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Volunteers keep winter trails well-groomed

By Matt Dettori, Enterprise Staff Writer

This season's snowpack levels continue to sit lower than average into March, which gives area volunteer trail groomers more reason to continue to take care of the snowy trails.

Big Sky Snowriders, the Park County chapter of the Montana Snow Mobile Association, manages several winter trails in the Crazy and Absaroka mountains.

Trails used by snowmobilers, along with skiers and dogsleds, develop large bumps and deep troughs from the various types of riding they endure. Any snowmobiler, musher or cross-country skier who's ridden the bumps will agree it's not a fun ride, said Big Sky Snowriders Grooming Committee Chairman Wayne Ford, who is also one of the grooming volunteers.

That's why the Park County chapter turns the rough trails into smooth corduroy pathways.

"You get a good hard base on the trail (by grooming)," Ford said. "It takes longer for the snow to melt, and our riding season will be longer."

When riders have a bumpy experience on a trail, they are inclined to go elsewhere the next time they ride, Ford said. Having a good trail will appeal to more snowmobilers, and snowmobilers bring in "a lot of money," to the community, he added.

The smooth paths aren't just for an easy ride and a longer-lasting trail, but also for safety, Ford said.

"When you meet traffic (on the trail) the bumps could bounce you into oncoming traffic or ... off the trail," said MSA member and Livingston resident Kemp O'Neill.

The groomers also take care of removing objects from the pathway such as fallen timber and rocks, he said.

The Big Sky Snowriders grooming committee grooms more than 40 miles of trails within the Crazy and Absaroka mountains. The three trails they groom are the Shields River Road loop, the Ibex trail south of the loop and Mill Creek in Paradise Valley.

The grooming program is administered through the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Recreational Department.

A portion of the state's gas tax is given out to different MSA clubs to use for grooming and trail maintenance expenses. The tax is from payment for gas used for snowmobiles in the state, Ford said.

The Big Sky Snowriders purchased its own groomer several years ago. The club was able to lease a much nicer 2001 Bombardier snowcat from FWP this year, said Snowriders member Kemp O'Neill.

Every two years, funds from the FWP gas tax are used to purchase a new snowcat for a different club in Montana, O'Neill said.

O'Neill, Ford and Clint Juhnke are the three stewards that volunteer their time to groom the snowmobile, ski and sled trails.

O'Neill spent all day Thursday grooming the Shields River Road loop in the northern Crazy Mountains in preparation for the annual Big Sky Snowriders Poker Fun Run fundraiser set for Sunday. The event, which involves getting a playing card and making stops for more cards along the Shields River Road loop, has seen as many as 200 participants in previous years.

The first card for the 22-mile Fun Run will be given at 9 a.m. and the last card will be handed out at 11 a.m. The cost is \$5 for each hand. The best hand gets a cash prize, O'Neill said.



Enterprise photo by Matt Dettori

Kemp O'Neill toggles the joystick that controls the front blade of a 2001 Bombardier snowcat Thursday morning, March 4, in the Crazy Mountains. O'Neill, who's been grooming for 17 years, is one of three volunteers from the Big Sky Snowriders chapter of the Montana Snowmobile Association that takes care of several snowmobile, ski and dogsled trails in Park County.

Riders, once they receive a card, will drive the entire Shields loop, stopping along the way at checkpoints to collect card for their poker hands. The last stop is at the Shields River Campground. Chili and hot dogs will be served at the final stop.

The organization will also sell raffle and 50-50 tickets for \$1 each. The raffle is for a fully processed pig. All proceeds will go toward the Big Sky Snowriders chapter