

# Common sense and courtesy on the winter trails

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Last year's poor snow year was a disappointment for many local skiers, snowshoers, and snowmobilers. So, with plenty of early snow this year, winter sports enthusiasts are flocking into snow country in big numbers. With that in mind, a few simple guidelines can make the experience more enjoyable for everyone.

Over time, hikers, equestrians, and cyclists learn to accommodate each other and share the trails during the summer trail-use season. When snow covers the ground, some of the same factors come into play. At this time of the year, winter competition for the trails is usually among nordic skiers, snowshoers, and snowmobilers.

Not surprisingly, the rules for winter trail use are essentially the same as in summer and can be summed up quite simply: common sense and courtesy. Following a few simple rules can help make outdoor winter recreation safer and more fun for everyone.

According to Forest Service officials, winter trail use has been steadily on the rise for the last decade, and the trend is expected to continue. Snowshoeing and back-country skiing are seeing much of the increase in trail usage, but groomed-trail skiing is also growing in popularity.

There are a few designated snowshoe trails in the Bend-Fort Rock Ranger District, but not many, and there is none in the Sisters Ranger District. Designated snowshoe trails are often narrow and winding and do not appeal much to Nordic skiers; and, frankly, much of the winter trail maintenance is driven by, and conducted by, Nordic skiers. To provide for increasing user demand and reduce conflicts between skiers and snowshoers, Deschutes National Forest trail managers have been looking at ways to add designated snowshoe trails out of local snow parks.

Nordic trails on U.S. Forest Service land are often marked with blue diamonds on tree trunks. Snowshoers are welcome to use the designated Nordic trails; but, if snowshoers plan to use a blue diamond trail, they should set a separate track at least two feet away from the ski tracks. In a like manner, skiers should refrain from skiing in a broken snowshoe track.

Skiers sometimes spend considerable time and effort setting down new ski tracks; and it is extremely frustrating,

when returning to enjoy their hard work, to find that the ski tracks that were laboriously laid down have been obliterated by snowshoers. It is important for all trail users to remember common courtesy so that everyone can enjoy the winter trails experience.

A handout available at the Sisters Ranger District office spells out some of the basic winter trail etiquette: "Snowshoers and hikers, please do not walk on ski tracks. Snowshoe and foot tracks make it difficult for skiers and has led to skier injuries." The Forest Service also discourages hiking on ski trails. Not only does it create the possibility of skier injuries, but winter trail users without skis or snowshoes risk injury to themselves.

The Forest Service recommends that "when using an untracked trail, please stay on one side of the trail corridor when setting new tracks. This will allow room for tracks to be set by another type of user within the existing cleared trail corridor. In other words, share the snow and not the tracks."

Snowmobilers are other principal users of winter trails. In many areas, snowmobile users set and maintain their own trails. In other areas, Nordic and snowmobile trails may run alongside each other; and, when that occurs, the same winter rules of common sense and courtesy apply.

For example, snowmobile and Nordic trails out of the Upper Three Creek Sno-Park south of Sisters often run parallel through the same forest corridor. This situation is known as a shared-use corridor. In those cases, snowmobile riders should try to avoid causing damage to ski tracks. Further, there is a safety concern if a snowmobile were to be following a ski track around a corner and suddenly encounter a skier. As a general practice, skiers are strongly advised to ski to the side of snowmobile trails, especially when snowmobilers are approaching.

Common sense and courtesy. That's what it's all about.

Snowmobile users are also reminded to steer clear of Congressionally designated wilderness areas where no mechanization is permitted. This prohibition is taken so seriously that summer trail crews clearing downed trees in the wilderness have traditionally used hand crosscut saws instead of chainsaws.

Other winter motorized closures on the Deschutes National Forest include the Bend municipal watershed,



PHOTO BY CRAIG EISENBEIS

Courtesy and common sense become critical in Sisters' backcountry.

certain areas on Dutchman Flat, blue diamond ski trails, developed ski areas, and the area between Swampy and Meissner sno-parks. Violators of motorized-use prohibitions are subject to substantial penalties, including fines of up to \$5,000 and six months in jail.

All trail and backcountry users should always prepare for their adventures by carrying appropriate emergency gear. The "Ten Essentials" are a basic starting point. Essentials should include a map, compass, sunglasses, matches, fire starter, first aid kit, lamp with extra batteries, extra food, water, extra clothes, repair materials like duct tape or wire, knife, whistle, emergency blanket, tin cup for melting snow, and other items as appropriate.

Cell phones are a good idea and are easy and convenient to carry; but they should NOT be considered

an alternative to appropriate emergency equipment. Cell phone service in backcountry areas is often limited; and, in cold conditions, batteries often run down much faster.

Backcountry users are reminded that search and rescue missions are often hampered by bad weather, deep snow, cold temperatures and poor access. A lost person may have to rely on what they are carrying for several hours, overnight, or even for a day or two.

Before venturing out onto winter trails, learn about the area and trails to be visited. Information is available at National Forest, Park Service, and BLM offices. Other resources include outdoor shops, and agency websites. Be a safe and responsible trail user, and always inform a responsible friend or family member of the location, duration, and return time of your outing.

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