

Easy sledding with 'Pucker Brush Dan'



Jack Hoffman

Indian River, Michigan—

As the season's first heavy snowfall arrives, Dan Nivelt is immediately consumed by a passion that infects a growing army of folks throughout the Great Lakes region—snowmobiling.

"I can't wait to get started," he says, twirling a wrench under the hood

of the car inside his repair shop. Outside, the snow is quietly building towards that magic one-foot mark. Nearby his "sled"—the outdoorsmen's name for their machines—is at the ready.

No ordinary snowmobiler this. Nivelt is a snowmobile guide, who from late December through February leads caravans of snowmobile enthusiasts through this Tip of the Mitt region of pristine forests and snow.

He's been guiding for 13 years. Snowmobiling for 30 years.

Owner and operator of a

automotive repair shop here, Nivelt and his wife also raise trout year-round and operate a half-dozen "catch your own" trout ponds in summer.

Both businesses are located just off Michigan's "Main Street," Interstate 75, smack dab in the middle of the state's snowmobiling capitol that averages nine feet of snowfall annually.

Although the repairs and the trout keep him busy from sun up to sun down, he manages somehow to squeeze in two months of fun in the snow.

Guiding, he says, "is really just a hobby. It gives me an opportunity to get out into the snow and explore the wonders of this place, to meet people. It's my favorite recreation. Guiding pays for my gas and my repairs but it doesn't pay for my sled. I live for snowmobiling, more so than even hunting or fishing, which I love. If you took my snowmobile away I'd be a kid without a sucker."

"My wife enjoys it; I love it."

The average snowmobiler living in Northern Michigan puts about a 1,000 miles a year on a sled. Those from downstate may ride only 400 to 500 miles a year. Nivelt averages 5,000 miles in basically two months.

"It's really an expensive hobby," he points out. "Figure it out. The average sled will cost from \$3,500 to \$4,000. You'll probably get 12 to 15 miles a gallon on gas. Figure in the cost of travel, the motel room, if you're in from out of town, your food, and I think they figure the average snowmobiler will spend about \$100 for his day in the snow. That's why snowmobiling is so important to the tourist business. It's a real boost to the economy."

Indian River, he explains, is in the middle of some of the state's premier groomed trails. Most are linked, allowing snowmobilers to travel virtually the entire tip of Michigan's northern Lower Peninsula. And that link now extends across the Straits into the Upper Peninsula where Nivelt

leads his longest safaris.

Despite the preponderance of groomed trails here, Nivelt normally only uses them to get from one area to another. Most times he makes his own trails. And that's why enthusiasts look him up.

"They want to explore, and that's what my safaris are all about. Getting out into areas where snow is fresh, where we're more likely to see wildlife, where around the next corner there's something new, unexpected."

"Riding groomed trails is lot of fun if all you want is a smooth, safe course in spectacular surroundings. For 90 percent of the people who come into our area that's all that is necessary. And we've got plenty of those kinds of excellent, well marked places to travel. For me, though, I like a foot or more of fresh snow flying in my face, the getting away from man-made adventure."

"Once you've experienced it you're hooked."

"Last year, for example, I took a guy from town with me to check out an area to see if I could get through it. He came back and said, 'I never thought snowmobiling was like this. I've been snowmobiling for 10 years and I've never had so much fun.'"

Nivelt never takes a party of snowmobilers through areas that he has not previously scouted. "I want to be absolutely sure it's safe because, if you're leading 25, 30 or more sleds, a safety's on your mind all the time. You certainly don't want to end up in a swamp or at the bottom of a hill that leads nowhere. Pre-checks are important, too, because I want to be absolutely sure we'll not be trespassing on private property. Respecting the rights of others ought to be on every snowmobiler's mind no matter where they operate. One sloh can ruin the sport for all of us."

You just have to read maps. You just can't start going across country without knowing the area. You certainly don't want to end up in someone's yard. Quite obviously, snowmobiling is a privilege and you

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	• AuSable River Days

NORTHEAST MICHIGAN'S

Sunrise Side

GATEWAY TO THE SCENIC BYWAY



FAMILY SAFARIS— Children and adults alike enjoy Dan Nivelt's snowmobile caravans through the Tip of the Mitt region's pristine forests and snow.