

Snowmobiling the Cascades

by Scott_Staats

Against a sky as deep and blue as Crater Lake, the Three Sisters appeared so magnified in the crisp, still winter air that I felt as if I could toss a snowball over their icy crests.

I removed my helmet and stared out at the white expanse. Iâ€™ve stood in this place many times before but never in winter. The seven other members of the group gathered around to read the interpretive sign describing the lava flow before us â€“ one of the youngest in the state, at less than 1,500 years old. With anxious anticipation, we climbed aboard our snowmobiles, leaving Windy Point and continued our trek toward McKenzie Pass.

Summit of McKenzie Pass, all photos by Scott Staats

Snowmobiling near McKenzie Pass

Carl Rapp makes a spectacular jump

Seven of us enjoyed our outing in the Cascades

Visibility can change quickly up in the high country â€“ safety first.

Several feet of snow lay on the road leading to the pass. We caught occasional glimpses of the lava field through the lodgepole pines. The cut in the lava just before reaching McKenzie Pass looked more like a giant bobsled course than a road.

I usually have cross-country skis or snowshoes under me, but this day instead opted for a quicker mode of

winter transport. With a squeeze of my thumb on the throttle, I caught up to the rest of the snowmobiles and continued the gentle climb up into the Oregon Cascades.

The sign at the summit showed we were at 5,325 feet. From atop the Dee Wright Observatory, it's possible to see most of the high Cascade peaks in the state from Mount Hood to the Three Sisters. Tiny openings in the walls of the observatory point out each peak. On the top deck is a mountain identifier.

Anyone opting for a snowmobile trek into the Cascades should follow a few basic rules. Always go with at least two people per group. If a snowmobile breaks down, it's not as easy as simply walking home. Carrying a set of snowshoes is also a good idea. The best advice is to know your machine and how it operates. Stay away from avalanche areas and let others know where you are going and when you expect to be back. Carry maps of the area and be familiar with them before heading out. Carry matches and a small snow shovel in the event you need to make a snow cave. Be courteous to cross-country skiers and snowshoers.

On the west side of McKenzie Pass, I stopped to read the almost-buried sign that marks the site where a mail carrier lost his life. In December of 1877, John Craig started out from McKenzie Bridge on snowshoes and headed for the Camp Polk post office. The trip usually required two days one way. A small cabin was located about halfway across the route for the layover.

Craig was caught in a sudden severe blizzard but managed to reach the cabin. The storm lasted several days and he died of exposure. It took weeks before anyone found him. His body is buried in a tomb at the old cabin site on a small knoll just behind the sign. I realized that it may have been this exact day that Craig lost his life on that fateful trip almost 130 years ago.

We covered about 25 miles that day, making it down to about the Scott Lake turnoff before turning around. Taking my helmet off back at the parking lot, I realized the trip ended way too quickly.

Safety

Visibility can change quickly up in the high country. Depth of field is difficult to determine sometimes in the snow, especially going across a meadow or when it's snowing. Many people have been injured or killed by hitting a creek or dip that they didn't see.

Staying on the designated trails can avoid accidents. Snowmobilers should get familiar with the area they are going into by looking over a map prior to heading out and checking it frequently when out on the trails.

Traveling at 30 miles per hour with a temperature of 30 degrees, the wind chill is 0 degrees. Going 60 mph at the same temperature, the wind chill is -20 degrees.

No motorized vehicles are allowed in the wilderness. Anyone caught riding there can be subject to a \$5,000 fine and six months in jail. A few unwise and unlucky snowmobilers are caught every year breaking this rule.

There are over 6,000 miles of groomed snowmobile trails in Oregon, 700 miles of that being on the Deschutes National Forest. There are 32 snowmobile clubs in the state and 23 of those have groomers. Each winter, club members across the state donate about 40,000 hours clearing and grooming trails.

Snowmobiles are very fun to ride but are not toys. They are powerful machines and can be dangerous if not used properly. Oftentimes, riders are 10 to 20 miles from the nearest road at over a mile high in the mountains. There have already been a few fatalities and several injuries this winter.

Rules of the Road for Snowmobilers (by Oregon State Snowmobilerâ€™s Association)

Â· Look out for cross-country skiers, snowshoers, sled dog teams and groomers.

Â· Donâ€™t use alcohol or drugs.

Â· Observe and comply with all posted areas.

Â· Ride on the right side of trails. Donâ€™t stop in the middle of the trail.

Â· onâ€™t go out alone.

Â· Be familiar with the area you ride in. Always have a map.

Â· Dress appropriately and be aware of snow depths.

Â· Carry extra spark plugs, belts, tools, water, snacks, extra socks, gloves, waterproof matches

Â· Use hand signals for slowing, stopping or turning off trails.

Scott Staats is a fulltime outdoor writer who has lived in Central Oregon the last ten years. His articles have appeared in local, regional and national publications.

Adventure of a Lifetime - Hells Canyon Trip: Those seeking adventure may want to consider a raft trip through Hells Canyon this June 16-19. Winding Waters River Expeditions is outfitting a 4-day archaeology/geology trip and is looking to fill 12 seats. Join USFS archeologist Skip Miller, geologist Dr. Tracy Vallier and geologist/photographer Ellen Morris Bishop for an unforgettable float trip through the deepest, most rugged parts of Hells Canyon. From Hells Canyon Dam to Pittsburg Landing, the group will learn about the canyon's oldest rocks, the greatest Ice Age Flood that scoured through the canyon 12,000 years ago, as well as getting a look at many of the more than 2,000 archaeological sites. Rafters will also run Hells Canyon's biggest whitewater. The trip includes breakfast on the 16th through lunch on the 19th. Price is \$1,145, with \$575 deposit required. For more information, contact Winding Waters River Expeditions in Joseph at 877-426-7238 or go to www.windingwatersrafting.com.