

Snowmobilers enjoy perfect conditions in Eastern Ontario



Snowmobiling in Eastern Ontario has been a boon for business as well as winter enthusiasts. André Lalonde, president of the Eastern Ontario Snowmobile Club (EOSC), took a few volunteers out on the trails on February 13, starting from the Larose Forest. (photo D Millette)



By Dominique Millette

BOURGET – It's around minus ten outside, on February 13. Though morning roads offer a hair-raising drive down the 17, then south on the 9 and west on the 2 past Curran all the way to the Larose Forest, the snowpack is the big payoff. Even during the weekend, conditions were "more than excellent," reports André Lalonde, president of the Eastern Ontario Snowmobile Club (EOSC). He's in the Larose Forest office with some extra machines in tow. His mission: to bring a few volunteers on an annual tour of part of the 435 kilometres of groomed and signed recreational snowmobile trails maintained by the EOSC throughout the Prescott-Russell United Counties. The volunteers in question, among them Russell Mayor and Counties warden Ken Hill as well as Casselman Mayor Conrad Lamadeleine, are all grinning broadly. This is going to be good.

What makes it all work is volunteers and good will. Hundreds contribute to signage, grooming, maintaining rest stops and filling out necessary paperwork. The trail network would also not be possible without private landowner support, emphasizes Lalonde. Of the total in Ontario, 24,500 km, or well over half the length of the trails, cut across private land. The point is driven home at a pit stop in a shack provided as rest area by treasurer Royal Brunet: on the wall, a sign declares "If you have eaten today, thank our farmers. If you are snowmobiling today, thank them twice."



André Lalonde, president of the Eastern Ontario Snowmobile Club (EOSC)

The year to beat, apparently, is the winter of 1970-1971, with an unbeaten record of 17 weeks of snowmobiling in Eastern Ontario. However, this year is shaping up very well, with over 1,000 snowmobile club members out on the trails. So far, there have been nine weeks in which to enjoy the sport. And it isn't over yet.

Throughout the province, snowmobile enthusiasts have access to 41,000 km of trails maintained by members of the Ontario Federation of Snowmobile Clubs, connected to another 37,000 km in Québec.

A billion-dollar business

When conditions are this good, snowmobiling is a tourism industry bonanza. What's good for the drivers is good, economically, for the counties. Since vacationers can easily cover 250 km a day, it's an industry that caters to visitors who spend their outside dollars here, explains Michel Levert, public relations agent for the EOSC. Levert also operates the Domaine chez Philias, a restaurant and bar along the recreational trails in Hammond. He's seen the change in clientele over the years: there are more families now, he observes. The total effect of all that spending is head-turning. Across the province, a press release entitled "2006/07 snowmobiling by the numbers" estimates the total economic impact of the sport at \$1.2 billion annually, with over \$112 million going into provincial tax coffers.

Environmental concerns have often followed the snowmobiling community. With stricter standards and worries over wildlife habitat, enthusiasts have had to negotiate changes with various other groups. For example, the Larose Forest itself is on the verge of adopting an official plan in April that recommends changing certain trails to better preserve the natural environment. However, notes Lalonde, on the plus side, technological improvements have helped diminish the carbon footprint left by today's snowmobiler. The two-stroke engine with its higher decibels is gradually giving way to quieter, less polluting models. Regardless of the type of engine, the federal government has instituted maximum decibels levels for snowmobiles.

In addition to grooming trails, selling passes, obtaining access to land and negotiating with various entities, the EOSC also organizes social events such as the Blessing of the Snowmobilers, in Hammond in January, and a few wiener roasts. The last one for this season takes place February 24.

EOSC sector directors can provide information, and trail passes are sold at hardware stores and sports shops from Alfred to St-Isidore. Michel Levert can answer questions at (613) 487-3412. Visit The Review's website for more pictures and for links to organizations mentioned in this story.



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