Prairie State snowmobiling depends on more than Mother Nature to ensure a great ride. Check out these tips before you hit the trails.

The White Stuff

Story By Steve Hefel
Photos By Jim Howard

As winter draws near, thousands of snowmobilers—riders of the nearly 50,000 snowmobiles registered in Illinois—are hoping the season brings frequent, ample snow.

"Illinois winters are unpredictable and everyone is anxious to hit the trail when sufficient snow cover occurs," said Jeff Hopkins, administrator of the Department of Natural Resources' (DNR) Snowmobile Safety Education program. "Riders should prepare themselves before the snow starts to fly, whether that involves taking a safety education course or reviewing their owner's manual. Once the trails are open, the guiding principle should be

(Photo by Mark Hazzard.)

Snowmobilers riding the multi-use Jane Addams Trail in Stephenson County stop while in the Village of Orangeville. The trail received a national award from the Coalition for Recreational Trails and was developed with the assistance of grants through DNR's local government snowmobile and recreational trails programs.

respect—for fellow trail users, landowners and the environment."

Most Illinois snowmobiling occurs in the northern third of the state, but central Illinois also offers a number of places to ride. Illinois' snowmobile trail network is mainly north of I-80, where nearly 2,500 miles of marked trails pass through private property and connect a number of communities. Riders will find trails ranging from flat to hilly and a constantly changing landscape of woodlands, pastures and open fields. Excellent riding areas also are available on public land, like Big River State Forest near Keithsburg, the Hennepin Canal Parkway State Trail and the Illinois and Michigan Canal State Trail, all DNR sites.

Snowmobilers pay for, and voluntarily help develop and maintain, most Illinois snowmobile trails, with assistance from a state-funded grant. A third of the revenue generated from snowmobile registration fees ($18 for three years) is allocated for a trail grant program administered by DNR.

(Photo by Mark Hazzard.)

A recently renovated bridge on the Jane Addams Trail, a former Illinois Central Railroad line, was completed with DNR grant funding assistance and volunteer labor provided by a local snowmobile club.

Most snowmobile trails in Illinois are maintained by volunteer snowmobile club members utilizing grooming equipment purchased through DNR's snowmobile trail establishment fund.

Maintaining the trails is a task gladly undertaken by the 80-plus clubs and 3,000 family members of the Illinois Association of Snowmobile Clubs (IASC). The mission of IASC is to provide pleasant riding experiences and promote family snowmobile activities by promoting safe snowmobiling and preservation of a trail system and the sport. Members believe sharing snowmobiling information and developing working relationships with other trail users are instrumental to achieving their goals.

"If you haven't tried snowmobiling, you should," an enthusiastic John Oliver, safety education program coordinator for IASC remarked. "Snowmobiling is an incredible way to tour some of Illinois' most scenic terrain. And if you're interested in watching wildlife, a day on the trail is likely to bring sightings of white-tailed deer and wild turkey, and it's not unusual to catch a glimpse of a fox or coyote hunting mice in an open field or a bald eagle soaring overhead."

Trail rides

For snowmobile safety classes, trail maps, a calendar of events and information on local clubs, visit the IASC website at www.ilsnowmobile.com or DNR website at www.dnr.state.il.us/lands/Landmgt/Snowmobile/index.html.

To register your snowmobile, you must submit a snowmobile application, required documents and the appropriate fee. Applications are available from DNR offices and snowmobile dealers, or online at www.dnr.state.il.us. If you have questions regarding registration, call (217) 782-2138 (TTY 217/782-9175). Credit card holders can renew their snowmobile registration by calling: 1-800-867-3542, (1-800-TO-RELICENSE) or go online at www.dnr.state.il.us.

Steve Hefel is an avid snowmobiler from Byron and serves as president of the Illinois Association of Snowmobile Clubs.

When venturing out on a snowmobile, riders are advised to adhere to the following safety code:

- Know and obey the law. Visit IASC or DNR websites or contact your local DNR Conservation Police Officer for updated snowmobiling laws.
- Get trained. Operators 16 years and older must possess a valid drivers license or a Snowmobile Safety Certificate. Operators 12 to 15 years old must possess a Snowmobile Safety Certificate. Operators 10 and 11 years old can operate a snowmobile only if an adult is riding on the same snowmobile. To obtain a Snowmobile Safety Certificate, you must attend an 8-hour snowmobile safety class conducted by IASC and local Conservation Police Officers.
- Respect the land. Without the generous support of private property owners, the trail system would not be possible. Ride only on designated trails or where you have been granted permission. Do not litter or damage living trees, shrubs or other natural features.
- Always use the buddy system.
- Respect the rights of other winter sports enthusiasts.
- Be sure your snowmobile is in top-notch mechanical condition at the beginning of the winter and throughout the season. Maintain a properly operating lighting system on the snowmobile at all times.
- Familiarize yourself with the snowmobile you are driving by reading the owner's manual.
- Wear sensible, protective clothing designed for snowmobiling.
- Use a full-size helmet, goggles or face shield to prevent injuries from twigs, stones, ice chips and flying debris.
- Avoid wearing a long scarf as it may get caught in moving parts of the snowmobile.
- If you are unfamiliar with the terrain or trail, ask someone who has already traveled over it.
- Know the weather forecast and the ice and snow conditions in the area. Drowning is a major cause of snowmobile fatalities so avoid areas where you are uncertain of the thickness of the ice.
- Uphold true sportsman-like behavior and refrain from pursuing domestic or wild animals. Report observed violations to the nearest law enforcement officer.
- Manufacturers are working to develop quieter machines in response to the demand for decreased noise pollution. Do your part by keeping the factory-installed air box or muffler in place.