

Trail Riders

Submitted by Bobby Mitchell

If you are reading this, chances are you already know the lure of the trail. You have experienced finding that “special place” to ride. It can be simply you and your horse or trail riding with friends. A trail experience can be many things - the scenic outdoors, an invigorating ride, the company of friends, and relaxation time with your horse.

Have you ever considered the “value” of your “special trail” and just what the trail experience is worth to you?

This may seem like an odd question, but it is especially relevant if you enjoy riding on public land. Are you aware that horse access to trails in our National Forests and State Parks might be taken away? If you use these public resources and if they are important to you, there are some issues that you might want to consider.

As time goes by, more people are using public lands and other places we like to ride. Increased demand and the specific needs of each user group (such as hikers, bikers, equestrians, birders, hunters, etc) can result in a competition for the limited resources within each public facility. And of course, more users do mean more impact and potential damage to the trails themselves.

We all have a right to use our public lands but with that right comes the responsibility to take care of them. There is a two-part solution involving becoming educated on issues surrounding use of public land use and volunteering your time.

Do you belong to a riding club that uses public lands and if so, is your club informed about developments in our National Forests and in your local State Parks? Many clubs designate a representative to gather information in these areas and report it to the club to keep members aware of changes in our public land policy and usage. Today's privilege of riding lands is not a guarantee of future access. A scan of your Forest and Parks planning documents may alert you to changes coming to your trails. Many favorite trails are lost because we riders were unaware of proposed changes in policies and missed public comment periods. Equestrians need to keep current on public sentiment and events that can signal a change to our right to ride.

The second part of this responsibility involves your time. Are you doing anything to help keep a place for you, your children, and grandchildren to ride? If not, they may never see or get to enjoy the sights and beauty of the places you now enjoy.

Trails, even well designed trails, require maintenance. Have you complained about poor trail conditions, or noticed trash on the trails? Have you seen people working on the trail during your rides, and wondered if you, too, should be contributing something? Did you tell the volunteers you appreciated what they were doing? Many riding clubs work with local land managers to hold trail “workdays” to help take care of the trails that they ride. The work can be physically difficult, but there are many easy things you can do, and there are many rewards. You meet new people, learn about new trails and have the satisfaction of doing something to improve our trails.

Perhaps you have not given much thought to the idea of giving back to the trails that you now enjoy. Maybe you feel that you don't have the time, and you would rather “just ride”. If we want to continue to have equestrian trails to enjoy, we need to get involved. If all trail riders participated in one or two workdays a year it would make a real difference in our trails.

Public land managers are generally very receptive to offers of trail assistance. Contact your local Park Manager or Forest Ranger to determine how your club can provide man-hours to get projects in his/her Park or Forest accomplished.

Ultimately, the decision is about your level of involvement in trails. What is your “special trail” worth to you and are you willing to risk losing it? If we don't take care of the trails we have now, our requests for new trails will surely be denied. Get informed, get involved; don't let our trails become just a trail memory. Let's keep a place for our children and our grandchildren to ride and enjoy.

Editor's Hoofnote:

Bobby Mitchell is undoubtedly one of Georgia's most dedicated and hard-working trail volunteers. He turns out for almost every trail work day, no matter where it is, giving up a great deal of riding and personal time. Certainly no one expects everyone to be “a Bobby”, but all trail riders need to make a contribution by coming out to work on our trails at least once. Bobby and the others who regularly put forth the effort cannot do it all by themselves. We need YOU! Please try to attend at least one of the CTHA workdays listed below.

