

Public or Private? Where You Can & Can't Ride

In the Spring issue of SnowTech Magazine we discussed the growing problem of snowmobilers trespassing on private land. Many, more like the majority, miles of groomed snowmobile trail cross private land. Even in areas with generous amounts of public land, the trails often must cross private lands to interconnect.

With the growing popularity of off trail riding, we find an increasing number of snowmobilers who are not familiar enough with the land or area they are riding in and do not study maps long enough to know where it is legal to ride, and where they need to stay on the trail. When we talk about “off trail riding” we are talking about riding in areas with no groomed trails, we are not referring to tearing across an open field right next to a groomed trail, but that is exactly the behavior that is causing all of the problems.

One almost needs to be a major in psychology to better understand the behavioral issues at hand. Do the riders not understand that the land adjacent to the trail is private, thus their off trail excursions are illegal trespassing? Or, do the riders know the land is private but do not think it will matter if they put down a few tracks? Or, do the riders know the land is private and simply do not care about land owner rights, and figure they won't get caught?

Anyone involved with trail clubs and associations know first hand how much of a problem this is becoming. They go out to talk with the land owner to secure an easement or permission for the trail to again cross the private land, but are told to move the trail, snowmobilers are no longer welcome. Why? Sometimes it is due to the loud machines, sometimes it is due to a land use conflict, but most often it is due to the inability of the snowmobilers to stay on the trail. Plain and simple. Snowmobilers running over small trees, trampling whatever might be under the snow, spinning their tracks and causing erosion, any and all of it. Even if they cause no damage, it is a matter of permission and respect – respecting private property, not going somewhere if you do not have permission, and understanding what the word “no” means. Pretty simple, yet often misunderstood.

Trail clubs do their best to convince the land owner to “give them one more chance” and put up more signage to keep the riders on the trail. Maybe with extra signs indicating this is a sensitive area that requires riders to stay on the trail maybe they will be better next year? While this seems to be a logical strategy, it often times has the opposite effect. It is like riders see these signs and completely ignore them, going right past them to tear up the fresh snow out in the open field.

So with each year, as we all venture out onto the groomed trail network, we find the trail has been moved, relocated, or worse yet, closed. You often wonder why. What happened to cause the trail that has been here for 10-20 years to get moved? Instead of taking the scenic route along a fence line and through the woods, you now are forced to ride alongside the roadway in

the ditch. Oh boy, that sure is fun. Slowly, year after year, more and more sections of “good” trail are replaced with ditch trail, using the last remaining path we have access to – road right of ways.

One theory is that younger riders, who seem to be the bulk of the problem, do not remember what snowmobiling was like before we had groomed trails. They do not remember hitting rocks, hitting culverts, riding only ditches and lakes and rivers, not having a safe, marked, smooth path designated for snowmobiles. They do not know how much time and effort and money went into creating a trail system in the first place. Because if they did, they might try a bit harder to keep what we have. The entitlement attitude they carry in their daily lives will slowly destroy the privilege that many of us have worked so hard for, for so long – having a safe place to ride our snowmobiles close to home in areas with little public lands.

To that end, each and every rider must ask themselves before they go off the trail – is this land public or private? If you don’t know, don’t go. Carry a map and learn how to read it. Know where you are. Pay attention to the signs along the trail. Use GPS information that indicates land ownership. Know where the restricted areas are. Know the customs and laws of each area you go to ride. Ignorance is no excuse!

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