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O.C. Boy Scout ties record: 131 merit badges

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LA HABRA – Ask mountain climbers why they expend so much effort in climbing frosty, craggy peaks, and the answer often is: "Because it's there."

It's much the same with 18-year-old Andrew Croy. The Eagle Scout recently became one of the very few to earn his 20th Eagle Palm, the highest achievement ever awarded by the Boy Scouts of America.

He did it by earning all 131 merit badges offered by the Boy Scouts.

To attain the rank of Eagle Scout, one must acquire 21 merit badges, some required, others elective. At 12, he'd earned 50 merit badges.

Many scouts simply stop once they've reached Eagle. Why did Croy continue? Because those merit badges were there.

"I realized, 'I could get these other merit badges. I have time,'" said Croy, who lives in La Habra and attends a private high school. "To not get them would be like giving up."

Croy received his 20th palm in a mid-January ceremony.

Croy's accomplishment "is very rare," said Jon Maeda, director of field services for the Orange County Council, the umbrella for the county's Boy Scout and affiliated troops. "It's like one in 300,000 or half a million boys achieve anything that big. ..."

"Any Eagle Scout has earned his rank. The palms are for those who really have a passion for learning and going beyond that," Maeda said. "Your average merit badge takes about 30 hours of work."

The merit badge sash that Croy wears on ceremonial occasions got filled up well before he earned his last badges, so those got placed on the inside of the sash.

Croy's scouting career began at age 6 when he entered Tiger Cubs, a precursor to the more familiar Cub Scouts. Six years later, he earned his Eagle rank, which scouts have until age 18 to attain.

"I just got started," Croy, with his characteristic modesty, said about earning Eagle. "It was hard, but I was able to do it. It was a lot of phone calls to people I know, and I'm kind of shy. It was a lot of planning, solving problems, and finding the right supplies and getting everything set up."

Later, Croy helped to form his local Venture Crew, in part to spend more time in the outdoors. Venturing is an affiliation with Boy Scouts, with an emphasis on wilderness outings, that includes boys, girls, men and women ages 14 to 21.

Croy's Venture group has done trips such as mountain biking in the Angeles National Forest and a week-long canoe trip near Thunder Bay, Ontario.

"They canoed some of the same routes used by trappers 200 years ago," said Andrew Croy's father, Jeff.

The crew travelling with Croy had to take turns carrying the canoe over stretches of muddy land, or hauling gear bags topping 70 pounds. The reward? The area they visited was so remote, they ran across more fish and eagles than fellow *homo sapiens*.

Andrew Croy's favorite part of the trip: "Being out in the canoe in the middle of a still lake as the sun is setting. We have some cool pictures. ... It's such an amazing place. It's like you're living in a painting."

Croy's has a strong love for the outdoors and remembers camping trips with his family when he was a few years old.

This summer, he'll set out on his own starting in the eastern Sierra Nevada's Onion Valley, near Independence. He plans to cross the Sierras, passing what is considered by many to be some of the most spectacular scenery in California on his way to Road's End in Kings Canyon National Park.

"I like to backpack," Croy said. "It provides a lot of quiet time to think."

"I'm jealous," Croy's father said. "I'd like to go, but I don't have that much vacation time."

After that, Croy plans to take communications and electronic media courses at The Master's College, a Christian university in Santa Clarita.

His study choice was inspired by earning his cinematography merit badge, one of his favorites because of the way he was required to make different shots of a room using different angles.

The first of Croy's 131 merit badges was for reading. It was an easy choice.

"I always loved to read," he said. "I don't have as much time now, but when I was younger, you'd never see me without books."

His least favorite was environmental science, which he earned at snow camp when he was 11.

"It involved a lot of writing, and I didn't like to write (then). I didn't want to continue, but I got a lot of encouragement from (my dad)," Croy said.

Once Croy made Eagle, Boy Scout rules say his palms could be earned only after serving a three-month period in a leadership role and by earning five more merit badges. At the end of the three-month period, there had to be a "board of review" involving parents of other scouts examining Croy's accomplishments and agreeing to award him another palm.

These reviews had to take place on a particular time frame to enable Croy to keep on pace toward getting 20 palms. Sometimes that involved parents agreeing to get together at odd times at some restaurant.

One took place on the slopes of 11,500-foot Mount San Gorgonio in the San Bernardino National Forest, as several members of Croy's troop hiked to the summit. Strangely, the review wasn't the most memorable part of the trip.

That was when they accidentally crashed a wedding — at the mountain's peak.

That was *not* what we were expecting," Croy said. "The bride was in a long, white dress, so we'd assumed she'd helicoptered in."

They found out later she, her husband, and the minister had hiked to the summit themselves.

The reviews are just one example of help from others that Croy received while he stockpiled his merit badges. He credits his father for urging him to continue. And each merit badge required Croy to consult

with an expert in that particular field.

"That means 131 people had to help Andrew," his father noted.

During his journey to 131, Croy co-piloted a Cessna, rode a horse and made friends laugh when he tried his hand at golf.

"I always feel accomplished and satisfied when I finish a merit badge. I feel like I've finished up a mini-school course. I've done something good, and I'm working toward my goal."

Croy earned his last badges in mid-January, just days before the deadline of his 18th birthday. To get them, he had to take bugle lessons and convince a surveyor to spend his weekend helping Croy place cones to mark sections of Fullerton's Rolling Hills Park.

"I'm glad it's over. It was a lot of work, and stress, especially at the end," Croy admitted. "I learned a bunch, and I got to do a lot of new things that I wouldn't have otherwise tried."

Lisa Todd said Croy's accomplishment doesn't surprise her. She knows him through his Venture Crew and has taught him in her science classes at Foundation Christian School in La Mirada.

"He's got a character that moves him forward," she said. "He's the epitome of a Boy Scout."

Croy is always willing to help others, she said. On the canoe trip, other campers often woke up to find that breakfast was already being prepared.

"It's just indicative of Troop 81 and Andrew's leadership," she said. "They don't even have to ask. It just gets done."

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