

**SAFETY**  
By Drew Casey

**SNOWMOBILE**  
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# Snowmobile Safety Education

## Enforcing the Trail Laws in New York State

*Snowmobiling is a fun sport that challenges the rider's agility on many levels. Whether you're slowly sidehilling up a steep and twisty trail or hammering the throttle across a frozen lake, the responsible snowmobiler always rides safely.*

Unlike the winter of '94-95, this past season blessed large parts of the country with abundant snowfall. Snowmobilers were out riding earlier and in greater numbers. Unfortunately, the number of accidents also increased last season. Research shows that a large percentage of all snowmobiling accidents are caused by irresponsible riders using poor judgement on the trails. Most occur at night after some drinking in the bars. While it's easy to point fingers at the irresponsible behavior of some snowmobilers, it's clear that more needs to be done to educate riders on the rules of the trail. In New York, state parks and law enforcement officials are doing just that. For the second straight year, Victor Wood of the Bureau of Marine and Recreational Vehicles organized a four-day law enforcement safety school for officers from throughout the Empire State and neighboring Massachusetts. The safety school was held at the Roaring Brook Lodge in Lake George, New York. My mission: to travel to New York and sit in on a series of classroom seminars, panel discussions and outdoors field exercises designed to teach state, sheriffs, and park police about snowmobile laws, patrol procedures, accident investigation, outdoor survival skills and techniques and cold weather

operation. The program aims to educate officers on these important safety issues so that they, in turn, can help make the trails safer and save lives. Snowmobile Magazine has been invited to cover the program and to let our readers know what's going on in the subject of snowmobile safety. As I drive into Adirondack State Park, I am struck by the beauty of towering pines covered in snow. At six million acres, this park is the largest State Park in U.S. Miles of snowmobile trails lie within the park. It's a good testing ground for Wood and his instructors to put their snowmobile safety plans into action. Over the next four days we will be given the opportunity to "refresh, reflect and act appropriately," says Wood, in matters involving snowmobile safety. He then breaks into a brief description of the course. We will be divided into two groups of 35 and be instructed in laws regulating basic operation, registration and insurance rules and regulations. In the classroom we'll cover snowmobile theft reporting, prevention, detection, how to handle intoxicated riders and basic search and rescue. Outdoor field exercises will be devoted to cold weather operations and snowmobile accident investigation and reconstruction conducted by Richard Hermance of Collision Research. The overall message is that, yes, the sport of snowmobiling is fun and enjoyable but it can be dangerous if not done responsibly. To get things rolling, Allegheny Parks Officer Mike Zalone begins with the

basics of snowmobile operations, such as reviewing the names and functions of various sled parts. While this may strike some readers as a no-brainer, we are reminded that our group is comprised of guys with a wide range of snowmobiling familiarity and skill levels. We then form into groups A and B. I'm part of the latter and we move to another room for the Basic Search and Rescue officer safety class. Our instructors are Zalone, a 22-year veteran of the state parks police, and Rich Peffer, a snowmobile safety instructor for the past 15 years. If there is one key phrase that describes this class it would be Zalone's advice to officers on the "importance of addressing your frame of mind in dealing with safety issues." We learn that it is better to stop irresponsible snowmobilers at wide intersections. This provides officers with the probability of having another person help him in case trouble erupts. "It's about your safety, protection and using common sense," says Zalone. Radio communication is key and two-man officer patrols are ideal since, of course, two heads are better than one. Oswego County Sheriff William "Woody" Woodworth stresses the importance of the buddy system and using helmet communicators because they are easier to use than portable two-way radios. The reality is that parks and sheriff department budget cuts limit the number of hours officers can spend out on the trails enforcing snowmobiling regulations. Woody also hammers on the point that "99 percent of snowmobilers

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are out having fun. Most recreational riders are with family and friends. The job of an enforcement officer is really to educate." Saddled with this newly gained knowledge, our group changes classrooms and we assemble to hear Bill Johnson instruct on cold weather operations. Johnson is a veteran snowmobiler who works at the Vermont Department of Public Safety. This practical course is designed to provide the officers with a working understanding of the hazards of cold weather operations. Johnson leads us through pre-test exercises on such topics as proper winter clothing, emergency shelters, rescue and survival techniques. After lunch we will head outdoors to put into action these practical exercises using natural resources found in the winter environment. Johnson stresses the importance of never leaving a victim alone and never giving alcoholic beverages to a victim. Conscious victims should drink as much warm, sweet liquid as possible. Preventing heat loss helps prevent hypothermia. It's crucial to get out of the wind and to wear layered clothing. Also, wet clothing can transfer heat up to 200 times faster than dry clothes. This is the kind of useful stuff every Joe Average snowmobiler should know before he or she sets out to ride on the trail. After a bite of lunch, our group heads outdoors for the field exercises. Johnson tells us, "Even if lost or panicked, a person who can build a fire

will almost certainly survive." We break into groups of five and seek sites in which to build shelter that will best prevent hypothermia. Each team will be evaluated on decision-making, appropriate use of skills and successful accomplishments of the mission. Each team is issued four wooden matches. The training area is in rolling, wooded terrain distinguished by a mixture of hardwood and softwood trees. Starting with small pieces of birch bark and softwood twigs we build our fire, adding additional limbs and using the wind to our advantage as a draft. We succeed and I head back to the Roaring Brook knowing I now have the tools to survive a night out in the woods should my snowmobile break down on the trail. A special presentation of Snowmobile Accident Investigation and Reconstruction is scheduled for the third day of the safety course. Led by Hermance, this course aims to demonstrate basic accident investigation and how to determine what information is important to record at the scene of an accident. During the course of the day, Hermance demonstrates speed, reaction time and travel distance out in the fields on snowmobiles traveling at varying speeds. We learn that temperature and snow are critical for skid tests at the accident site. Hermance has devised a tried and true slide and stop formula. "The slide and stop formula is the meat and potatoes of accident reconstruction," Hermance says.

"That's what it all comes down to, total stopping distance." Officer reaction to this presentation was overwhelmingly positive. Zalone and his staff who took the course one year ago simulated skid action on three Ski-Doos. Zalone could be speaking for virtually all the officers enrolled in the safety course when he says, "It's practical, useful information. Dick takes physics and makes it all understandable for the average Joe Patrolman."



As the course winds down and the law enforcement officers prepare for their exams, I reflect on what I've experienced over the past four days. These guys see themselves as ambassadors for safe snowmobiling. Many are passionate about the sport and don't want to see the image of snowmobiling tarnished by the actions of a few. The snowmobile Law Enforcement Training program aims and succeeds, in the words of Vic Wood, "to get law enforcement out there and to get the public aware that they are out there."