

A changing image



Photo by Mike Terrell

The 81-mile Boardman Valley trail system is a recreational paradise for snowmobilers.

• More families riding the snowmobile trails of northern Michigan

By MIKE TERRELL

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The Boardman Valley Trail system, an 81-mile trail system located just southeast of Traverse City, is a great route for families to enjoy, according to George VanKersen.

VanKersen, one of the volunteers who helps groom the trail on a weekly basis, says the family snowmobile scene has really blossomed in the last couple of years. He also owns Peegeo's, a popular watering hole with the snowmobile crowd, which is located near the High Lake staging area. It's also the unofficial home of the Snow Spiders, the snowmobile club that does much of the trail grooming.

"The family snowmobile market has really taken off in recent years," said the avid snowmobiler. "Anymore we serve more pop on a winter weekend than beer at the restaurant.

"It used to be a lot of guys, but the image has changed over the years. I see more families out enjoying the trail now, especially here in Traverse City where there's lot of activities to keep a family busy."

The number of stops along the trail system is one of the reasons you see so many families using the Boardman Valley Trail. It gives families with smaller kids the ability to make frequent

stops, which, if you've ever traveled with kids, is a frequent necessity.

There's stops in Kalkaska, Fife Lake, and in between at places like Ranch Rudolf and VanKersen's place.

"It's not like riding in the U.P. where you can go a 100 miles in between places to stop," he stressed. "Here you're never more than 15 miles away from a place to get in out of the cold."

But, if you want distance, you can get that as well. Bill Manson, an executive with the Michigan Snowmobile Association, likes the fact that you can get so many places from the Boardman Valley Trail.

"It's easy to get to Cadillac, Grayling or Gaylord," said the Grand Rapids resident who recently bought land for a cabin in the Boardman River valley. "You're hooked into hundreds of miles of groomed trails, and most of the system is on state land. It's really great riding, and you have lots of choices."

Both men stressed that if you're looking for a quiet, scenic ride without a lot of other machines on the trail, try midweek snowmobiling.

"Weekends get kind of crazy during the height of the season," VanKersen pointed out. "If you're looking for a quality ride, pick a midweek day and head out early in the morning."

The trails are frequently groomed overnight just before weekends. An early Thursday or Friday morning outing may net a freshly groomed "corduroy highway" to ride. It doesn't get much better.

Considering the cost of owning a snowmobile and acquiring all the related equipment and clothing that you need for the sport, families may consider renting for an outing; especially if you plan on riding infrequently. Most places rent not only the machines, but clothing accessories as well.

In the Traverse City area you can rent snowmobiles at the following places: Blizzard Snowmobile Rentals & Guided Tours, located on High Lake Road, (231) 929-1777; Snowblitz Snowmobile Rentals & Guided Tours, located at High Pointe Golf Club in Williamsburg, (231) 932-1800; Sureway Snowmobile Rentals & Guided Tours, located on Scharmen Road, (231) 263-3724.

Brett Campbell, who owns and manages Snowblitz Rentals, said they see a lot of families coming through in the winter.

"It's cost effective for them unless they really plan on getting into the sport. We have families that rent a few times each winter and seem to really enjoy it. They'll go out for three or four hours, sometimes eight hours. They may have lunch at Ranch Rudolf and make a day of it.

"The trails, with maps that we supply, are fairly easy to follow, and, leaving from the back of High Pointe, you have few, if any, roads to cross," said Campbell with his thick Australian accent. "Of course, if you want to take a longer ride and put in a good day, I would recommend a guided tour."