



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Snowmobiles and National Wildlife Refuge System Lands

Introduction

National wildlife refuges and waterfowl production areas seem like ideal territory for snowmobiling -- scenic, largely undeveloped, and public. From the standpoint of refuge management, however, several issues complicate the question of whether or not National Wildlife Refuge System lands should be open to snowmobiling.

This information sheet addresses the general issues associated with snowmobiling. If you have questions related to a specific refuge or waterfowl production area, more information is available at the refuge.

Is Snowmobiling Allowed on Refuge System Land?

Motorized vehicles on Refuge System lands are generally permitted only on designated roads during specified times of the year. Off-road vehicle use, including ATVs and snowmobiles, is generally not permitted because it impacts vegetation, disturbs wildlife and other refuge users, and creates safety and liability issues. Also, snowmobiles do not have a clear link to the wildlife-dependent priority uses of the Refuge System as defined by law.

While snowmobiling isn't typically allowed on most national wildlife refuges in the Midwest Region, it is allowed at Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge in Bloomington, Minnesota, where a state law established a trail prior to the establishment of the Refuge.



Ski trail at Rice Lake National Wildlife Refuge in Minnesota. Photo Credit: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Are There Options?

The Fish and Wildlife Service will work with snowmobile user groups to avoid conflicts and reduce impacts to vegetation, wildlife, and other refuge visitors. Options for routing snowmobile trails can be numerous since frozen wetlands and lakes can be part of the route.

Because they know the land well and have contacts with neighboring landowners and local government units, Refuge Managers can also provide valuable assistance to snowmobile organizations in finding alternative routes

Why Not Allow Snowmobiling?

The Refuge System is governed according to a variety of laws, most notably the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997. The

Act established in law that the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System is wildlife conservation. The Act directs the Fish and Wildlife Service to manage national wildlife refuges for wildlife first, with compatible wildlife-dependent public use a secondary benefit of healthy fish, wildlife and plant populations.

Wildlife-dependent uses as defined in the Act are:

- hunting
- fishing
- wildlife observation and photography
- wildlife interpretation and education

Other uses may be permitted, but Refuge managers must determine that they are compatible with the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System and purpose of the individual refuge.

So, what's the harm in riding snowmobiles on national wildlife refuges or waterfowl production areas?

Snowmobiles can negatively impact plants, wildlife habitat, wildlife, and other refuge users.

- Snowmobiles pack and crush snow, often damaging plants and overall vegetative structure. Compacted snow can also disrupt the movements of small mammals that live in and use sub-snow habitats.
- Wildlife can be directly disturbed by noise and visual intrusions.
- Snow-packed trails create travel lanes that can artificially concentrate animals, increasing the potential for spreading disease and overuse of habitats.
- Snowmobiles are disturbing to other visitors engaged in activities linked to wildlife observation or photography such as hiking, snowshoeing, and cross-country skiing. Many visitors to National Wildlife Refuge System lands seek the special solitude, quiet and

naturalness that these areas of protected habitat provide.

Allowing snowmobiling may preclude other uses.

- Since snowmobile use precludes the use of the same trail for winter hiking, snowshoeing and cross-country skiing, a manager's options for providing these activities can be limited.

Allowing a non wildlife-dependent use may create a precedent, and various user groups would expect the same activities on Refuge System throughout the Midwest Region.

- Permitting snowmobiling or any non-wildlife dependent use in one area has obvious implications for other areas in the Region and nationwide.
- Like any use, once snowmobiling is allowed, it is difficult to prohibit it again regardless of adverse impacts or time and space conflicts that arise.

Allowing one non wildlife-dependent use makes it even harder to say "no" to requests for other non wildlife-

dependent uses such as ATVs, horseback riding, dog sledding, and a host of other uses becomes more difficult.

Snowmobiling creates safety and liability issues for Refuge System land managers.

- The use of off-road vehicles capable of high speeds presents safety concerns for managers, not only for the riders, but also for other users of a refuge. Liability is also a concern.

Refuge law enforcement does not have the resources needed to police trail use.

- Even on established trails, a few snowmobilers are inclined to venture off-trail, creating impacts beyond the trail itself. This adds another enforcement burden on refuge managers and staff.



Snow shoeing at Seney National Wildlife Refuge in Michigan. Photo Credit: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service