**Showcasing the DNR: Back in the saddle again**

*Some snowmobilers who gave up riding years ago are coming back to the sport*

**By JOHN PEPIN**

**Michigan Department of Natural Resources**

It sounds like a long time ago now, but it really wasn’t – just one generation.

Back then, Michigan was blinded by snow dust kicked up by a record number of snowmobiles registered across the state, the highest of any other place in the U.S.

Those 206,000 machines were only the beginning of a meteoric rise in snowmobiling popularity not seen since the sport’s 1970s heyday. Michigan ranked third highest in trail mileage.

“If Michigan’s 4,900 miles of snowmobile trails were laid end to end, they would stretch farther than the distance from Detroit to Panama City in South America,” Jerry Basch, AAA Michigan safety and services manager, told the Battle Creek Enquirer for a story kicking off the sledding season in December 1991.

The same article said snowmobilers annually spent between $150 million and $200 million on lodging, gas and oil, equipment, food, clothing and more.

**Changing conditions**

Five years later, Basch told the Detroit Free Press, “Snowmobiling is a very important part of our winter wonderland, but it can be dangerous.”

His caveat signaled several transitions that had taken place or were then occurring.

Among the changes, were those rising numbers of snowmobiles and sledders, many of whom were inexperienced riders. In some places, especially in winters with only limited snowfall, the trails were getting crowded.

To help curb hazards on the trail, law enforcement officers mounted educational, safety and regulation enforcement patrols, urging riders to slow down and ride safely. The state Legislature imposed then-new, stricter penalties on drinking and snowmobiling.

Another thing influencing the sport was the power of greatly improved snowmobiles.

“People think they can just hop on one of these things, figure out how start and stop it and that’s all there is to it,” Basch told the newspaper, noting that some models can easily exceed 100 mph. “They get overconfident and go faster and faster, and they suddenly lose control.”

These factors coupled with back-to-back winters with record snowfall all created a perfect snowstorm that produced some unintended negative consequences.

**Record fatalities**

The winter of 1995-96 was the deadliest in state history to that point. A total of 47 snowmobilers were killed amid 700 crashes that occurred in Michigan.

A common fatal crash scenario, all too familiar to law enforcement officers, involved riders traveling too fast around corners, going off the trail and striking trees.

By early 2001, the number of registered snowmobiles in Michigan had surpassed 357,000 – still the highest in the country then.

After the winter of 2002-03, when another 46 snowmobiling deaths occurred, sledding fatalities began to drop for several consecutive winters.

In 2010, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources reported that since the winter of 1992-93, 578 people had died in Michigan snowmobile crashes.

There was now a hesitancy out there on the trails.

“Many people got out of snowmobiling in the 1990s and 2000s due to rough trails, overcrowding, rowdy riders, unsafe conditions and poor mapping,” said Ron Yesney, DNR Upper Peninsula trails coordinator.

**Lasting effects**

Over the subsequent time that has since passed, snowmobiling in Michigan has changed for the better in several ways.

The popularity of side-by-sides and other off-road vehicles has outpaced that of snowmobiles in Michigan.

The Great Recession that hit the national economy beginning in 2008-09, and struck Michigan particularly hard, forced many snowmobilers, boaters and recreational vehicle owners to sell their machines.

This left a lot of snowmobilers opting to rent a sled rather than own one.

In 2017, Bill Manson, then-executive director of the Michigan Snowmobile Association, told the Capital News Service snowmobiling depends on disposable income, which had decreased since the recession.

Manson said that in the late 1990s, sales of new snowmobiles in Michigan had been about 20,000 each year, but dropped to roughly 3,000 by 2008, rebounding to 6,000 by 2016.

**New conditions**

Today, though Michigan trail mileage has increased to 6,500 miles, the state has slipped to rank sixth nationally in that department.

However, while the number of the state’s trail miles has been outpaced by other states, the Michigan DNR and trail groups have worked to improve trail conditions, including bettering grooming efficiency and replacing outdated bridges and other infrastructure.

With 178,109 registered snowmobiles in 2021, Michigan has dropped from first to third behind Wisconsin and Minnesota, according to the International Snowmobile Manufacturers Association.

Though a single death is one too many, the number of fatalities over the past couple of winters is significantly lower when compared with those previous high-fatality winter seasons years ago.

Last winter, there was a total of five snowmobile deaths across Michigan and 14 the winter before that. So far this winter, seven people have been killed in snowmobile accidents.

Excessive speed remains the No. 1 cause of snowmobile deaths and serious injuries in Michigan. Alcohol use continues to be a prominent factor in most crashes, according to DNR crash statistics.

The DNR and trail groups have championed a “[Ride Right](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-350-79119_79150_90334---,00.html)” safety campaign over the past few years to help keep safety at the forefront of rider reminders. Meanwhile, DNR conservation officers continue to patrol snowmobile trails, enforcing laws and helping to educate riders.

A snowmobiling handbook distributed by the International Snowmobiler Manufacturers Association includes a “Safe Riders Pledge.”

Riders taking the pledge promise to never drink and drive, drive within the limits of their machine and their own abilities, obey the rules and laws of the states and provinces they are visiting, treat the outdoors with respect, not litter or damage trees or other vegetation, respect property rights, not snowmobile where prohibited and more.

The pledge is promoted by riders who take the oath and then encourage others to do the same thing.

**Results**

The declines in Michigan’s numbers of sleds, snowmobilers and deaths, along with improved trail availability and riding conditions, have led to a “less is better” circumstance for snowmobiling in Michigan. Many people who previously abandoned their sleds, are now hopping back on.

“Now, we have better grooming equipment, more grooming, fewer riders, an aging and maturing riding population, better maps and flat-out better riding,” Yesney said.

The [International Snowmobile Manufacturers Association](https://www.snowmobile.org/snowmobiling-statistics-and-facts.html) has developed a profile of today’s snowmobiler.

The average age is 46. Riders spend an average of $2,000 a year on snowmobile-related recreation. Half of snowmobilers trailer their sleds to ride, while the other half ride from their homes or vacation spots where they keep and use their sleds.

Combined, snowmobilers raise over $3 million for charity each year. The annual economic impact of snowmobiling in the U.S. is estimated at $26 billion, far beyond that of Canada, Russia and Europe combined, according to the association.

Worldwide, there are more than 3,000 snowmobile clubs involved in trail grooming, charity fundraising and family activities. There are over 40 registered nonprofit associations representing snowmobilers in the U.S., Canada, Europe and Russia.

“Snowmobiling is a great exercise bringing people outdoors interacting with nature and each other,” the ISMA profile states. “It is an invigorating sport, great for stress release and good mental health.”

**One sledder’s story**

Dave Johnson of Marquette rode single-ski Ski-Doo snowmobiles as a kid in the 1970s with friends and neighbors whose parents had snowmobiles and let them “rip around as youngsters out at camp.”

As a teen, Johnson rode his older brother’s Polaris 530 around south Marquette and used to ride trails and an old railroad grade to get to the jack pine barrens of the Sands Plains, located about 10 miles south of town.

A parts dealer was located about four blocks from his house.

“I had a Polaris TXC 340 out of high school and rode with a group of friends,” Johnson said. “Did some crazy stuff back then as well.”

Late one night, his Polaris “blew up” while he was riding in a remote part of Alger County. At 2 a.m., he had to call his girlfriend from a local bar to come to pick him up.

“I sold the sled to a friend as is, and I was out,” Johnson said. “I got married, had kids, work, et cetera. Pretty much gave it up to be a husband and father – rode a bit with a good buddy a couple times because he had two sleds.”

Then in 2009, when his youngest daughter was 8 or 9 years old, Johnson came back to snowmobiling when he purchased an older Arctic Cat from a co-worker to take his daughter riding.

“I did rides to camp with her, local rides and some rides to Gwinn,” Johnson said. “I loved it and she loved it – great father-daughter time – really miss those days.”

Johnson bought three sleds after that one and he still rides today, alone sometimes, but mostly with groups. In returning to snowmobiling, he has found improvements, including better trails.

“The trail system is very nice and well-maintained throughout the whole Upper Peninsula,” he said.

**Pandemic waves**

With the onset of the coronavirus pandemic and the shutdowns that followed, many people began to seek respite, physical exercise and solace in the outdoors. This led to increased numbers of people visiting Michigan state parks and purchasing fishing and hunting licenses.

The numbers of people getting outdoors to enjoy recreation also affected the habits of snowmobile permit buyers.

Numbers of snowmobile permits sold in Michigan totaled 130,366 in 2017, then increased to 141,850 the following year. In the pandemic’s first year of 2019, permits sold dropped slightly to 139,056 and then dropped again in 2020 to 132,739.

However, in 2021, numbers of permits rose again to 138,870, perhaps signifying a resurgence. Overall, snowmobile permit sales have remained relatively stable during the pandemic.

After a tremendous jump in ORV license sales from 2019 to 2020, numbers are trending back toward pre-pandemic levels.

“ORV licenses are down 13.3% and snowmobile permits are up 4.6% through December,” said Dustin Isenhoff, a DNR Marketing and Outreach Division specialist in a January 2022 sales report to the Michigan Natural Resources Commission.

In 2021, there were 133,444 snowmobiles sold worldwide; 59,234 were sold in the U.S. and 50,567 sold in Canada, according to the International Snowmobile Manufacturers Association.

There are over 1.3 million registered snowmobiles in the U.S. and over 596,000 registered snowmobiles in Canada.

The complexion of snowmobiling has changed significantly over the past generation. These days, snowmobilers are riding better trails, under safer conditions, with fewer sledders, to reach improved destination points across Michigan’s winter wonderland.

However, some things remain the same, including the fun of the sport many riders say can promote great outdoor family recreation.

“It’s a small percentage of people that cause issues with unsafe snowmobile operation,” said Lt. Skip Hagy, DNR law enforcement supervisor in Newberry. “We believe our presence on the trails helps keep that in check and makes snowmobiling safer for everyone.

“Conservation officers really find it a pleasure to encounter families and people out together on group rides enjoying all Michigan wintertime has to offer. Our goal is to make sure everyone goes home with nothing but great memories when their trip is done.”

For more information on snowmobiling in Michigan, including information on trails, safety requirements, maps, licenses and permits, visit [Michigan.gov/Snowmobiling](http://www.Michigan.gov/Snowmobiling).

Check out previous Showcasing the DNR stories in our archive at [Michigan.gov/DNRStories](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-350-79137_79770_79873_80003---,00.html). To subscribe to upcoming Showcasing articles, sign up for free email delivery at [Michigan.gov/DNR](http://www.Michigan.gov/DNR).

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