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'Tis the season to go snowmobiling

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Snowmobile season is off and running in Rock County.

The county's 226-mile trail is open to snowmobilers. Riders are permitted to use the trail so long as there is enough snow and the temperature remains adequately near the freezing mark, said County Parks Director Lori Williams.

The trail is maintained by several county snowmobile clubs.

"We work with the clubs, which do all the trail grooming," Williams said. "We check the intersections to make sure they are all marked correctly."

Levi Olson, who serves as liaison between the snowmobiling clubs and the county, said the enthusiasts dedicate a great deal of time toward keeping the trails clear.

"There's probably about 10 of us. We have over 120 hours (of trail maintenance) already this season," he said. "Last year we had about 500 hours."

There is no shortage of tips to stay safe when snowmobiling. Maintaining an appropriate speed is one of the most important, Olson said.

"Just slow down. Don't ride faster than you should," he said. "So many people ride too fast and they end up riding too fast and they can't stop. If you don't know the trail, 55 is too fast. Ride at a speed you're comfortable with. I've seen some people do in excess of 90 miles per hour."

Boyd Richter, conservation warden at the Department of Natural Resources, has seen two snowmobile-related fatalities during his 19 years in Rock County.

"In one case a subject struck a fence, while in the other an individual drove off the top of a rock quarry and fell to the bottom," he said. "A collision of fixed objects is typically where accidents occur, usually trees or gullies."

No snowmobile accidents have been reported in the county this season, Richter said.

The cause of the vast majority of crashes can be traced back to alcohol, he said.

"Seventy-five percent of snowmobile accidents occur because of an intoxicated operator," Richter said. "It's one of the reasons we have our 55 mile per hour speed limit at night. You end up riding faster than your headlights can keep up."

Snowmobiles aren't designed to float, which is reason enough to act with great caution when riding over bodies of water. Having to fish snowmobilers out of the water is something that occurs with some degree of frequency, Richter said.

"That's pretty common. It happens on Lake Koshkonong every year," he said. "People drive

from (Rock River) down to the lake where it isn't as frozen, and they end up getting lost and falling through. The good thing about the lake is that it's so shallow in some spots that you can fall through and still be sitting above water."

About 6 inches of ice are necessary to safely navigate across water on a snowmobile, while about a foot is needed when driving a truck, Richter said. However, it's important to know the area before venturing too far.

"You can have a foot of ice in one area but 6 inches in another, so it's good to ask fisherman and people who live nearby if the ice is safe," he said.

Snowmobilers are reminded to use the official trail to prevent damage to the lands the trail passes through and their equipment. Snowmobiling on private land requires permission from the land owner.

All-terrain vehicles, or ATVs, are not permitted on snowmobile trails at any time.

All snowmobiles must be registered with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.

For further information or updates, contact the Rock County Parks Division at 608-757-5458 for a recorded message. Conditions also are available by going to the websites at www.co.rock.wi.us or www.travelwisconsin.com.