

Club Spotlight: The Shawangunk Mountain Snowmobile and Rescue Club, Ulster County, NY

By Anne M. O'Dell, NYSSA Ulster County District Director, with special thanks to Jerry Hlavacek, Past Vice-President of SMSRC, for providing the historical information for this article.

"It doesn't snow downstate!" is the response I usually get when I introduce myself at NYSSA functions. Well, I'm here to tell you, snowmobiling is alive and well in all parts of New York State, including little ol' Ulster county, a mere 90 miles from New York City. In fact, it's a tradition dating back to when snowmobiles had just one big piston and required both hands to pull start!

The Shawangunk Mountain Snowmobile and Rescue Club (SMSRC), founded in 1970, was incorporated in 1976 in then-rural Ulster County, New York. Built on a solid foundation, the club's stated purpose was to promote safe, courteous, legal and responsible snowmobiling; to promote a favorable public interest in snowmobiling, to establish a code of conduct for its members, and to provide service to the community. With the intention of keeping the club's focus local, membership was limited to 200 individuals or families. The club generally covers communities in northern Orange County and southern Ulster, home to the stunningly beautiful Shawangunk Mountain range and Minnewaska State Park, Mohonk Preserve, and Sam's Point Preserve. The sheer cliffs of the mountains are a year-round attraction. Because of them, the Club's services would be needed time and time again.



*Don Woodin (in white hat) demonstrates snowmobile safety to the next generation
(Photo Courtesy Gerry Hlavacek)*

SAFETY FIRST

Attracting well over 150 members, the club quickly became a community resource, providing NYS Snowmobile Safety courses, first aid and CPR classes, and sponsoring a NYS Basic Wildland Search Skills training course together with the NYS DEC. It wasn't long before they were on call with county and local fire departments, state and local police, DEC and OPRHP to respond to emergencies with snowmobiles, operators, and rescue equipment. Last year a NYSSA Trail Inspector training session was held here. Safety messages are an important part of each Club meeting.

RESCUE ME

By far the most important service this club provides is its search and rescue capabilities. Rescues began as early as 1975, when members rescued 8 people, among them two 3 year old children, a woman 8 months pregnant, and a man recuperating from an appendectomy from the rugged terrain of Sam's Point when their four-wheel drive truck mired in a snow bank. Over the decades, countless rescue calls have come in, among them:

- January 17, 1983 – rescued five missing teenagers from Lake Maratanza (near Minnewaska State Park Preserve in New Paltz).
- A suicide victim’s body was retrieved from Cragmoor – and 8 exhausted search party members had to be transported out after their efforts.
- During the Blizzard of 1993, local towns were under a state of emergency. The Club was on call and under direct supervision of the Ulster County Fire Coordinator. Members provided round-the-clock coverage with machines and club members at various fire houses for the entire weekend. Club members assisted with rescuing people and provided needed transportation at a time when most emergency vehicles found it impossible to travel the roads.
- In January 1994, just one week following the Blizzard of 93, they were again called upon by authorities to assist with a search and rescue, this time transporting two lost skiers out of Cragmoor.
- On January 18, 2005 – a man injured while “caving” illegally in the NYSDEC’s Bashakill Wildlife Management Area in Westbrookville was rescued. Ice hampered rescue efforts; club members ferried personnel and supplies up the mountain on snowmobiles with studded tracks. The rescue took 10 hours; temperatures were in the teens.

The club is always ready to go. Its trailer is loaded with a rescue sled, 2 backboards made by club members, a snowmobile, reflective safety, vests, ropes, flashlights, helmet, gloves, duct tape, spiders for the backboard, blankets, pillows, tarp, cervical collar, and head blocks.

A YEAR-ROUND SPORT IN THE PUBLIC EYE

Although the club meets September through April, members work year-round for our sport. They’ve participated in New York’s Adopt-a-Highway Program for over 12 years, maintaining over five miles of road. An annual scholarship is given to ten students each year, five in Ulster County and five in Orange County, with funds raised from a limited 50-50 raffle. Food drives and toys-for tots events are held. Community businesses are involved by providing sponsorship for a local trail map produced by the club. Club members receive discounts by showing their membership cards at these establishments. Until recently, landowner dinner dances were held each spring and fall at the 1776 Colonial Inn, an historic stone Revolutionary War era building. In 1995 the Club held it’s 25th anniversary party, a gala event that received local press. This year it celebrates its 35th anniversary!

THINKING GLOBALLY, ACTING LOCALLY

Times have changed for us! In the late 70s snowmobile races were a community event that drew 250 entries and 1800 spectators. In 1989 the Club marked and signed trails at Winding Hills County Park. Fortunately those trails are still open, but they are now multiple use.

Over the years the Club saw their riding areas closed off one by one. Ulster County is under tremendous development pressure from NYC residents moving upstate. Farmland is sold off for development, closing trails used by local families for decades. The Open Space Institute acquired the 5,770-acre Sam’s Point Preserve in a series of transactions that began in the 1980s and culminated in 1997. Access to and activities at Sam’s Point are managed by The Nature Conservancy. Sam’s Point is now off limits to snowmobiles (until they need them for a rescue...). Both Minnewaska and Mohonk are now off- limits.

In 1982 SMSRC was asked to draw up a list of town roads it would like designated as trails. As new people moved in, snowmobiles began to fall out of favor. In 1993, local law was enacted stating that snowmobile travel “shall be authorized for a distance not to exceed 500 yards on such designated highways and are only for the purpose of gaining access to the highway”. Fines of not less than \$100 would be levied to “protect the public health, welfare and safety and minimize detrimental effects of such use on the environment and make such use compatible with vehicular and pedestrian travel.”

Local riding began to drift away. Today, most Club members support several clubs: SMSRC and one or more upstate where they travel to ride. “Club Rides” to Speculator, Piseco, and many other areas are planned each year.



*Fred Hallock, SMSRC President, registers a group of members as they prepare to cross DEC land.
Photo Courtesy Anne O'Dell*

The Club has actively supported NYSSA in its efforts. The Club provides input to DEC Unit Management Plans in and beyond our area. In March 2004, SMSRC petitioned the DEC to hold a public hearing on the Draft Adirondack Snowmobile Plan. Prior to their request, no hearing was planned for DEC Region 3. Over 100 snowmobilers from seven counties attended and made their voices heard. The Club is involved nationally through membership in the Blue Ribbon Coalition.

Far from being a “social club”, the Shawangunk Mountain Snowmobile and Rescue Club may not build bridges on trails, but the bridges we build in our communities are just as important to our Sport. Contact us at smsrc1@hotmail.com or SMSRC, PO Box 872, Pine Bush, NY 12566.

Anne O'Dell is also the Chair of the New York State Trails Council and the author of [Ride New York: 35 Horse and Multiple-Use Trails in the Empire State.](#)

SIDE BAR: DON WOODIN, PAST NYSSA DISTRICT DIRECTOR

Don Woodin, former Ulster-Dutchess District Director (now retired in North Carolina), was one of NYSSA's brightest stars. He worked tirelessly over the years for NYSSA and NYSCG (New York Snowmobile Coordinating Group, NYSSA's predecessor). Whatever the task, Don was always there to help. For years, he would get all the raffle sleds and deliver them to the winners -- and that could be anywhere in NY! He was responsible for obtaining NYSSA's big black safety trailer (shown in the photo) and worked countless shows and events with it. "Don is an all around nice guy and a good friend" said Jeff Johnson, Past President of NYSSA.

SIDE BAR: FRED HALLOCK, SMRSC PRESIDENT

Fred Hallock didn't realize when he took the presidency of the Shawangunk Mountain Snowmobile and Rescue club in 1988, he would continue to serve for seventeen years. Fred's dedication to the sport of snowmobiling is

tireless and inspiring. He's a safety course instructor, Boy Scout troop leader and role model for us all. "Fred is the glue that holds the club together." Says Jerry Hlavacek, past Vice President.