

Wardens stressing safety message after region's deadliest snowmobile season

InsuranceTimes™, April 15, 2003, Vol. XXIII, No. 8

Copyright 2003 @M&S Communications, publisher of *InsuranceTimes*™

by Jerry Harkavy
Associated Press

GREENVILLE, Maine — The last in a string of three snowmobiles raced around a curve at the approach to a road crossing when its driver apparently lost control of her sled and strayed onto the left side of the trail.

Waiting beside the road was Warden Adam Gormely. He could have handed the woman a summons but let her off with a warning instead. He told her she was riding too fast and if another sled had been rounding the turn in the opposite direction the two would have collided.

"Maybe that will get her to thinking," Gormely said. "Or maybe she'll just tell herself I should go pound sand."

In Maine's deadliest snowmobile season ever, the brief interaction outside Greenville was one of an estimated 50,000 contacts between members of the Maine Warden Service and snowmobilers that officials hope will reduce carnage on the trails.

The state has recorded 15 snowmobile deaths this winter, and the season is not over. Some areas have enough snow to accommodate a couple more weeks of sledding. Last season's death toll of 12 matched the previous record Maine reached twice before.

On a sunny Saturday in early March, when woods and lakes buzzed with snowmobiles, Gormely and Sgt. Dan Menard began their spot checks at the Kokadjo Trading Post, at a key trail intersection where many riders stop for food.

With snowmobiles roaring in and out every few minutes, the wardens checked for registration stickers and numbers on the dozens of sleds parked outside the store and chatted with their riders. To reward children for wearing helmets, wardens passed out coupons for free McDonald's sundaes.

The 120-member warden force may be spread thin, but the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife is trying to make it as visible as possible.

"When motorists see a state trooper on the interstate, they slow down. When they see a game warden on a trail, they'll be more mindful, perhaps, of how they operate their snowmobile," said Col. Tim Peabody, chief of the Maine Warden Service.

Unpleasant Duty

Wardens who joined the service with the purpose of enforcing fish and game laws make no secret that policing snowmobiles can be unpleasant duty. Gormely and Menard said they often get a headache after spending a couple of hours at a trail crossing exposed to snowmobile fumes and noise.

Although most riders wear helmets, Maine has no mandatory helmet law. So when Menard stopped a woman riding with a young child — neither wearing a helmet — the most he could do was suggest the need for head protection.

The woman said the child didn't have a helmet, and she didn't like to wear hers because it tended to strike the child in the head.

"It's stupid. But it's not illegal," Menard said, shaking his head.

Unlike neighboring New Hampshire, Maine has no speed limit for snowmobiles. It requires only that speeds be reasonable and prudent, a standard that makes for subjective enforcement.

Mandatory helmets and other restrictions — including creation of a new snowmobile driver's license — are included in a bill now before the Legislature.

Snowmobile Deaths

Maine's first death this season occurred in late December when a New Gloucester teenager drove his machine into a chain that marked off part of a road in Gray. The most recent victims included a man from Pittston whose snowmobile collided with a car as he was crossing a road in Aroostook County and a Casco teenager whose machine hit an embankment.

Among the other victims were two Connecticut men whose snowmobiles crashed through ice on Kezar Lake, a man struck by a hit-and-run snowmobiler while walking on Sabattus Lake and a Mapleton snowmobiler who missed a turn to a bridge and crashed into the Aroostook River.

The number of reportable snowmobile accidents — those causing death, personal injury or more than \$1,000 in property damage — has risen this year to more than 300. That's well above the 247 for all of last winter, when snowmobiling got a late start due to too little snow.

Wardens and snowmobile enthusiasts agree that the increase reflects the rapid growth in the sport, with snowmobile registrations in Maine expected to reach the 100,000 mark this year for the first time.

Also cited are this year's excellent snow conditions and the long season that has attracted hordes of out-of-state visitors to Maine's 13,000 miles of groomed trails. □