups and paper products. Folks can bring whatever they'd like to drink.

Please let Tonya know what favorite, festive side dish you will bring (appetizer/vegetable dish/dessert). This will let Tonya know how many will be in attendance so that she can determine how much ham and turkey we will need. You can contact Tonya at 501-580-5891 or email tonyalambert1000@gmail.com.

An assortment of culinary delights are provided by members at the annual SJBCH Christmas party. Come enjoy the food, the fun and each other. (Photo by Kelli Day)



Time to Renew Chapter Dues

It's that time of year for reflecting on those things for which we are grateful. Family, health and friends, of course, rank at the top. Many of us also are grateful for the place we call home, and Pagosa Springs gives us so much in the way of scenic beauty and opportunities to explore this amazing country.

San Juan Back Country Horsemen and Back Country Horsemen of America are committed to preserving access to the forests and wilderness areas that are in our "backyard" and beyond. Both want to ensure these landscapes are here for future generations to explore. Your membership dues support local, state and national efforts to maintain access to the backcountry, while also protecting the resources of our public lands.

Your dues support these goals. We hope everyone will remember to pay their dues by the Jan. 31 deadline. Annual memberships are Feb. 1 through Jan. 1. Dues are \$45 for individuals and \$50 for families.

Please note that current members also need to submit a 2025 membership application, because we need to have an updated disclaimer each year for all members. Renewing your membership is easy and quick by going to our website at sjbch.org and clicking on "Membership." From there you can either join online by filling out the information and paying via PayPal or credit card, or you can download a membership form, fill it out and mail it in with a check to San Juan Back Country Horsemen, PO Box 682, Pagosa Springs, CO 81147.



A Big "Thank You" to Dick Ray

SJBCH was thrilled to receive this note and donation from immediate past board member Dick Ray:

"At the October BCH Board of Directors meeting it was brought to our attention that the SJBCH equipment trailer had come off of its hitch several times in the past.

It was agreed that it was time for a new coupler. I volunteered to research and replace the coupler.

The work has been done! The trailer now has a Bulldog style coupler that takes a 2 inch ball.

This will diminish the inconvenience and the danger of a disconnect while towing down the road as well as the potential liability involved with any wreck.

The cost to the organization is zero. It is my donation."

Chapter Welcomes 2025 Board Officers

The chapter recently conducted an election for SJBCH board officers. With gratitude to those who previously served, the chapter welcomes the following officers for 2025:

- Ron Toland, President**
- Larry Smith, Vice President**
- Katie Betts, Secretary**
- Allan Netzer, Treasurer**

The chapter also expresses its deep appreciation to all those who have served and those who currently serve on the Board of Directors. We welcome Autumn Anderson from the Pagosa Ranger District, who joins us as our first-ever USFS liaison as a non-voting board member. Your current board of directors is listed on page 6.

Pic(k)s of the Month



Photos above by Gabe Candelaria

Photo by Gabe Candelaria



Ron Toland stands next to the wilderness sign on Turkey Creek that had been broken and laying on the ground. The sign was repaired and repainted by a crew of trails volunteers. Ron and his wife Diane packed in the sign and reattached it to a tree, as the sign post was destroyed. (Photo by Diane Burnett)

Ricky Nelson enjoys the Chama River Basin view with John Nelson on his back.



Thank You to Our Generous 2024 Donors



John and Jane Mancuso



San Juan
Veterinary Hospital

Ash and Trish Tully
Sundown Outfitters/Rio Grande Outfitters



Sherwin Williams

Justin Frie
Backcountry Outfitters

Your Board of Directors

Ron Toland, President
 Larry Smith, Vice President
 Katie Betts, Secretary
 Allan Netzer, Treasurer
 John Nelson, Past President
 Chris Boyd, Safety and Training Officer

Gabe Candelaria, Trails Lead
 Lisa Nelson, Communications Lead
 Randy Betts, Ex-Officio member
 Justin Frie, Outfitter and Guide Liaison
 Autumn Anderson, U.S. Forest Service Liaison