

Renegade riders



Brian Peterson, Dml - Star Tribune Star Tribune

Trail Ambassador Perry May checks an area of "trail braiding" where riders widen out a spot on the trail by trying to avoid the deep water. May flagged this area and marked the spot on his GPS for future repair by the DNR.

New laws and extra enforcement aren't keeping all-terrain vehicles from going off trails to damage fragile state lands.

FIRST OF THREE PARTS



On a busy day on the Pine Center Trail, Department of Natural Resource...

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The Red Top trail in north central Minnesota is a popular spot for ATV...

By **DAVID SHAFFER, TOM MEERSMAN** and **GLENN HOWATT** • Star Tribune staff writers • FIRST OF THREE PARTS

State Conservation Officer Matt Miller stopped his truck at the edge of the Rum River, just in time to see the wet joyrider.

A young man on an all-terrain vehicle was driving down the center of the shallow river, waves of mud and water pouring away from his machine. It was the kind of destructive fun that draws many ATV riders to Minnesota's public lands and waters. It's also against the law.

The thrill-seeking rider drove up on the bank. Miller followed in his truck, to the man's nearby home and wrote him tickets. Returning to the Rum River, a state wild and scenic waterway north of the Twin Cities, Miller photographed a stretch of once-green shoreline that had been scraped into black ruts by ATV wheels.

"It seems like some of them think they can ride anywhere they wish regardless of what guidelines and laws there are," Miller said.

Across Minnesota, as ATV ridership soars, the wildly popular pastime is exacting a lasting, costly toll on the state's forests and wild lands.

Fragile wetlands are being churned into mud. Wildlife habitats are being torn up. Lake and river beds are being rutted. Hillsides are being eroded.

Five years ago, Minnesota enacted laws to keep all-terrain vehicles on trails. But officers like Miller keep catching riders doing the opposite.

To the dismay of lawful riders, renegades on four-wheelers are being caught damaging forests and trespassing on nature areas and private lands across the state, a Star Tribune analysis of five years of Department of Natural Resources enforcement records shows. Some are ignoring signs or driving around barriers put up to stop them. Others are brazenly posting videos of destructive riding on YouTube.

With stepped-up enforcement, nearly 1,600 riders have been issued tickets or written warnings for off-trail lawbreaking, but that's only a fraction of the violators, most of whom are never caught.

Continued: Renegade riders



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"You see the damage, you see the aftereffect of what's been happening, so you assume there are a lot more out there than we're catching," said Colleen Adam, a DNR conservation officer assigned to ATV enforcement.

Regulating ATV riding on public land has become a dominant issue for the DNR, which at times is divided over how to respond to the go-almost-anywhere vehicles. As ATV registrations have nearly tripled in the past decade, to 264,000, there's also unrelenting conflict between four-wheeler fans and hikers, canoeists, bird watchers and others who prefer quiet in the woods.

The DNR hasn't documented the full extent of ATV damage on public lands or estimated the cost of repairing it. But recent DNR monitoring efforts found problems in 17 state forests.

A Star Tribune investigation of ATVs on state lands also reveals:

- Renegade riders caught trashing the environment usually face small fines, seldom pay restitution and never lose driving privileges. The DNR doesn't enforce a 2005 law to keep the worst violators off ATVs, saying it doesn't have the money to do so.
- Riders often use state-approved trails to illegally enter sensitive places. Nearly one in four tickets or warnings issued for riding in wetlands and public waters occurred near places where it's legal to go, the DNR's data show.
- ATVs now represent the third-biggest claim on conservation officers' patrol time. Officers spend more hours checking on ATVs than they do on waterfowl and small-game hunting or snowmobiling. Yet the DNR Enforcement Division is roughly the same size as a decade ago -- a little more than 200 officers and supervisors.

DNR Commissioner Mark Holsten said the department is trying to change the virtually unregulated riding culture of the past -- a difficult job that is far from finished.

"It is offensive to me to have people say that it is not better out there than it was pre-2003," said Holsten, referring to the year new laws took effect.



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To get the problem under control, the DNR is now taking the controversial step of paying rider clubs to act as "Trail Ambassadors" who encourage riders to obey the law. The agency also is closing many trails, and mapping thousands of miles of ATV routes in a hotly debated five-year review of motor use in state forests.

Damage? Check YouTube

Anyone who wants to see what ATVs can do to the environment need not go into the woods. Riders' exploits are posted all the time on [YouTube.com](https://www.youtube.com), the video-sharing service on the Internet.

That's what Conservation Officer Paul Kuske discovered last year. Acting on a tip, he searched YouTube, and spotted a clip from the Pine Center ATV Trail, a 23-mile network on county and state land in Whitefish Lake Memorial Forest near Brainerd, Minn.

Wetlands lie adjacent to that trail. Watching the YouTube video several times, Kuske said he was "90 percent certain" he recognized at least one site. The clip showed ATV riders repeatedly driving through muddy areas just off the trail, including protected wetland. Kuske couldn't identify the riders: They wore helmets; mud covered their license plates.

Kuske said he was too busy to seek a subpoena ordering YouTube to name the video maker. The investigation stalled, no one was arrested, and the video disappeared from YouTube.

To protect the areas, foresters placed keep-out signs at the sites. Kuske also warned many ATV riders that the trail could be closed if violations persisted. He said it has helped.

Still, this spring, someone ripped out two DNR signs at one site featured on YouTube. Fresh tracks led into the mud. So the Star Tribune placed a hidden, motion-activated video camera there in June. It recorded a man and a woman riding ATVs into the mud and getting stuck (see it on StarTribune.com).

Under state rules, it is illegal for ATV riders to cause erosion or make off-trail ruts. Kuske, after being shown the new video, said that if he caught the riders, he likely would issue a written warning, rather than a ticket, because the keep-out signs were gone and the area isn't a protected wetland

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Some officers are experimenting with hidden cameras to gather evidence of destructive off-road riding, and one even led to a prosecution in Kittson County. But the videos usually don't clearly show the license plate or riders' faces, enforcement officials say.

"Isn't hurting anything"

More often, it takes luck to catch ATV riders ripping up the landscape.

Last September, conservation officer Miller got a call from a radio dispatcher reporting that ATVs had been seen in the Rum River in Isanti County.

Miller drove to a boat landing. He was just in time to see Delorne Kluck, then 20, "riding down dead-center in the river."

The officer followed Kluck to his house near Cambridge, and confronted him. Kluck was polite, Miller said, but insisted that he did nothing wrong, though he later paid a \$300 fine. Two friends also got tickets.

It was Kluck's second bust for damaging the environment on an ATV. In June 2006, he was caught by other officers patrolling the Red Top ATV Trail, just east of Mille Lacs Lake, after he drove into a wetland.

"I still don't think it was a wetland," said Kluck, who paid a \$100 fine for that violation. "It was just a trail with mud on it."

Kluck said that "most riders want to do stuff that's a challenge and see if they can make it through it. " If his ATV gets dirty, he washes it off by riding in the river, he said.

"For the most part this stuff we ride in isn't hurting anything," he said. And the DNR "makes it sound worse than it is so that people won't do it anymore, " he added.

Officers write tickets or warnings to about 439 ATV riders each year for damaging the land or off-roading where they shouldn't, the DNR data show. That includes 52 riders, on average, caught in waters or wetlands. Another 386 people are stopped for driving illegally in parks and

preserves, in roadside ditches during bird-nesting season, in hunting areas during restricted hours or on private lands **Related Content**



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The worst lawbreakers keep riding. At least 42 people have been charged with careless or reckless ATV violations since 2005, but they didn't lose riding privileges despite a state law. Nor did they have to take a class and pass a state test before riding again, as the law requires. DNR acting enforcement chief Mark Johanson said the agency did not get money from the Legislature to track the offenders and impose the extra sanctions.

Increasingly, officers are turning into woodland traffic cops. They issue, on average, 3,400 tickets and warnings each year for safety and vehicle registration violations. That work is crucial to reducing ATV accidents, injuries and deaths, but means less time protecting natural resources.

Powerful ATVs can alter the landscape in a variety of ways. If ATVs ride in grassy agricultural ditches during the April-to-August closed season, pheasants often won't nest there, said

Carmelita Nelson, who coordinates a DNR Roadsides for Wildlife program. Seeds from invasive weeds can be carried on muddy ATVs, and damaged wetlands often grow back with Reed canary grass instead of native plants.

Rarely made to pay

Only in rare cases are destructive riders made to pay restitution for tearing up the land.

One is Trevor James John of Crosslake, a former snowmobile racer. He was caught four years ago with his ATV stuck in a wetland at Flanders Lake near Brainerd.

John said he and a friend were "just out enjoying nature." The DNR complaint said they drove unregistered ATVs past a sign that said, "No motorized vehicles allowed beyond this point," and then got stuck in a wetland. Conservation officer Karl Hadrits, who spotted the ATVs, slogged through thigh-deep mud to reach the two riders.

After long court delays, a judge last May ordered John to pay \$400 restitution, on top of an earlier \$377 in fines and fees. John said he paid the money to make the case go away.

His ATV wasn't confiscated. Although conservation officers seize firearms, fishing gear, boats or fish houses for various violations, the seizure law doesn't apply when people damage the land with a vehicle.

"Why would you buy like a 4-wheel-drive ATV if you can't even go in mud?" John said. "... It wasn't like we were the first ones riding there. There were tracks all over the place. People have ridden there for years ... I don't understand what it is we are ruining to drive an ATV there."

Hadrits has busted numerous wetland violators, including people driving giant-wheeled trucks. At trouble spots, he hides in the woods, binoculars in hand, his ATV parked and ready to roll.

"Sometimes to catch people you have to sit back and hide and watch -- and it takes time," he said. In one stakeout, he chased three riders on his ATV for nearly 4 miles after they rutted up a lakeshore and then sped away.

Riders sometimes help. While patrolling the Pine Center Trail in May 2007, conservation officers Kuske and Miller met two riders who said that two kids on ATVs were stuck in a bog down the trail. "Sure enough, they were right up to the handlebars," Kuske said. "... They had been in here for probably a good half-hour or better, ripping around and going around."

The boys had driven around a keep-out sign and barrier logs.

The clear-water bog, once the home of wood ducks, "was like a pudding. It was so churned up, completely devoid of vegetation, even around the edges, just one big soup hole," he added.

As Kuske and Miller questioned the 17-year-old boys, from Champlin and Dayton, the two riders who reported the incident returned -- angry at the kids' behavior.

"They wanted a piece of these guys," Kuske said, who intervened to prevent a violent confrontation.

Some ATV riders worry that destructive acts damage the image of their sport and will sour Minnesotans -- the vast majority of whom don't own ATVs -- on allowing motorized trails on public lands.

"If we have all these bad apples digging up the mud all over the place ... pretty soon no one is going to have a spot to ride," said Dan Scholl, president of the Eastern Morrison County 4-Wheeler Club. "And we are out for more trails. To get more trails, we have to keep everybody from making it look like a bad sport."

Fixing the scars

Environmental damage from ATVs, however, is more than bad PR. Scarred landscapes can be costly to fix and take years to heal.

Nowhere is this more visible than at Spider Lake Recreation Area in north-central Minnesota, where 26 miles of trails became a magnet for ATVs and 4-wheel-drive trucks early in the decade.

It once featured a hillside deliberately strewn with boulders and logs for trucks to scramble over. The eroded "challenge hill" has been closed, and the DNR has spent \$450,000 since 2003 to deal with wetlands, lakeshores and hillsides damaged by illegal ATV riding.

Some areas at Spider Lake are recovering, yet new ATV damage is visible. Last Memorial Day weekend, conservation officers ticketed or warned 10 ATV riders for driving off the trail, including two who rode around in a wetland.

"You get, lots of times, younger groups maybe in their 20s or early 30s who think that they're on their own little private piece of property and they're going to do what they want to do," said DNR conservation officer Chad Sherack, who patrols the area.

Even minor damage, such as ATV ruts, can become a costly problem. At Sugar Hills, a cross-country ski area near Grand Rapids, Minn., almost every hillside has been damaged by illegal riding over the past 10 years, said Bruce Slinkman, president of the Minnesota Nordic Ski Association and a contractor who sometimes has been hired to smooth and regrade trails.

On hills, the ruts gradually erode into gullies after a few rainfalls. "I have encountered gullies that are 2 feet deep to a couple cases that are 4 feet deep -- the trail is impassible," he added. It costs \$1,000 just to bring heavy equipment into the woods for a day, and a repair job can easily cost double that, he said.

Since 2006, when DNR established the first of two damage-monitoring programs, field workers have reported wetland damage or signs of illegal off-trail riding in 17 state forests and other scattered state land.

Yet many of the state's 58 forests have not been checked for such damage.

"I don't claim that we're doing anywhere near 100 percent monitoring," said Keith Simar, recreation coordinator for the DNR Forestry Division. "Our direction to foresters is to deal with the issues as we come across them in our normal work, not to go out and try to find unfound problem sites."

Simar said he sought \$100,000 to systematically look for forest ATV damage, but the money wasn't approved.

State and county foresters have placed signs, downed logs, fences and boulders to keep out ATVs. Those efforts haven't always worked. At one spot near the Mississippi River headwaters, determined riders have repeatedly moved large rocks blocking a favored unauthorized riding area.

A few good boulders

In Beltrami County, foresters recently discovered a way to keep vehicles out of closed areas: 5,000-pound boulders.

Rocks smaller than about 3 feet in diameter can be yanked aside by a 4-wheel-drive truck, said John Winter, who heads county recreation programs. The county paid a contractor \$14,000 to place about 35 boulders, other barriers and signs at eight closed access points to the Mississippi Headwaters State Forest.

Logs and branches also have been put on closed trails, and in another innovation, workers scatter soil over the piles. If anyone tries to cut the logs, grit will ruin the chainsaw.

At one spot where old keep-out signs and barriers had been ripped out, workers embedded new signposts in concrete. "We fortified that one and, by God, it worked," Winter said.

He believes it will take years, and pressure from riders who don't break the law, to change the thinking of those who do.

"I am hoping they will help to influence the ones who are raising hell," Winter said. "To say we are going to get all the resource damage under control, that is going to take a hell of a long time."

Star Tribune photographer Brian Peterson contributed to this article.

DNR paying clubs to monitor riders



Brian Peterson, Star Tribune

Trail Ambassador Perry May checks an area of "trail braiding" where riders widen out a spot on the trail by trying to avoid the deep water. May flagged this area and marked the spot on his GPS for future repair by the DNR.

A club-sponsored ride leads to an investigation of a damaged wetland, triggering a fox guarding the henhouse debate.

By [DAVID SHAFFER](#) and [TOM MEERSMAN](#), Star Tribune staff writers

Last update: September 14, 2008 - 9:26 PM

Featured comment



[Raise fines, confiscate ATVs. Create a REAL, EFFECTIVE deterrent...](#)

...while we still have some state wetlands left. First offense should be a \$1,000 fine. Second offense should be \$2,000 fine and [... read more](#) confiscation of the ATV involved, regardless of who owns it, and the state should sell it at auction. Those who lose an ATV to the state should also be prohibited from owning ATVs that have ever been sold at auction, and be banned from riding on state lands and trails for three years. If they get caught during the ban, it should be extended to a lifetime ban. Same goes for riding unlicensed. Changes to the laws like this should be sent to licensee addresses on file. Too harsh? I don't think so. Get rid of the lawbreakers so the

rest of us don't have to suffer for the bad behavior of a small percentage of bad actors who's arrogance makes them think they are above the law.

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SECOND OF THREE PARTS

On a sunny Saturday in June, a fleet of ATVs motored into the woods of north-central Minnesota for a day of four-wheeling fun and pig roast called the "Pork and Ride."

The procession of riders on the outing, sponsored by an ATV club called the Over the Hills Gang, stopped on their way to the Moose River Trail. Most left their machines for a short hike. But three riders reportedly steered their ATVs off the trail into a pond fringed with cattails, roaring through it until the fragile wetland was a muddy mess.

A few weeks later, members of the same club hopped on ATVs to ride the same trail, but in a much different role. They were "Trail Ambassadors," handing out brochures on safe, responsible ATV riding. The Over the Hills Gang was paid \$34 an hour for its two-man patrols -- by the state.

Such payments, totaling \$250,000 a year, are a new strategy that the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources hopes will reduce the damage that some riders are doing to forests and wildlife habitat.

But the government aid to rider clubs also has become a flashpoint in the debate over how the DNR should confront the challenge of ATVs, which are filling Minnesota forests in larger numbers than ever before.

"It's pretty discouraging," said DNR conservation officer Cary Shoutz, who is investigating the reported wetland damage during the club-sponsored ride.

"Here we have clubs that are supposed to be promoting good things about riding ATVs responsibly, and they're actually doing different when they're out there, where nobody can see them," Shoutz added.

In July, representatives of two conservation organizations resigned as advisers to DNR's Ambassador program, saying they were frustrated with the DNR's off-road policies.

But the DNR official in charge of the Ambassador program defended it and the club, saying the fact that the agency even found out about the illegal riding was a sign of progress.

Destruction of a wetland IS A CRIME!

Some of the most enjoyable moments of my life have been spent with a conservation officer in northern Minnesota. I took both of my daughters and my son on week long vacations to hunt with him for many years. Let me tell you, conservation officers are the most dedicated

individuals in the world, typically working 500 hours or more of overtime and additionally giving 500 or more hours of overtime each year to the citizens of Minnesota without reimbursement. I never owned a snowmobile or ATV (I did win a three wheeler once but gave it away)and have only ridden them twice in my life, but my son has ridden with this conservation officer and watched him perform his duties. My son told me that the officer was "crazy" when it came to catching an illegal rider; sometimes riding 60-80 miles per hour on a narrow trail in pursuit. My friend also told me that the first thing he always did is ask the rider to remove their helmet. The minute the helmet came off and the face was exposed, the attitude went away. There's something about a helmet and hiding the face that gives the rider permission to do anything they want to do. I believe in helmets on ATV's because I have had personal friends killed in three wheeler accidents, however many use a helmet like a mask to commit a crime. As to the fines, YES something needs to be done. I believe that the fine for littering is \$750 and conservation officers like enforcing that crime. They like it so much that another officer that I know personally stopped two men that were throwing pieces of litter out of their vehicle in front of him not realizing who he was in his dark vehicle. He turned on his red light, pulled them over and gave them a ticket. It wasn't until later that he discovered that they were the wrappers from the money that had just been stolen in an armed robbery from the local bank. He had walked into a situation where he could have easily been killed for stopping someone for littering. So, please understand that the enforcement of the ATV laws are a top priority to them but you as citizens must contact your representatives to change the laws. Although only rarely enforced, conservation officers and the courts take away vehicles, guns, trucks, etc when the situation is egregious enough. Maybe, at some point the law needs to be changed to take away ATV's from the truly bad drivers. I also believe that the criminals should be required to pay for restoring the wetland that they have destroyed. Then a large sign should be placed there showing the face, name, amount of fine, jail time, cost of restitution, and estimate time for recovery. Maybe the next person driving by on their ATV will read it and realize that that could be their face on the sign. Good luck with this issue Minnesota. You need every wetland possible to maintain a quality of life second to none throughout the lower 48.

posted by **chavista** on Sep 15, 08 at 10:10 am |

6 of 6 people liked this comment.

What Percentage??

Can anyone tell me the percentage of land made available by the city, county and state for bike trails or walking trails as compared to the amount of land made available to ATV/snowmobile trails?

posted by **joetraveller** on Sep 15, 08 at 10:14 am |

1 of 1 people liked this comment.

Good wages.....

I'd do that PR job for \$34 an hour!

posted by **bettyishere** on Sep 15, 08 at 10:30 am |

1 of 1 people liked this comment.

Just a little knowledge

Just to throw a bit of knowledge at the person who put a hex on the ATV inventors... People with disabilities who like to enjoy the outdoors may view things a little bit differently than you. But as usual some people fail to see things from both sides of the spectrum and just spew ignorance in the hopes that their opinion will be validated. What ever happened to respecting other people and maybe comprimising with one another.

posted by **doan0401** on Sep 15, 08 at 10:31 am |

Problem Enforcing the Law? Increase Fines, Confiscate Vehicles and Revoke Rider Privileges

Increases the fines, confiscate the vehicles and revoke rider privileges. Increased fines and auctioning confiscated vehicles will not only help fund the DNR for enforcement activity it will also modify behavior of the offenders by stiffening the penalties

Another rider, Ken LeVoir, marked the scene by writing down the GPS coordinates and tying orange tape to a tree branch. That would alert the DNR to a potential trouble spot.

LeVoir and May, members of the Over The Hills Gang ATV Club, are enthusiastic riders who were among the first to volunteer for weekend Trail Ambassador training. The program is modeled after a similar effort in Wisconsin that has earned praise there for improving rider behavior.

The Ambassadors can't enforce ATV laws. But they are encouraged to call a conservation officer if they witness unsafe or destructive ATV use.

May and LeVoir, who weren't along on the June ride under investigation by the DNR, spent a Sunday in July motoring down the trail as Ambassadors. Their uniforms were fluorescent yellow and orange vests, and they handed out brochures and maps, not tickets.

Where two trails met in the forest, three young dirt-bike riders pulled up and stopped at the sight of the men on the ATVs.

"This area is closed to motorcycles," LeVoir said to them.

"We didn't see the signs," came the reply.

Then May jumped in. "We are not enforcement officers," he said. "So we are just trying to explain, you know, compliance rules and that. This trail system isn't marked as well as it should be and we'll definitely report that to the DNR."

The bikers, on the other hand, wouldn't be reported to a conservation officer. They drove off.

LeVoir said he thought the three dirt-bikers made an honest mistake. The rules can be confusing, he said, and his approach is "to give people the opportunity to do it the right way" before calling an officer.

Although Ambassadors are volunteers, each of their hours on the trail earns \$17 for their club. The club can then reimburse volunteers for expenses such as gasoline, according to the program rules.

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4 of 6 people liked this comment. Do you?

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posted by **doan0401** on Sep 15, 08 at 10:31 am |
2 of 5 people liked this comment. Do you?

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posted by **uscitizen** on Sep 15, 08 at 10:33 am |
4 of 4 people liked this comment. Do you?

Disabled

I would like to address the issue of disabled persons and OHVs. As a therapist I have done analysis of activities throughout my career. First off there are special permits for persons with disabilities as their use of off road vehicles is regarded. They have more access than most of the population via OHVs. However looking at what is safe and healthy for disabled persons, about the last choice of activities would be taking an off road vehicle into the forest. A rider alone on an unmarked trail (and remember that in most of our forests which are north of Hwy 2 this is the case!) is at terrible risk if he or she is not able to get off that machine and walk to safety. You can get very far, very fast on an OHV and they both break down and get stuck. In Northern Mn where ATV riders have insisted on the "managed" classification, there is no enforcement, and none of those nice well paid OHV "Ambassadors" to find you. You are on your own. This is not something that is healthy either - a person with limited mobility is going to suffer more from the jolts and jumps on the trails (in particular the unmaintained trails of the north) A person with cognitive or emotional impairments may not cope well with the lack of maps or markers on trails northe of 2 also. There is no way to know where you are unless you can afford and run a GPS and it's batteries have not run out! The out of doors offers wonderful opportunities for disabled persons - a simple walk on an even well marked surface is a whole lot better than miles spent on an off road vehicle. And last but not least, I object strongly to the notion that persons with disabilities are less concerned than others with harm done to the natural world. Disabled persons are individuals and have broad and complex world opinions. I suggest those using "disabled vets" and people with disabilities as an excuse to do harm think again because you are in error. As someone who has spent years working with and helping people with challenges find ways to participate in the world despite the obstacles I assure you - there are ways to participate in nature without doing harm no matter who you are or what your disability.

posted by **fenfriend** on Sep 15, 08 at 11:10 am |
2 of 2 people liked this comment.

sigh

typical selfish response from an "outdoors enthusiast". what am I supposed to do about it? I'm only the president of the club, i dont have any authority. i'm just thankful the DNR is trying SOMETHING. Their budgets seem to get smaller every year, yet they have to deal with more and more jerks like these people. grow up and realize that the world doesnt revolve around you and you are not entitled to do anything you want, whenever you want to.

posted by **betseyp** on Sep 15, 08 at 11:11 am |
2 of 2 people liked this comment. Do you?

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Continued: DNR paying clubs to monitor riders

Featured comment



Destruction of a wetland IS A CRIME!

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41 comments

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One rule limits ATV Ambassadors to riders sponsored by clubs that belong to the All-Terrain Vehicle Association of Minnesota (ATVAM). It is a statewide group that has lobbied the Legislature for more trail funding and against tougher regulations and enforcement. Ambassadors also must be certified to teach ATV safety training classes under a separate DNR program.

Ken Irish of Inver Grove Heights, the group's president and a founder of another rider club in Crow Wing County, was one of the first Ambassadors to complete the DNR training program.

Though he had been nabbed by a conservation officer in 2003 for illegal ATV riding, the offense didn't disqualify him from the outreach program.

"I got caught -- I'm not ashamed to say it," said Irish, who was ticketed, and paid an \$80 fine, for riding on a posted non-motorized trail in the Crow Wing State Forest. He also got a ticket in 1999 for riding an unregistered dirt bike.

Irish said the 2003 ticket taught him a lesson and got him involved with the Cuyuna Iron Range Riders, an ATV/dirt bike club, to push for legal places to ride. "I took a positive approach," Irish said.

The DNR's Hammer agrees. He praised Irish, and expressed no concerns about a handful of other trail Ambassadors whose violations of fish, game or other regulations turned up in DNR background checks. Unless people have "gross violations," such as a driving while intoxicated, or patterns of less-serious offenses, they are not excluded from the program, Hammer said. So far, no one has been turned away from the Ambassador program because of a background check, he added.

"Somewhere along the line they may have screwed up," said Hammer, who believes the Ambassadors will help discourage illegal, destructive riding.

Skeptical of riders

Nobody is quite sure who screwed up at the June 7 "Pork and Ride" fundraiser and trail ride.

Before a pork barbeque, more than 100 ATV riders took off in groups for trail rides. In one group, riders parked their ATVs at a shallow pond just off the trail, and most of the group walked away to see the ruins of an abandoned homestead, according to the witness who alerted the DNR. Several riders stayed behind, including three who drove back and forth through the pond and surrounding cattails for the next half hour, the witness said.

Problem Enforcing the Law? Increase Fines, Confiscate Vehicles and Revoke Rider Privileges

Increases the fines, confiscate the vehicles and revoke rider privileges. Increased fines and auctioning confiscated vehicles will not only help fund the DNR for enforcement activity it will also modify behavior of the offenders by stiffening the penalties.

posted by **uscitizen** on Sep 15, 08 at 10:33 am |

5 of 5 people liked this comment. Do you?

Disabled

I would like to address the issue of disabled persons and OHVs. As a therapist I have done analysis of activities throughout my career. First off there are special permits for persons with

disabilities as their use of off road vehicles is regarded. They have more access than most of the population via OHVs. However looking at what is safe and healthy for disabled persons, about the last choice of activities would be taking an off road vehicle into the forest. A rider alone on an unmarked trail (and remember that in most of our forests which are north of Hwy 2 this is the case!) is at terrible risk if he or she is not able to get off that machine and walk to safety. You can get very far, very fast on an OHV and they both break down and get stuck. In Northern Mn where ATV riders have insisted on the "managed" classification, there is no enforcement, and none of those nice well paid OHV "Ambassadors" to find you. You are on your own. This is not something that is healthy either - a person with limited mobility is going to suffer more from the jolts and jumps on the trails (in particular the unmaintained trails of the north) A person with cognitive or emotional impairments may not cope well with the lack of maps or markers on trails north of 2 also. There is no way to know where you are unless you can afford and run a GPS and it's batteries have not run out! The outdoors offers wonderful opportunities for disabled persons - a simple walk on an even well marked surface is a whole lot better than miles spent on an off road vehicle. And last but not least, I object strongly to the notion that persons with disabilities are less concerned than others with harm done to the natural world. Disabled persons are individuals and have broad and complex world opinions. I suggest those using "disabled vets" and people with disabilities as an excuse to do harm think again because you are in error. As someone who has spent years working with and helping people with challenges find ways to participate in the world despite the obstacles I assure you - there are ways to participate in nature without doing harm no matter who you are or what your disability.

posted by **fenfriend** on Sep 15, 08 at 11:10 am |

3 of 3 people liked this comment.

sigh

typical selfish response from an "outdoors enthusiast". what am I supposed to do about it? I'm only the president of the club, i dont have any authority. i'm just thankful the DNR is trying SOMETHING. Their budgets seem to get smaller every year, yet they have to deal with more and more jerks like these people. grow up and realize that the world doesnt revolve around you and you are not entitled to do anything you want, whenever you want to.

posted by **betseyp** on Sep 15, 08 at 11:11 am |

2 of 2 people liked this comment. Do you?

Too Many Bad Apples

I see blatant disregard of signs asking ATVerS to stay off winter-only trails in Wisconsin as well. When the trails are barricaded, they just driver further into the woods to get around the blockage. I have very little respect for any ATVerS anymore. My advice is that if you are an ATVer and see your pals riding where they shouldn't be, you best confront them and tell them you don't appreciate what they are doing. Many of us are sick of the disregard and are going to continue put more pressure on lawmakers for help.

posted by **endoempire** on Sep 15, 08 at 11:30 am |

Do you like this comment?

This "disability" argument

I'd happily give a special permit (with reasonable limitations) for OHV use required because of a documented disability (a la handicapped license plate.) Now - how does this mean that all ATV use is good again

Continued: DNR paying clubs to monitor riders

When the others returned, the witness said, the pond had been turned into a "slough of black mud" and one ATV was stuck. The group pulled it out and rode on. The witness said he didn't know the riders who entered the wetland, or whether they were club members.

Audubon Minnesota and the Jack Pine Coalition, two groups that support more regulation of ATVs on public lands, are skeptical that rider groups are a solution to illegal, destructive driving. They say the start-up funds for the Ambassador program should be used to hire more conservation officers instead.

"There is no sense in having people who are associated with other people who are breaking the law trying to police them," said Susan Solterman, policy director for Audubon Minnesota.

Solterman and Gene Larimore of the Jack Pine Coalition, a loose collection of outdoors enthusiasts, briefly served on the DNR's advisory group for the Ambassador program. But they grew frustrated with the DNR's rules, and resigned in protest in July.

"There was no opportunity for advice," said Larimore, who believes the Ambassador program does little more than hand over public money to rider groups.

He and Solterman said they believe state law required the DNR to include non-motor groups in the program. They said conservationists, hunters and other outdoors enthusiasts should be allowed to serve as Trail Ambassadors to promote conservation and environmental protection and also bridge the gap between rider and non-rider groups.

Hammer of the DNR said the department is "not trying to include or exclude anybody." He said Larimore and Solterman quit before giving the program a chance to succeed.

Hammer and other conservation officers believe ATV rider clubs can help promote responsible behavior, just as snowmobile clubs did in that sport 25 years ago. Yet that view is not universal within the department.

Shoutz, the officer who was first contacted by the witness to the Over the Hills Gang incident, said that ATV club members are unlikely to turn in friends for illegal riding. The witness who reported the incident was not a club member or in the Ambassador program.

"I'm in one of the busiest ATV areas in the state and I have not received one complaint from an Ambassador about anybody," Shoutz said.

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