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Snowmobilers' Heaven Is Hell on Wildlife

By [JOE BARRETT](#)

FORT ATKINSON, Wis. -- More than two dozen people die on snowmobiles each year in Wisconsin, but the talk of this season isn't the damage riders do to themselves -- it's the havoc they wreak on wildlife.

Three men were arrested a few hours north of here in Waupaca County last month for allegedly using their snowmobiles to terrorize and kill five deer. Another man in Fond du Lac turned himself in after killing more than 50 ducks as he zoomed over open water in a maneuver called "water skipping." And authorities near Holmen in the western part of the state are trying to decide whether a man who ran over a deer with his snowmobile on Jan. 31 violated any wildlife regulations.

"I don't remember a year like this," said Gary Eddy, snowmobile-safety administrator for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. "I'm not sure what is really going on."

Here in this town of 12,000 straddling the Rock River east of Madison, authorities are trying to find the rider or riders who killed 62 ducks over two nights in late January as they nestled together in open water beneath the Main Street Bridge.

"There were carcasses scattered all over," said David Walz, the natural-resources warden investigating the incidents here. "There were duck heads laying around, blood spots all over the place."

The killings throw a cold spotlight on a sport that is wildly popular in the Upper Midwest but is often besmirched by the acts of its rowdiest participants.

Wisconsin is the No. 3 state for registered snowmobiles, but is typically No. 1 in snowmobile-related deaths, with an average of 27 fatalities a year. The state has a 55 mph night-time speed limit for snow machines, but essentially none in the daytime. Unlike neighbors Minnesota and Michigan, Wisconsin doesn't link drunk-driving violations with driver's licenses.

Critics of snowmobiling see a pattern. "It's a volatile mix of speed, testosterone and often a lot of alcohol sprinkled in," said Ann Engelman, a public-television consultant known in Fort Atkinson as the "duck lady" for her vigorous efforts to protect the birds from snowmobilers.

Enthusiasts say snowmobiling is a family-friendly pursuit marred by a few bad actors. Larry Chwala, president of the Jefferson County Snowmobile Alliance, has helped raise more than \$9,000 of reward money from businesses, anti-animal-cruelty groups and the 18 clubs in his umbrella group to help solve the recent duck killings.

Mr. Chwala, a 39-year-old owner of an auto-repair shop, and his wife, Tammy, 38, are snowmobile-safety instructors. They have lost two friends to the sport, both of whom were drinking. "I'm against that. I don't drink on snowmobiles," said Mr. Chwala, sipping a Pepsi at the Capn's Corner bar after taking a novice rider on a white-knuckle ride through

woods and over the frozen river.

Every three or four years, ducks are killed by snowmobiles passing under the Main Street Bridge in Fort Atkinson. Snowmobilers can pass through any of five arched openings beneath the bridge where, because of a fluke in river currents, there is usually open water even in the coldest winters.

Mr. Walz received a call about the first duck incident on Jan. 24, and arrived to a ghastly scene. Two days later, he was called back to the bridge to look into the second group of duck deaths. Firefighters donned special gear and tethers to venture onto the ice and bag up all the remains.

The massacre prompted extensive coverage in the Daily Jefferson County Union and conversations at local watering holes. "It's truly an absolute slaughter," said Tisha Erdman, owner of the Velvet Lips Lounge, Bar and Grill, which overlooks the river at the bridge.

Mr. Walz said the killings could be intentional, since ducks are known to congregate under the bridge. On the other hand, a waterskiing rider would have needed to maintain his speed and simply might not have seen the waterfowl in time, he said.

Mr. Chwala, the snowmobile-group president, recently met with local officials to discuss ways to solve the problem. His group, which helps maintain some of the more than 500 miles of snowmobile trails in the county, agreed to install lighting under the bridge and warning signs as snowmobiles approach it.

Mr. Chwala thinks the killings were an accident, but "the longer this drags on without [the perpetrators] turning themselves in, it's making it look a little suspicious. ... If he's a true snowmobiler, he would have turned himself in already."

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