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News Release

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Snowmobilers: Help protect sensitive wildlife and habitats – please stay on designated trails and routes



RHINELANDER, Wis. – Jan. 23, 2023 — As more winter recreationists make the most of the great outdoors this season, the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest team urges snowmobilers and other over-snow vehicle operators to stay on designated trails for their safety and to help protect sensitive wildlife species, their habitats and other natural resources within the Forest.

Winter in Wisconsin provides incredible opportunities for getting out and connecting with nature. Snowfall amounts this year have provided excellent conditions for activities such as skiing, snowshoeing, and snowmobiling. With hundreds of miles of trails, the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest is a popular destination for snowmobilers.

The Moquah Barrens of the Washburn Ranger District in Bayfield County has seen a substantial increase in prohibited off-trail and off-road over-snow vehicle use this winter. Though it is inviting to do so, operating over-snow vehicles, such as snowmobiles, off-trail in areas like the Moquah Barrens is not allowed and can cause excessive disturbance to sensitive wildlife and damage rare habitats. “When snowmobiles operate off-trail in



places like the Moquah Barrens, on the surface it may seem fine, but on closer inspection, we find that the noise and disturbance caused by these machines can be detrimental to the many wildlife species that are using these areas to survive harsh winter weather,” said Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest Wildlife Biologist Brian Heeringa. “For example, species such as the [sharp-tailed grouse](#) are only found in a few locations across Wisconsin, including the Moquah Barrens. These birds will use drifts of snow under the right conditions to “snow roost,” to help endure cold temperatures and severe winter weather. When a snowmobile drives through these otherwise undisturbed areas it not only impacts the wildlife that may be there, but it also compacts snow, and creates trails for predators like coyotes and fishers to access difficult-to-reach areas more readily. Disrupted wildlife will flee the area, expending vital energy reserves and increasing their exposure to predation, harsh winter conditions, and more.”

The Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest team manages, with USDA FS partners, more than 800 miles of groomed snowmobile trails, and the CNNF Land and Resource Management Plan allows snowmobiles on routes and trails posted open and designated for their use. Snowmobiles may also travel on normally unplowed, open roads within the National Forest when snow accumulations exceed four inches. For these reasons, it is important to know where you are operating because in many places, like the Moquah Barrens, off-trail/road operations are prohibited.

Over-snow vehicle operators are encouraged to exercise the “rules of the road” and have a travel plan in place before heading out. Take the time to know before you go and only operate in designated areas for the safety and enjoyment of all, including the wildlife.

The following resources are available online to help everyone make the most of their experience and to stay safe this season:

- County snowmobile [trail maps](#) are available through the CNNF website.
- The Wisconsin Department of Tourism updates trail condition information regularly on the Travel Wisconsin website, here: www.travelwisconsin.com/snowreport/snowmobile.
- The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources offers snowmobile safety classes; learn more here: <https://dnr.wisconsin.gov/Education/OutdoorSkills/safetyEducation>.

Photo 1: Off-trail snowmobile tracks on the Moquah Barrens of the Washburn Ranger District in Bayfield County. Off-trail snowmobiles and over-snow vehicles can endanger sensitive wildlife species and habitats. USDA FS photo by Brian Heeringa.

Photo 2: A sharp-tailed grouse rests in the Moquah Barrens snow on the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest. Off-trail snowmobiles and over-snow vehicles can endanger sensitive wildlife species and habitats. USDA Forest Service Photo by Alexandra Lehner.

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