

Brief history of Winter Motorized Access at Red Shirt Lake

The following is a brief and by no means complete description of how winter access has developed, how we assessed trail conditions and changes over the years.

Back before the dawn of the internet and e-mail we had these communication devices that were wired to the wall. They were single purpose two-way communication devices called telephones. When it came to finding out weather and trail conditions at NLSRA in the 1970's and 1980's, we would use them to call the ranger on duty, usually Dennis or John, and find out if the conditions were "snowy" enough to ride snowmobiles in the park. The rangers were always cordial and really more like good friends who had our safety in mind when providing condition reports. Grooming of trails was rare to nonexistent for the most part. Instances and locations of overflow might be discussed if rangers had encountered any. Snowmobiles were less capable and sophisticated and there were far fewer winter operations than occur today.

Over time more cabins and homes were constructed, snowmobiles became more reliable and pressure on NLSRA resources increased due to increased winter travel. Nothing bad ever came of the increased travel on the Red Shirt Winter trail. Butterfly lake was another story. It's a longer story that I'll save for later.

In the early 2000's we had a few years with late freezes with delayed openings of the winter trail and NLSRA in general. The question became "when is it possible to travel by snowmobile with minimal damage to the resource"? Out of that debate the November 19, 2009 Winter Motorized Use, Interim Policy was created. It was reasonable. It was based on how thick the ground frost was and the snow/water equivalent formula used by many ski resorts to determine acceptable opening and closing conditions.

Honestly, we could have probably lived with that policy for a long while but it was called "interim" for a reason. There was a move afoot to update the NLSRA master Plan that was originally created in 1983 (I believe).

The 2016 master plan took years in its creation, in part due to ongoing legal issues over Butterfly Lake access. But also, because there were many more players and many more things being considered that the original master plan did not take into account. It was a good process and many of the concepts in the interim policy transferred over to the final plan but the specific winter motorized use policy was never updated, until a couple days ago.

I was hopeful that the thaw and refreeze of January 2024 was a temporary condition that would eventually see more snow added to restore the area to normal conditions. It might still materialize. I think the Park staff probably did the right thing when conditions turned warm with temperatures in the 40's, and things turned a little wet on the surface. The snow cover disappeared but the ground was/is still frozen very deep. When things refroze after heavy rains, we experienced conditions where travel by a tracked or wheeled vehicle was entirely possible

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without damage to the 1.2 miles of winter trail between South Rolly campground and the north shore of Red Shirt Lake. This being the real area of concern.

Although the entire area was closed, special permits could be obtained for tracked vehicles. Not everyone however, can afford a set of tracks to put on their 4-wheeler or side by side at the cost of \$6,000 as an entry price. So, the question became, “would a wheeled vehicle do any real damage if it stayed on the trail given the unique and solidly frozen conditions, we find ourselves with this year?” The answer was clearly no.

This situation of thaw and refreeze without more covering snow is a rare situation for the mid-winter months. We were all hoping for more snow including Park staff. State Parks has worked sincerely and transparently to help us regain access via the Red Shirt Winter Trail, which is the best for hauling fuel, material and loads of any size. The East Red Shirt Trail is not conducive to load hauling to begin with and I’m told it is currently littered with many fallen spruce trees after spruce bark beetle killed trees have succumbed and the high winds have blown down onto the trail. After brief discussions with Park Superintendent Stuart Leidner and really within about 36 hours of the question of wheeled access being raised, the most recent winter access policy was updated to allow wheeled and tracked vehicles with a special use permit. This is only until such time as conditions either improve for snowmobiles or worsen as the trail thaws in the spring.

Anyway, that’s a longer brief history than I intended but it lays out the basics of how we got to where we are today. I’ve probably left out much. Happy to answer questions and fill in the blanks.

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