

Jacks River Fields – North Georgia



AERC Trails Grant, completed 2007

Updating a horse camping area means continued availability
of this beautiful Georgia campground and trailhead to riders

by Jim Holland



At a time when the Forest Service is attempting to limit horses to a few designated trails in the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest (CONF), the Back Country Horsemen of North Georgia (BCHNG)—in cooperation with the Conasauga Ranger District and with help from an AERC grant—have saved a small but significant recreation area in the North Georgia mountains from closure.

Jacks River Fields (JRF) is a small camping area and equestrian trailhead in the Chattahoochee National Forest just outside the southwest corner of the Cohutta Wilderness (GPS coordinates: DegMinSec NAD83 - 34, 51, 52 N, 84, 31, 11 W). This is a beautiful, serene, scenic, and remote spot along the south fork of Jacks River at its intersection with a small stream.

The south fork of the Jacks merges with the north fork and flows from south to north through the entire 36,977-acre Cohutta Wilderness to its confluence with the Conasauga River at the Georgia-Tennessee state line. JRF is located about 35 miles from Blue Ridge, Georgia. Ten miles of that distance is winding and sometimes steep (but scenic) single-track Forest Service road.

JRF provides access to the Cohutta Wilderness Trail System and several non-wilderness trails nearby. It is the only equestrian trailhead camping location in this area. It was once an old farm and has a grassy area perfect for hand grazing, permanent composting toilets and easy access to natural water. It has seven tent pad/trailer camping sites on one side of the stream along an oval drive and a small gravel parking lot across the stream for horse camping with 4x6 highline poles.

Horses are limited to the area across the stream, accessed by a very narrow road and a hardened stream ford. Only small bumper-pull trailers could navigate it. Under current environmental regulations, a camping area—especially horse camping—could not be built in a riparian area of this nature, especially in such close proximity to significant water sources, which makes it an extremely valuable site.

In the spring of 2007, BCHNG was notified by the FS that they were considering closing JRF because of its remote location and lack of manpower to maintain it. BCHNG President Jim McGarvey and I entered into negotiations with USFS Operations Team Leader Larry Thomas of the Conasauga Ranger District on behalf of BCHNG as to how we might save the site. BCHNG agreed to adopt complete maintenance of the site and I agreed to manage the project. The FS agreed to:

- Modify the entrance area to improve access by horse trailers.
- Widen the access road and ford to the horse camping area to allow access by larger trailers.
- Modify the campsite oval to allow the use of two of the regular campsites on the near side of the stream by equestrians, although horses would not be allowed to be kept in this area.
- Conditional on the approval of a grant from AERC, allow BCHNG as a pilot project to build two 12' x 12' corrals in the highline area to provide a more secure confinement system with better footing and a drainage base which would protect the area from runoff.

The highline tether area is located in the tree line, and due to the nature of the soil in this lowland riparian area, the footing is fairly soft mineral soil with a heavy layer of duff and although protected to some extent by geo-webbing and some gravel, it does not drain well. Horses quickly create holes under the tether lines, and the area becomes a quagmire of manure and hay, attracting mosquitoes and smells of decay and rotting manure.

Higher usage by equestrians due to our improvements at the site would most certainly result in greater impact, especially in wet weather. We proposed that the use of corrals in this area using grassy pavers installed over a gravel drainage sub-base and filled with a gravel-sand floor would provide stable footing and a viable solution to this problem.

We wanted this to be a “model” trailhead to demonstrate that equestrians are environmentally conscious and that we can use public lands without abusing them. BCHNG is a relatively new organization, and funds for projects are in short supply, so we applied to AERC for a trails grant to build the corrals.

In August, 2007 the Forest Service completed the modifications to the road and campsites and in September of 2007, AERC granted the request for funds. The corrals are scheduled to be installed in the next few months. The FS is extremely pleased with our efforts and the Conasauga Ranger District has widely publicized the project. The Back Country Horsemen of North Georgia would like to express thanks to the AERC Trails Committee for their support.