

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

Winter Health and Safety: A New Year's Resolution

By Keith Hammer

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It's 2008 and I'm still trying to shed a 2007 image of Santa Clause riding a snowmobile. I say we put Santa back in his reindeer powered sleigh and resolve in 2008 to behave in a way that promotes personal responsibility and public safety. Indeed, the closing days of 2007 should serve as an early warning for Winter 2008.

On December 19, 2007, a snowmobiler triggered an avalanche and was buried while high-marking on Fiberglass Hill in the Canyon Creek area behind Big Mountain – so named because it is littered with broken snowmobile parts from past avalanches and attempts to climb up the slope higher than the last guy. He survived with a broken femur, but not without substantial risk to those who helped transport him from the backcountry to the hospital.

The following day, another snowmobiler narrowly escaped injury when an avalanche buried his snowmobile near the site of the previous day's avalanche. The Glacier Country Avalanche Advisory posted "considerable" risk on December 21; meaning human caused avalanches are "probable." This did not seem to deter snowmobilers, however, as they flocked up the Jewel Basin Road the next day, where they routinely high-mark in the open bowl above Alpine Trail #7.

It was similar ignorance that led to the death of five snowmobilers on New Years Eve day of 1993, including a 7-year old Canadian boy riding on the back of his father's snowmobile. The group had followed a trail illegally blazed through Krause Basin to be buried by a slab avalanche high in the Swan Range.

Last year's near-fatal burial of a snowmobiler by avalanche in Jewel Basin is also a reminder of the consequences of irresponsible behavior, which can result in injury or death to search and rescue personnel as well as the perpetrator. More than twenty search and rescue folks spent the night traveling mountainous terrain in snow and fog that cut visibility to as little as fifty feet. The Sheriff concluded none of the drama would have occurred if the snowmobilers had not been in the backcountry illegally on motorized vehicles.

Such irresponsible behavior is often dismissed as a few bad apples spoiling the lot. Snowmobile publications, however, intentionally promote a culture of unlawful risk-taking. In October 1999, the publisher of Snowest Magazine wrote: "In the four days of riding ... we estimate that we violated around 652 laws or regulations. But since our crew's motto was 'if you can't break parts, break laws,' we acted naive and 'wandered' off the groomed trails..."

Even more alarming is the nurturing of this irresponsible behavior in our young people. In the November 2007 issue of Snowest Magazine, immediately below an article titled "Bangin' the Hills," an 11-year old boy from Colorado writes "Limbs breaking when I hit them, running out of gas, getting clothes lined by branches, flying off cliffs and breaking something when I land... I am a SNOWMOBILER!"

We all love the freedom that comes with being American, but along with that freedom comes the obligation to conduct ourselves in a personally responsible manner that respects the law and the wellbeing of others. This applies to backcountry skiers as well as snowmobilers, who at times also sacrifice good judgment to instant gratification in the presence of an open slope of untracked powder.

It is my wish in 2008 that folks turn toward a lifestyle rooted in individual responsibility to minimize our impacts on others and on the environment. By choosing skis or snowshoes to travel in the backcountry, we not only preserve the silence for wildlife security and the enjoyment of others, we also safeguard our ability to hear the subtle warning “whumpf” of a collapsing layer in the snow pack long before reaching the steeper slopes where it may very well fail sideways in a deadly avalanche.

By educating ourselves and practicing safe route selection and avalanche awareness we can greatly reduce the chances of injury to ourselves and those who may be called upon to come rescue us. For a listing of local trainings and advisories, visit Glacier Country Avalanche Center’s web site at www.glacieravalanche.org.

By choosing skis and snowshoes over snowmobiles we can also lessen our dependency on petroleum while simultaneously improving our cardiovascular health and mental wellbeing. Putting Santa back in his sleigh may be a first step in teaching our children that wildlife like reindeer and caribou depend upon secure habitat not trashed by motorized vehicles and oil wells.

Perhaps that was the message delivered by a cow moose on the Canyon Creek trail last December 29, when it kicked two snowmobiles and refused to move for a snowmobile trail-grooming machine. Unfortunately, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks proposes to kill the moose rather than rethink the snowmobile trail grooming program it funds with a portion of your automobile gasoline tax.

Keith Hammer grew up hiking, skiing, camping, hunting, and fishing in the Swan Mountains. He has worked a number of jobs, from Forest Service trail worker to logger to backcountry guide, and currently works as an environmental consultant and head of the nonprofit Swan View Coalition. His column will appear regularly in this paper and will also be archived at www.swanrange.org. Keith can be reached at 406-755-1379 or keith@swanview.org.

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Wolverines again leave tracks in an area once dominated by an illegal and deadly snowmobile trail now closed under court order. Krause Basin photo by Swan View Coalition.