

NO horsin' around

Local horse trail riders join forces with national organization

By June Breneman

Back Country Horsemen members enjoy a ride at The Bird Sanctuary, near Solon Springs, in June, as seen from the back of Carolyn Petruga's horse, Hank.
Contributed / Carolyn Petruga

The name will fool you.

Back Country Horsemen of America is definitely not just for men. At the national level, more than half of its members are women. And at the chapter level, according to its website, mostly led by women.

That is certainly the case for the newly formed Duluth chapter of Back Country Horsemen of Minnesota, led by President Deserae Hendrickson. She's not surprised by the gender stats; nearly 70% of the Duluth chapter members are women.

Mission driven

So while this BCH chapter is new, horse trail maintenance and development in the Northland is not. The grassroots Duluth Area Horse Trail Alliance — which became an official nonprofit in 2012 — decided to join BCH of Minnesota in 2025. This added northern representation to three other Minnesota chapters: Zumbro Bottoms, Southeast, and Northwest Metro.

"Our goals are essentially the same — maintaining trails, building new ones and making sure people know how to be light on the land," Hendrickson said. "Adding Duluth made sense; there was no BCH representation in the northern half of the state."

What was once a small group of folks determined to keep horse trail riding a vibrant local option now has advocacy muscle across the state and even Washington, D.C.

"Our membership dues now go toward statewide advocacy, as well as nationwide efforts to maintain access to horse trails," Hendrickson said. "Having a voice in Washington is important to maintaining access to public lands for horses."

Building off the efforts of the former Alliance, Duluth BCH-MN has many projects underway in the Northland:

- Expanding the DWP trail (former railroad track route that includes a long train tunnel) across Becks Road and along a short stretch of the Munger Trail to The Buffalo House campground. If this happens, the campground owner plans to build a horse camping area that could attract visitors from a much broader area.
- Proposing expansion of Duluth's Magney-Snively riding trails (cross-country ski trails in the winter) to include the existing 2.2-mile horse trail loop (near Lindahl Road).



Members of Back Country Horsemen of Minnesota relax after a ride at the Douglas County Wildlife Area, known as "The Bird Sanctuary," near Solon Springs. **Photo by June Breneman**



The Duluth Back Country Horsemen of Minnesota Board consists of, left to right: Ron Hendrickson (trails), Deserae Hendrickson (president), Anne Gullion (education), Carolyn Petruga (marketing), Lynn Smith (treasurer) and Dawn Johnson (secretary). Not pictured: Candy Barbo (vice president). **Contributed / Duluth Back Country Horsemen of Minnesota**

- Improving parking access at Jay Cooke Park to accommodate horse trailers near Forbay Lake at the park's horse trail access point.
- Developing equestrian facilities in the northern section of Nemadji State Forest near Wild Valley Road. This will include a new parking lot capable of accommodating small horse trailers, with up to 10 miles of new riding trails within the state forest boundaries.

Being part of the bigger BCH organization has many benefits, Hendrickson explained.

"It's helpful for agencies like the Department of Natural Resources to work with one unified organization instead of multiple separate groups," she said. "BCH also ensures volunteers are properly trained and certified to do trail work safely."



Duluth Back Country Horsemen of Minnesota President Deserae Hendrickson enjoys a moment with her horse, Stetson.
Contributed / Deserae Hendrickson

Education effort

But in addition to expanding and maintaining horse trails, an important role for these trail riders is working with other trail user groups and the general public to educate them on how to share trails with horse riders.

Anne Gullion is the education chair on the chapter's board. She has owned horses most of her life and has been involved in North Country RIDE, Carlton County Mounted Posse, and was a charter member of the Duluth Area Horse Trail Alliance. In 2019, she was awarded the American Trails Advancing Trails Award, which, according to their website, recognizes the "tremendous contributions of volunteers, professionals and other leaders who are working to create an effective system of trails across the globe."

"Back when I first started riding, we'd go anywhere. There weren't as many bikers and hikers," Gullion said. "But now there are many competing uses for trails, so it's really important that we all get along."

To keep everyone safe, Duluth BCH-MN puts a high priority on getting the word out about the skittish nature of horses. Even though they're big and look intimidating, horses are prey animals, wary of being attacked.

"Bikers and inline skaters who approach horses quickly and silently can spook them and throw the rider," she said. "We need people to stop and say something so the horse knows they're not a threat. It's so important."

The chapter stays connected with other outdoor groups through the Duluth Area Outdoor Alliance, which includes COGGS (Cyclists of Gitchee Gumee Shores), Superior Hiking Trail and other groups, to help them understand the unique needs of horse trail riders.

They also help horse owners prepare their horses for the upcoming trail riding season by hosting the Spring Tune Up. This event, held at Gullion's horse farm, is a maze of potentially scary things — blowing bags, flapping flags,

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crunchy cans, spinning pool noodles — that are carefully introduced to the horses. Bikes and ATVs are also sporadically ridden through the course, among other obstacles.

This year’s event included talks by horse care professionals: a chiropractor, a dentist and a massage therapist. Even with all of her decades of experience, Gullion said she’s still learning.

“Everything, from the teeth to the tail, it’s all connected,” she said. “And all of this ultimately affects how you are going to ride your horse. They can’t talk, but they’ll tell you if they’re in pain.”

Hot to trot the trails

If it sounds like a lot of work, it is. But the chapter members take time for fun, too. Each year they host a trail ride get-together. This year it was held at the Solon Springs Bird Sanctuary in June with 12 horses and riders. Duluth chapter members were joined by BCH-MN’s state treasurer, Bruce Kvittem and his wife, Barb.

“It’s easy to buy a bike or put on boots and hit the trails,” Gullion said. “Owning a horse is a huge commitment, an act of love and an honor. So we work hard to work with everyone to maintain horse trail access so we can enjoy our animals.”

To learn more about upcoming meetings, projects and events, visit DuluthHorseTrails.org. New members are always welcome. ✻



Anne Gullion demonstrates how to maneuver obstacles during the Spring Tune Up held in May. The course helps desensitize horses to increase their confidence and promote rider safety. **Contributed / Duluth Back Country Horsemen of Minnesota**

June Breneman is a native Minnesotan and retired research writer living just over the river in Oliver, Wisconsin.

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