

# Mountain Trails & Tradition

The Roundup Riders of the Rockies traverse spectacular wilderness landscapes and help maintain trails for others to enjoy.

By RANDY WITTE



**Above: Roundup Riders take a break during one of their rides. Fellowship and horsemanship are two pillars of the organization.**

**Left: During their Big Ride in 2011, Roundup Riders weave through the San Juan Mountains.**

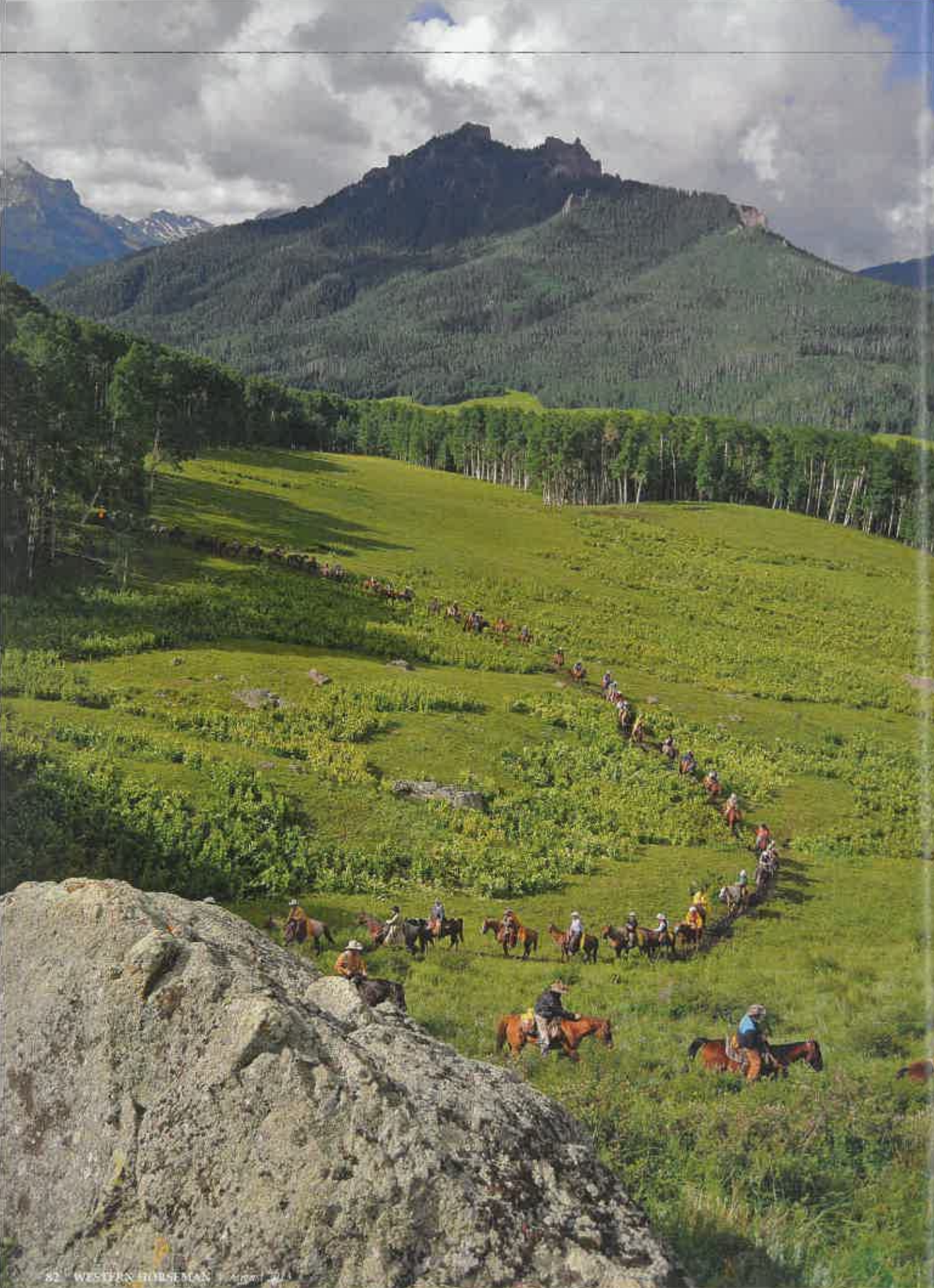
## Horsemanship, sportsmanship and camaraderie

are at the heart of the Roundup Riders of the Rockies, a men's trail-riding organization devoted to maintaining Western traditions.

For a full week each summer, the riders converge on a mountainous location, typically in Colorado, and embark on a 100-mile ride that is both rugged and spectacular. Every day of the ride offers plenty of natural challenges—steep, rocky paths that often top the Continental Divide, remote trails through canyons and forests, rushing streams to ford—plus scenic views that seem to

go on forever in the pure mountain air. Nighttime campfires set the tone for cowboy music and good conversation.

The Roundup Riders organization has four rides a year, including the Big Ride, which also has a layover day for a horse show and race events. About 150 riders participate each year, and camp is moved between each leg of the ride—no small task in itself, with tents, cots, self-contained shower and toilet trucks, and all the food and cooking equipment necessary to round out such an expedition.



Lest anyone think an organized ride with these comforts is “soft”—it is not. Men and horses are expected to arrive in top physical condition. Anything less is asking for trouble along the challenging trails and in the thin, high-altitude air.

Charles Scoggin, a Boulder, Colorado, physician, recalls his first experience with the Roundup Riders in 1993.

“That first year on the ride, I pulled into camp and saw tents and cots, the shower truck, the catering, and I was thinking this wasn’t going to be a serious horseback ride,” he says. “I can tell you after the first day, when they hauled my sorry butt up 12,000 feet and back, boy, that shower truck sure looked good. It’s a serious horseback ride, with a lot of emphasis on safety. But horse and rider better be fit. The ride is also a way you get into some pretty spectacular country.”

The Roundup Riders record a brief day-by-day synopsis of each ride for posterity. Here’s an excerpt describing a ride that covered about 20 miles one summer day in Colorado’s California Park, west of the Continental Divide. The colorful names alone make a person want to saddle a horse and head for the hills.

“Monday’s ride struck to the northwest, up the Angel Spring Trail,” the account reads, “initially past Buck Mountain, and then along the western slope of Slide Mountain toward Saw Mill Creek. The riders then began

along the rim. It was a bright and clear day, with a great view of the Flat Tops and the Gore Range in the distance. The riders then headed down to the southwest, bucking a few snow drifts, then past Freeman Reservoir and on to Johnson Meadows to camp for the evening.”

Scoggin talks about the friendships formed along the trail.

“You get to know some great people,” he says. “Bob Shideler [a past president of the organization and veteran of 42 rides] told me on that first ride I’d come to know some of the best friends I would ever have. Nineteen years later, he’s still right!”

The Roundup Riders of the Rockies was formed in 1948 by Rick Ricketson and Joe Dekker, a couple of Coloradans who were flying home after participating in California’s annual Rancheros Visitadores ride. They got the idea for a similar ride in Colorado—taking a horseback trek through the Rockies with like-minded friends, and using the ride to help promote tourism in the state. The organization came up with its own brand, a stylized 3R.

So, a handful of friends invited other friends to join the ride, and that’s how it started in July of 1948, with 18 riders traveling from Al Gould’s ranch on the Platte River at Shawnee to Van Vleet’s Caribou Ranch near Nederland, Colorado. Today, the ride is limited to 150 participants, and membership is obtained the same way it was

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a long, slow, steep climb to the top of Black Mountain. Once on top of the mountain, they were greeted by a few 10- to 12-foot-high snow drifts off to the side of the trail. After a brief ride on top of the flat-topped mountain, the riders enjoyed a lunch stop

in the beginning, with friends inviting friends to join.

Such friendships are sincere. Among those early-day members was the late Sage Kester, a veterinarian in the United States Army who helped write guidelines for ride etiquette, equine



healthcare and horsemanship that are still used by the organization today.

Wes Segelke, a rancher and real estate agent who lives in Englewood, Colorado, recalls visiting with Kester one day.

“We had talked about all the experiences he had with the Army in the 1940s and ’50s, all the places he had lived, and I asked why he had chosen to settle on Lookout Mountain [just west of Denver],” Segelke says. “He said, ‘Well, because of the Roundup Riders.... That’s where all my friends are.’”

Kester was a dedicated horseman throughout his life. There are still those who recall his unique account of the Pearl Harbor attack by Japanese planes on December 7, 1941. Kester watched the attack unfold while he was horseback in the nearby hills. He was stationed in Oahu at the time, and was out for an early-morning ride when he saw the planes flying toward the harbor.

Segelke, a past president of the Roundup Riders, has also been involved for years with the Heritage Trails Foun-



**General Andy Love and Charles Scoggin, MD, describe the history of the Big Horn Mountain area at the overlook of Walker Prairie during the Big Ride in 2012, which drew 155 horsemen.**

dation, a complementary part of the 3R organization that was incorporated in 1983 to help the United States Forest Service with trail maintenance. With the foundation, a fund was started to help the Forest Service improve some trails for the ride, and then maintain them for the general public.

"This partnership is mutually beneficial," Segelke says. "The Forest Service has certainly helped the Roundup Riders over the years, and we've tried to help them. There have been years when the Forest Service needed help in re-establishing trails that had become inaccessible because of lack of maintenance. The Roundup Ride has been able to provide funding for work like this, and trails have been re-opened to the public."

The Roundup Riders also support other like-minded organizations involved with public open space trail improvements, including Colorado Youth Corps and Backcountry Horsemen of America. Of the youth corps,

Segelke noted that the organization "employs teenagers from primarily the metro area for trail building and open space enhancement all over the state. So by supporting this organization, we are supporting underemployed or at-risk young men and women, and we're also enhancing open space and public trails. We like that concept."

He adds that the Colorado Trail, which runs from Denver to Durango along the Continental Divide, was also a recipient of funds.

About 90 percent of the foundation is financed by 3R members. The group also supports Denver's National Western Stock Show, and was instrumental in starting the Citizen of the West Dinner, held in conjunction with the stock show to recognize a prominent Westerner. The dinner raises funds for scholarships for Colorado and Wyoming agricultural business students, or to medical students who plan to provide rural health care.

Still, the Big Ride remains the largest event of the Roundup Riders after all these years, and it is put together by a 12-member ride and trail committee, currently headed by Darrel Wentz, a retired airline pilot and rancher, of Elbert, Colorado. Each year, the current 3R president gets to choose the area for the ride, but then it's up to the committee to figure out the logistics.

"Most of the time, once we identify the area we want to take the ride to, we contact the Forest Service, establish a relationship with them at the District Ranger level, and we all look at a map together," Wentz says. "We try to use existing trails, although we have on occasion bushwhacked through some areas with Forest Service approval, and then developed those trails."

Next, the local sheriff's office is contacted and provided with a map and emergency phone numbers to the two satellite phones taken on each ride. In the event of a medical evacuation, a 911 operator and the sheriff's office will coordinate details. The ride organizers have people who know how to bring in a helicopter.

The committee then rides the trails to be used for the next year's ride, and rides them again in the spring a few weeks prior to the Big Ride.

"We want to make sure no trees have fallen across the trails, and verify whatever notes we made from the fall check," Wentz says. "On occasion we have taken pack horses with chainsaws and done our own trail work. But typically we like to employ the Forest Service for that, and then they use various resources to do the trail work. One of those is the youth organization."

The committee's biggest responsibility, says Wentz, is to provide an interesting, scenic and challenging ride on safe trails, and still have campsites that



**The 3R camp, complete with tents and plenty of horses, sits near Silver Jack Reservoir in the San Juan Mountains.**

can be reached by the big rigs needed to transport gear and supplies.

The ride has little impact environmentally. If camp is established for more than a day, picket lines are moved. Only certified weed-free hay is used, manure is spread, and all human waste and camp trash is hauled away.

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— DARREL WENTZ

"We've had occasions," Scoggins adds, "where the Forest Service rode a trail shortly after we rode through and told us there was no way anyone would know all those horses had been on that trail. In some cases the Forest Service gives us credit for improving a trail with the use of horses. The flat-footed-

ness of the horse tends to level the trail, whereas any kind of bike tends to cut the trail."

He added that the Roundup Riders want all people to have access to public lands, whether they're horseback, hiking or on bikes.

In the early days of the ride, there were a lot of Quarter Horses, Arabians and Morgans. There were also some Thoroughbred crosses. But the Fox Trotter established a major presence on the ride in subsequent years with its reputation for an easy-going, ground-covering walk over miles of varying terrain. Today there are still plenty of Quarter Horses on the ride, not as many Arabians and Morgans, and a good contingent of Fox Trotters.

There are also a few mules. Darrel Wentz has used both horses and mules on the ride, and he likes them both.

At night, horses and mules are picketed and watched by a "night hawk." Veterinarians, medical doctors and a farrier join each ride. And at the end of every ride column there's even a spare horse or two, in case a horse comes up lame.

The Roundup Riders of the Rockies have a well-earned reputation for do-

ing everything the right way. And the riders come from about every background and every day-job one can imagine. Cowboys, ranchers, doctors, lawyers, military and police veterans, airline pilots—you name it, they're represented in this group.

Dick Houck of Burlington, Wisconsin, has been part of the 3R since 1991. He's a retired veterinarian who spent his career overseeing Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus animals. Houck even designed and built an elephant breeding facility for the circus.

But in the spirit of "irony has a sense of humor," he has gone from raising elephants to raising championship miniature horses for himself. On the rides, however, you'll still find him on his own smooth-riding, sure-footed Fox Trotter. 🐾

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