Backcountry Horsemen of Central Arizona Painted Desert Packing Project
By John Nelson, member

The Painted Desert of northern Arizona, long written about in literature and song, stirs the soul. At every change of light at sunrise and sunset and during every change of weather, the shifting scenery of the valleys and mesas of this scenic area is a landscape no one can forget.

Red sandstone ruins perched on mesas seem out of place atop the dark, basalt volcanic flows on which they sit. They look as if their owners left them only yesterday. The ruins hover above the washes and arroyos of the Painted Desert, and you wonder if the people who lived here hundreds of years ago also looked in awe across this colorful landscape.

To the south, the majestic San Francisco Peaks loom at over 12,000 feet—the top of the mountain hidden behind early-winter clouds. Several other peaks in the area are clear and sharp, rising above the desert below.

This quintessential American West scene was the setting recently for a unique volunteer project at Wupatki National Monument, thirty miles northeast of Flagstaff, Arizona. Eighty people from Arizona and around the world came together in early November to help the National Park Service replace old fencing along the northeast corner of the monument boundary near the Little Colorado River. With access to much of the monument limited because of difficult terrain and road conditions, the Park Service

decided to use horses and mules to pack over 12,000 pounds of fencing materials into the project area.

Using livestock to haul the heavy loads would save the crew valuable time to complete about four miles of the antelope-friendly fence. If the horses and mules couldn't haul the materials, crews on foot would have to hand carry the heavy loads miles into the project area, an idea that no one relished, and an option that would seriously reduce valuable crew time for fence building.

Challenged to find enough mules and horses for the project, Park Service Facilities Manager Mike Schneegas turned to the Back Country Horsemen of America, Central Arizona Chapter, for help. The BCHA had assisted Schneegas with a similar but smaller project in 2006, and they had impressed him with their abilities, enthusiasm, and volunteer spirit. He figured they'd be up to the job.

"In 2006 we hooked the Back Country Horsemen up with our ACE (American Conservation Experience) crew of eleven people, and with NPS and USFS employees and volunteers, and we were able to complete that fencing project on time, within budget, and with minimal resource impacts," Schneegas said.

Two years ago, he had found that the ACE crews, consisting of young volunteers from around the world and the United States, were hard workers, and they certainly enjoyed the opportunity to be in northern Arizona and to work around the horses and mules the BCHA uses for such projects. Schneegas also learned through the 2006 project how valuable and rewarding it can be to bring seemingly disparate groups of people together to make resource improvements on the land.

"Not only did the young ACE crew members and the Back Country Horsemen folks get along well during the project," he said, "but some of them became good friends, which certainly was rewarding. Whether they were going home to Prescott, Arizona or Rome, Italy, at the end of the project, in your heart you knew that, not only did we get some good work done on the ground, but we maybe also improved international relations in some small way."

Because of the larger size of this year's Wupatki project, Schneegas added a second ACE crew to the effort and signed up 27 BCHA members and their 55 horses and mules to haul materials for the three-day project. Students from the Northern Arizona University School of Forestry's Wilderness Management class and the Student Wildlife Society got involved this year, too. With ten National Park Service and five U.S. Forest Service employees and volunteers added to the mix, Schneegas had a diversified and skilled group to tackle this year's project.

“This is our second time packing here at Wupatki,” said Diane Judge-Cox of Prescott, Arizona. “The first time in 2006 was so amazing, (husband) Harley and I jumped at the chance to come back. It couldn’t get any better than this—camping out with good people, the horses, great food, incredible views, and doing something we love to do for a good cause. It was also great to see the cooperative partnership between the agencies and all the organizations involved.”

The group met and set up camp in the junipers at the U.S. Forest Service’s Doney Mountain recreation site on Friday, October 31. All that afternoon horse trailers and vans full of crews pulled into the site, ready to go to work. Simone Sellin served as camp cook for the event, making it easier for the working group to maximize its time in the field by not having to cook their own meals each day.

On Friday evening, after the animals had been fed and the group had enjoyed a good meal, they gathered around a blazing campfire where Schneegas outlined the plan for the next day. They would be trailering all 55 animals four miles on a rough road to a main drop point where the horses and mules would be loaded with 150-pound packs of barbed and smooth wire, pre-mix concrete and five-gallon containers of water. Then the materials would be packed about four miles out across rugged, broken country to the farthest part of the project area along the Little Colorado River.

Schneegas covered safety topics for the project, and then he urged the crew to get to bed early, as breakfast would be served at 6 a.m., and they would pull out of camp at 7 a.m.

As the volunteers stood around the campfire warming their hands and backsides, they commented how bright the star-lit night skies were out on the desert—a sight many of them had never seen.

By 4:30 a.m. on Saturday, you could hear mules braying and horses nickering in the dark as BCHA members fed hay, dinner pots clanked in the field kitchen, and drowsy packers and workers crawled out of their sleeping bags to meet the day.

“Coffee’s ready!” shouted Simone’s able assistant, husband Tim Sellin, at about 5 a.m. Soon the whole camp was gathered around the morning fire, sipping coffee, and smelling breakfast cooking in the chilly morning air.

It was hardly first light at 6:30 a.m., but the first BCHA packers already were pulling out of camp, headed for the Painted Desert. Out front were Wayne and Sheree Pitrat, with Wayne serving as lead packer for the project, followed closely by Spike and Carol Hicks.

No strangers to BCHA packing projects on public lands, between them they had ten riding and pack animals ready to haul the loads. The rest of the packers soon followed, and by 6:45 a.m., everyone had pulled out of camp.

Looking out across the Painted Desert from above on the Wupatki and Sunset Crater National Monuments loop road, you could see numerous small plumes of dust several miles out in the first rays of early morning light as packers and crews slowly made their way across the rough road to the main drop point. Sunlight was just striking the mesas and cliffs along the Little Colorado River, painting the desert with soft hues of pink, red, and blue.

"I'd never seen anything like that before," Wayne Pitrat said about the scenic drive to the drop point. "It sure was neat seeing that Painted Desert country and those ruins, and if we hadn't been doing this project, we probably wouldn't have seen it."

By 8 a.m. fifteen horse trailers were parked at the main drop point, and USFS volunteer loadmaster Jim McGeorge and his crews were loading panniers for the trek out to the Little Colorado River. Wayne, Sheree, Spike, Carol, and Will Hill of the U.S. Forest Service's Red Rock Ranger District and his pack string headed off across the high desert.

Four miles out, the horsemen met up with the ACE crew, who helped unload the animals and began work to reconstruct the fence. While unloading the animals, the crew came across several rattlesnakes under a bank by the river. Most had never seen a rattlesnake before, and after a few screams and shouts of laughter, they went about their work.

By late morning, all the pack strings had made at least one round trip hauling materials. At the end of the day, most strings had hauled at least two loads, and some had hauled three. About one-third of the materials that were needed in the field for the project had been hauled. While the trailer that had been loaded with six tons of materials was noticeably less full, the pile of materials to be hauled yet still seemed large. Tired packers, crews, and livestock headed back to camp. Sunset comes early in November.

At camp, Simone and Tim, with BCHA member Dick Wertz' skilled assistance, cooked up a steak dinner over hot juniper coals. Mike Schneegas asked the group what time they'd like to leave for the planned trail ride into the far mesas of the Painted Desert that

was scheduled for the next morning, since only the first day had been scheduled for packing materials. His question was met with silence as the campfire crackled. Spike Hicks then asked if folks could haul materials again on Sunday instead of going on the ride. Schneegas paused a moment, impressed that anyone would want to continue working instead of going on a fun day ride, and said they could work more on Sunday if they like, and that it would be greatly appreciated. Others began calling out how they'd rather pack materials the next day, and it was soon apparent the entire group of 80 was headed back in the morning to pack supplies.

Chris Baker, founder and director of the ACE program, told the group how much he appreciated their work and what it means to the ACE crew to be involved with the BCHA members. He said "The ACE volunteers come from completely different backgrounds than most of us, and this experience is both fun and a learning experience for them."

BCHA member Sheree Pitrat responded, saying how much she enjoyed meeting the nice young ACE crew members. She went on to say that she appreciated their politeness, great work ethic, and their friendliness.

Early the next morning, packers and crew ate a hot breakfast of bacon, eggs, and buttered pancakes with syrup and then loaded up and headed back out to the main drop point.

It became everyone's personal goal to finish the hauling project.

At the pre-designated drop points out on the Painted Desert, the ACE crew members from England, France, Japan, Korea, Belgium, Spain, Holland, Italy, Taiwan, and other countries unloaded heavy packs. Other crew members gladly held the lead rope for the animals. Many had never been around horses and mules, and the immediate fondness they felt for the animals showed as smiles were recorded by clicking cameras.

Angela Kirk of Leeds, England stood stroking the head of Cliff, the black Forest Service horse, as others unloaded his packs. "I feel so lucky to experience this," she said, "it's something I've never done before. The wonderful scenery, the people, the horses." She paused and said "It's fantastic."

Cecelia Huber of Rome, Italy held Forest Service horse Bobbin's lead rope, obviously reminiscing about how she had ridden as a little girl but then had to quit when she started school. "What kind of horse is this?" she asked, and when told he was an American Quarter Horse she said "I want to learn more about these horses."

"The ACE kids were so fun to watch around the horses," said BCHA member Diane Judge-Cox. "Some were like a kid in a candy store. They couldn't get enough. I loved sharing information and answering questions about the horses, how to handle and be around them and, of course, the picture taking. It was an experience none of us will ever forget."

By noon that second day, some strings already had hauled three loads, but they hardly stopped for a break, mostly only to water the animals, and then they were on the trail again with another load. A little breeze had come up ahead of a storm front that was beginning to pass through the area. The nearby San Francisco Peaks had a dusting of snow way up high. Packers could be seen putting their heads down a little in the wind as their horses and mule's tails blew outwards and dust plumes followed the strings through the sandy washes.

The strings kept moving, though, and by 3 p.m. the big trailer was empty. In just two days, the packers and crews had hauled over 12,000 pounds of materials—six tons—all by horse and mule.

The sun was starting to dip toward the horizon as the dusty, sweaty, and tired crew and their strings of animals loaded up and headed back for camp.

"Our goal is to be good stewards of public lands with the purpose of helping public land agencies maintain quality natural resources and thereby allowing for continued equestrian stock use where it has historically occurred," said Jim Buchanan, Arizona state BCHA chair "On a national scale, we try to get out there on the ground with all the public land agencies to help out and demonstrate how useful and appropriate stock use can be. The National Park Service, Forest Service, ACE and other partners in this one were absolutely outstanding."

That night 80 people of different ages, experiences, and countries sat around the campfire and laughed and carried on like good friends who'd known each other forever. Like the unforgettable landscape of the Painted Desert, they knew they would long remember and cherish the rewarding work and the new friends they had made.