

Iowa Farmer Today

Navigating the winter wonderland by snowmobile

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Proper snowmobile attire, such as helmets and waterproof outer layers, help snowmobile riders stay protected and warm.

Photo courtesy I-CASH

Thanksgiving has come and gone, and the December holidays are quickly approaching. Many people dream of a white Christmas, but snowmobile riders across the region hope for white, snowy conditions all winter long.

Should these wishes be granted, experienced and new snowmobilers have many safety considerations they need to take before they hit the trails.

A key component of snowmobile safety is wearing the proper gear. Most importantly, a helmet should always be worn while on a snowmobile. Head trauma from a snowmobile incident can be fatal. Helmets offer protection in the event of collisions, falls, rollovers and obstacles such as low branches.

Snowmobile helmets should be DOT certified. Snowmobile helmets also often have visors that provide additional protection from small flying objects and cold wind. Riders who use helmets that do not have visors should wear snowmobiling goggles to protect their eyes.

Dressing for the cold when snowmobiling is critical and something riders must keep in mind as they gear up. Frostbite can happen when people are exposed to cold temperatures for long periods of time and happens even faster when temperatures are at extreme lows.

In addition to head trauma protection, helmets provide warmth. For the rest of the body, clothing should be worn in layers. Moisture-wicking under-layers are helpful to keep you dry as well as prevent frostbite. An outer layer that includes waterproof boots, jacket and pants will keep snow out and warmth in.

The most common places people experience frostbite are the hands, feet, ears, nose and lips. Covering up with gloves, boots and a facial covering like a balaclava can help keep these areas warm and protected from frostbite.

When snowmobiling, it is also important to know your abilities and not push past your own or your machine's limitations. Snowmobiling takes physical strength and endurance to maintain control of the machine and for various additional activities such as digging a sled out, clearing obstacles like fallen branches, and loading and unloading from a trailer.

Snowmobiling also has mental demands — quick reaction time and good decision making are essential for safe snowmobiling.

Snowmobiles should never be operated under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Drugs and alcohol impair users' motor skills, reaction time, vision and judgment. These are all key aspects of operating a snowmobile, and users need to be unimpaired to operate safely. Drinking alcohol can also cause bodies to lose heat faster and increase susceptibility to frostbite.

Planning a route and staying on a snowmobile trail can help snowmobile operators avoid unplanned challenges and collisions. When following others on a trail, snowmobilers should keep a safe distance to allow ample reaction time in case the person in front of them abruptly stops or adjusts their path to avoid an obstacle.

Being prepared for the riding conditions is necessary for safe snowmobiling. Checking weather forecasts and not going out in hazardous conditions, such as blizzards, can help snowmobilers avoid dangerous situations. Planning for changing temperatures is also important. As night falls, weather can become much colder.

Other safety hazards at night include reduced visibility in the dark. Working headlights are essential for snowmobiling in the dark and other times of reduced visibility. Headlights need to be kept clear of snow and ice.

Before going out, snowmobilers need to be prepared for different environments they may encounter while riding. Riders need to be cautious when crossing roads and highways. Crossings should only happen at locations with visibility in both directions, and snowmobilers should yield to oncoming traffic.

Avoid snowmobiling on frozen bodies of water if possible. Ice conditions can change frequently and can be inconsistent across bodies of water. Snowmobiling on ice also decreases the traction of the machine and can make maintaining control of the snowmobile more difficult.

There is power in numbers, and snowmobiling is no exception. Snowmobilers should avoid riding alone. Being with other riders helps ensure that snowmobilers can get assistance in the case of accidents or machine issues. This could include helping dig out a stuck snowmobile or traveling to get help for an injured person.

Riders should also tell someone where they plan to snowmobile and how long they expect to be gone. It is important someone knows the location and timeline of the riders so there is a person able to take action and know where to look if the snowmobile riders do not return.

In Iowa, persons 12 to 17 must have a valid snowmobile education certificate in their possession while snowmobiling on public land, public ice, designated riding trails or designated riding areas. This certificate is obtained by taking a snowmobile education course. More information on the course and Iowa requirements can be found at tinyurl.com/bddbk4f.

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