**Things Your Equine Should be able to do for Back Country Work**

**The Pecos Chapter of the Back County Horsemen**

The following is a list of skills your equine should possess in order to be a safe and pleasant backcountry partner. These skills ***can and should be practiced at home*** so that accidents are avoided. Of course, no equine is expected to be perfect at all times!

1. Good ground manners

* Leads politely from either side by anyone (in situations when other people might need to handle your animal).
* Stops and backs on command.
* Ties well to trees for up to an hour
  1. Doesn’t pull back
  2. Doesn’t paw (it damages the environment). Pawing is pretty common at first, but generally a few reminders can teach the equine to stand quietly.
* Doesn’t bite or kick people.
* Doesn’t bite or kick other equines; however some degree of aggressive behavior can be accommodated during the rides by making sure the group is aware of the issue and then using proper spacing between animals as well as choosing a position in line that makes the equine most comfortable. The line position can be changed. Some issues resolve themselves as the equine becomes more experienced riding in groups.
* Understands hotwire: Only if you need to pen your equine in a hot wire pen overnight.
* Highlines if staying overnight in the back country.
* Hobbles if staying overnight in the back country.
* Trailer loads. Obviously, we haul to the projects.

1. Comfortable in groups

* BCH rides are group rides, so the equine needs to be comfortable riding in a group. Sometimes animals need a few rides to get used to riding in a group. They might jig or just be nervous in general on the first few rides. This usually goes away with experience and as the equine gets to know some of the other equines. Also, sometimes just changing position in line or rearranging the neighboring equines can help. Members are always willing to stop to rearrange—or just stop to help if problems arise.

1. Comfortable going slow

* BCH rides entail a lot of slow riding with many stops. Equines that can’t abide going slow generally do not enjoy BCH outings.

1. Base level of fitness

* Even though BCH rides entail a lot of slow riding, sometimes the rides cover 10-15 miles and thousands of feet of elevation change, at 7,000 to 11,000 feet above sea level. Unfit equines can get in serious trouble.

1. Comfortable encountering various obstacles.

* The experienced equines and riders help the new equines gain confidence. Members are willing to wait while equines get used to new things. It is always acceptable to dismount and lead equines over, around, or through obstacles. Sometimes equines can be ponied. Safety is our first priority. The best way to avoid unpleasant surprises is to practice at home!
* Water: Water crossings are common on project rides. There is a creek at the Four Hills Open space if the equine needs practice. In wet years, water may be quite deep on the Pecos trails, but most years 1-2 feet is about it. Keep in mind that equines unfamiliar with water crossings often refuse and then attempt to jump their first body of water—sometimes with fairly hilarious results. It is best to have some experience crossing water as opposed to hoping for the best in a back country situation.
* Mud, Bogs (Yuck) and Snow: There are not many places to practice bog or snow crossings, but as with water crossings, the experienced equines usually help the newer equines gain confidence. (Stay on the trails, though. Some of the Pecos bogs are pretty deep off the trail. Snow banks can hide obstacles and equine hooves do tend to penetrate into the snow.)
* Wooden bridges: There are a number of bridge crossings on trails we regularly ride. Practicing by walking over plywood or a trail-course type bridge. There is one at the public Edgewood Arena.
* Going over logs: Usually we are clearing the trail, but every so often, we get in situations where we have to go over down logs. It is safest if equines step over logs rather than jumping them. It is sometimes the case that the rider can get off and send the equine over the log. There are logs are the Edgewood Arena, also.
* Going under trees and branches: We sometimes lean or duck to go under branches. Occasionally, we even have to ride under trees that are hanging across the trail. This is where short animals have the advantage!
* Boulders: A surprising number of equines are afraid of boulders, but most get over it pretty quickly.
* Backpackers: We encounter backpackers regularly. Most equines simply don’t recognize the backpackers as people. Asking the hikers to talk to you really helps. Hikers are supposed to yield the right of way and should go to the low side of the trail to decrease the chance of spooking the equine. Practicing at home can obviously help, too.
* Dogs: Our own dogs are not allowed on BCH projects, but hikers often have dogs. Dogs should be under control, but are not always.
* Tarps, ropes and pack animals: We carry project materials on pack animals and these loads are often tarped and lashed. Most equines barely react to this, but we usually have a few packed stock on our training rides so you can find out!
* Bicycles: Not that common on our project rides, as we are often in designated Wilderness, but they are very common at Elena Gallegos, Cedro Peak and other Albuquerque area multi-use parks. As with hikers, bikes should yield to the equines, and asking the cyclist to speak to you, helps. Desensitizing at home is well worth the effort!

1. Other skills:

* Backing and turning in tight spaces. Sometimes the trails are narrow or cramped.
* Moving off your leg—away from unpleasant edges.
* Mounting and dismounting from both sides (in case you need to in an awkward spot).
* Carrying saddle and/or pommel bags with water bottles, food, etc.
* Comfortable with rain gear, maps, plastic bags, Velcro, rattling tools on the pack animals, long-eared equines and crinkly candy bar packages. It is a drag to have rain and be unable to wear your poncho or slicker because your equine is petrified. Even worse if the equine is afraid of every one else’s rain gear! It is nice to be able to receive a map from another rider or unwrap a trail snack without having your animal take off.
* Comfortable wearing a halter under the bridle. (Saves time with the frequent stops but not absolutely necessary, although you absolutely need a halter on the rides because we usually tie up multiple times.)
* Comfortable wearing a breast collar (some equines really need cruppers, too). If your saddle fit is excellent and your equine has good withers, you might not need a breast collar, but because many of the trails we work climb steeply for long stretches, breast collars can prevent a lot of discomfort for your equine and can save you a lot of saddle readjustment time, so they really are a must. Most equines don’t have a problem with them, but it is nice to know before project day!
* Optional: Ability to pony another equine. Conversely, ability to be ponied can be useful in an emergency.

If you need help with any of these, please ask for advice from other members or contact an equine professional!