

Eagle Feather Riding

By Jacqueline Louie



Vickie Tait, owner of Eagle Feather Riding.

At Eagle Feather Riding, the horses know when their riders are on their way, and come running to greet them when they arrive.

That deep connection between horses and riders is part of the magic of Eagle Feather Riding, which offers bareback riding lessons from September through June, as well as summer camps.

Situated on land overlooking the foothills just west of Calgary, Alberta, Eagle Feather Riding makes learning to ride bareback and connecting to your mount, easy. A “copilot” — an experienced horse person — holds the rope for each beginning rider’s horse and accompanies horse and rider for every lesson, which is always at a walking pace.

Eagle Feather Riding owner Vickie Tait, who has taught riding for nearly three decades, started teaching using saddles, and moved on to bareback in the late 1990s.

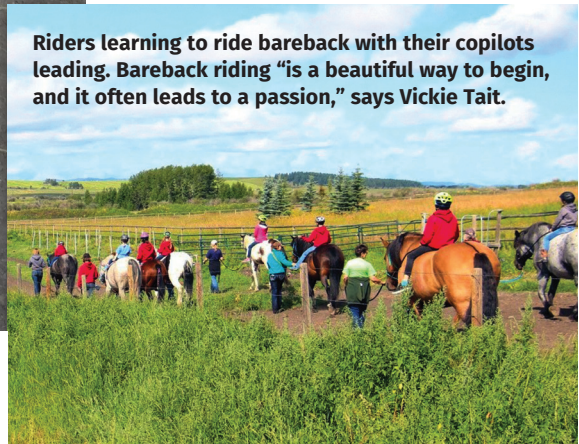
“My whole purpose was to have them slow down and feel the horse, and really understand where the feet were,” explains Tait, a physical education teacher in Calgary before she left her job to operate her riding business full-time.

Learning to ride bareback is unusual, she says, “because it is so vulnerable.”

Tait, whose mother was a Calgary Stampede Princess, grew up riding bareback in Alberta and Yukon. As an adult, Tait took up one of the challenges of GaWaNi Pony Boy, author of *Horse, Follow Closely: Native American Horsemanship*, to ride bareback for a year. She never went back to the saddle.

Bareback riding appeals to “sensitive, quiet, gentle people interested in a slow, deep connection,” says Tait. Bareback riding “is a beautiful way to begin and it often leads to a passion.”

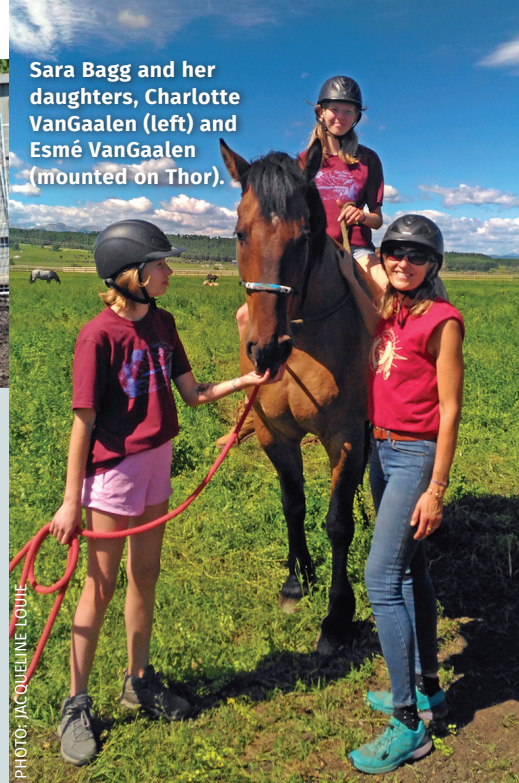
Eagle Feather Riding teaches all ages, from little ones to people in their 70s.



Riders learning to ride bareback with their copilots leading. Bareback riding “is a beautiful way to begin, and it often leads to a passion,” says Vickie Tait.

PHOTO: EAGLE FEATHER RIDING

Amber Zierath and her daughters, Kyra (left) mounted on Digger, a Norwegian Fjord, and Kiyomi mounted on Karma, the family's palomino Quarter Horse that lives at Eagle Feather Riding. Zierath says the horses are "best buddies," and has written a novel about Karma, titled *Horse Karma*, which will be published by Olympia Publishers in the United Kingdom, is expected to be released in the fall of 2022.



Sara Bagg and her daughters, Charlotte VanGalen (left) and Esmé VanGalen (mounted on Thor).

"If they can walk, they can ride," says Tait. Holly Tait, Vickie's sister, helps by taking out the more advanced riders.

"The most powerful thing is the development of the relationship with horses. They are great teachers, helping people learn to be comfortable with themselves and face their fears," says Holly, a registered psychologist specializing in addiction recovery. "Learning to ride bareback with a copilot makes it a lot safer, because they don't have to worry about controlling the horse — they just need to focus on finding their balance."

Sara Bagg and her daughters, Charlotte VanGalen age 12, and Esmé VanGalen age 14, have been taking lessons with Eagle Feather Riding for several years.

When she first began bareback lessons, Bagg was "really scared" to get on a horse. She thinks that learning to ride bareback with a copilot is hugely beneficial. "Because there's an experienced person who knows the horse you're riding really well, all you really need is to trust in that person and the courage to get on the horse's back."

Bagg rides Thor, a Friesian gelding. Now in her relationship with Thor, she hardly ever touches the reins. "I can say, 'Okay buddy, we're going to go over



PHOTO: EAGLE FEATHER RIDING

here.' He'll pick up his head and go."

She understands how some riders might want to be more task-oriented with their horse and "do all kinds of fancy stuff." For Bagg, however, "it's more about spending time with a friend."


Amber Zierath and her daughters, Kyra Kariatsumari, age 12, and Kiyomi Kariatsumari, age 14, have been taking riding lessons with Eagle Feather Riding for several years.

"We gain so much more than just equestrian skills," Zierath says. "What Vickie teaches is deep listening and gentle communication. So much is earning the respect of the horses. The more they trust you, the more willing they are to trust your direction. Riding bareback is a form of profoundly deeper connection

with the horse."

A close-knit community is another hallmark of Eagle Feather Riding, which is home to a mixed herd of geldings, including Arabians, Quarter Horses, and draft horses. To have a horse stay there, owners are asked to volunteer for at least two hours a week.

"I have such a love of Eagle Feather Riding and Vickie," says Zierath. "She is a remarkable person. She is a trail blazer."

"I really think Vickie has created an amazing community. That is a standout," says Bagg. 

> www.eaglefeatherriding.ab.ca

> Read [Jacqueline Louie's bio on page 78](#).