

Snowmachine season is almost here

by Bruce Bigelow

Snowmobiling is a popular winter recreation activity enjoyed by millions of people across North America and especially on the Kenai Peninsula. It can also be a dangerous activity and each year hundreds of people are seriously injured and killed while snowmobiling. The main causes of snowmobile accidents are alcohol and excessive speed. To enjoy the sport of snowmobiling safely, each rider needs to accept responsibility for his or her own safety and survival.

Safety Tips

- Always wear a safety-certified helmet: Your helmet needs to be snug fitting and should include a face shield or goggles. The helmet provides protection from the cold and wind as well as from impact.
- Dress appropriately: Dress in layers so you can add or remove a layer to match changing conditions and activity level. Start with a layer of synthetic or wool long underwear; cotton loses its insulating properties when it gets wet and should be avoided. Add layers of wool, synthetic fleece or other heat retentive fabrics depending on the temperatures. The outside layer needs to be windproof because the windchill added by even slow travel on a snowmobile is significant. Avoid tight fitting boots and gloves that may restrict circulation.
- Don't drink and ride: Alcohol impairs judgment and increases the risk of hypothermia, a cooling of the body's temperature that can be fatal. **ALCOHOL DOES NOT WARM A CHILLED PERSON.** Instead it opens the body's blood vessels and removes the feeling of chill leaving the person more susceptible to the cold. **DUI on a snowmobile is the same charge as DUI in a car; you will LOOSE YOUR DRIVERS LICENSE if you are caught riding under the influence.**
- Keep your eyes open and the speed reasonable: Kenai Peninsula trails are used by skiers and dog mushers, as well as by other snowmachiners. Don't go into a limited visibility situation at a high speed—there may be somebody on the trail just over the hill or around the bend.
- Keep your machine in good working order: Have it checked over and serviced before the riding season. Follow the pre-ride checklist in your owner's manual. A 5-minute check at home or at the trailhead can help you avoid being stranded by a breakdown in the field. Always carry a tool kit with a spare drive belt, towrope, spark plugs
- Don't ride alone: Always ride with a friend and stay together in the field.
- Leave a trip plan: Let a responsible person know where you are going and when you expect to be back.
- Bring snowshoes: Strap them on the back of your machine; if you break down they may be your only way out.
- Stay physically fit: Riding a machine, especially in deep snow is a rigorous workout. Don't ride with anyone who couldn't make it back in the event of breakdown.
- Bring a winter survival kit: First aid kit, matches and fire starter (railroad flares work great, are water resistant and can double as a signal), map and compass, flashlight with extra batteries, sleeping bag, high calorie food, metal container to melt snow. A cell phone is a great addition to the survival kit but you still need to bring the basics (cell phones don't keep you very warm and are hard to eat). An extra cell phone battery can prove very useful, especially if warmed in an armpit.
- Carry avalanche gear in the mountains: Shovel, probe and avalanche transceiver. You need all three items together; one is not much help without the other. It is best to carry your avalanche gear on your person (in a backpack) instead of strapped to your machine. If you are involved

in an avalanche and manage to get out your machine will most likely be buried and it's hard to help find your friends without your gear.

- Educate yourself: Take an avalanche awareness course. For more information contact the Alaska Mountain Safety Center, 9140 Brewster's Dr, Anchorage (907-345-3566).

There is a free Avalanche Hazard Recognition Workshop on Saturday December 2nd at the Soldotna High School Auditorium from 9:00am to 5:30pm, sponsored by Kenai Peninsula Office of Emergency Management. Pre-registration is requested. Contact Kay Steele or Bonnie Hanson at the Kenai Peninsula Borough Office of Emergency Management: 262-4910 or toll free 800-478-4441.

The Kenai National Wildlife Refuge is presently closed to snowmobiles until sufficient snow depth accumulates to protect underlying vegetation and ter-

rain. There are certain areas of the Refuge that are never open to snowmobiles. These include all areas above tree line, except the Caribou Hills, and all maintained roads in the Refuge. Within the Skilak Loop Special Management Area, snowmobiles are prohibited except on Hidden, Kelly, Peterson and Engineer Lakes for ice fishing access only. The Swanson River Canoe Route and The Swan Lake Canoe Route and portages are closed to snowmobiles. If you plan on riding on the Refuge this winter, stop by the Refuge Office on Ski Hill road for a snowmobile map. It is the riders' responsibility to know where they can and cannot ride. The map is free, but the fine for snowmobiling in a closed area is \$100. Ride smart and ride safe, and we'll see you out on the trails!

Bruce Bigelow is a law enforcement officer at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Previous Refuge Notebooks can be viewed on the web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.