## The Adventures of a Solo Snowmobiler

By Richard A. Demers

For the last three winters, a solo snowmobiler, dressed in gray, and riding a bright red sled, has been spotted on the trails of Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Northern Michigan. A solo snowmobiler? Is there really such a thing? Aren't snowmobilers pack animals, like horses, who ride through the woods nose-to-tail, breathing each other's exhaust fumes? Indeed, snowmobilers do tend to be social critters, but not always. There is real pleasure to be found in hitting the trails all by yourself, at least some of the time.

One weekend, a year or two ago, I trailered my sled north from my home in Rochester, Minnesota, past the Twin cities, past Duluth, and along the north shore of Lake Superior to the town of Grand Marais. Being one of the main starting points for trips into the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, I'd visited this little town many times before, but never in winter. When I arrived, its snug harbor was ringed by ice pushed up onto the shore by lake storms. The moon glistened on the water. I found a cozy but inexpensive motel for the night, had a steak dinner in a restaurant overlooking the lake, and retired early with the latest Tom Clancy novel.

I was up early the next morning and was unloading my sled when the owner of the motel approached me. Where was I headed, he asked. There were three possibilities: northeast along the lake toward Grand Portage, southwest along the lake toward Duluth, or northwest along the Gunflint trail into the wilderness. We talked about trail conditions, I decided on the Gunflint trail, and he decided to come along for a morning's ride. Great, I thought, what a shame it would be to live in a place like this and not get out on the trails.

The Gunflint trail is just about the only road through the million and a half acres of woods, hills, lakes, and streams of the BWCA. A few resorts, campgrounds and restaurants can be found along the sixty miles to Lake Saganaga on the Canadian border, where the trail dead-ends. Most of these are closed in the winter, but a few places, owned and operated by rugged souls, stay open and are welcomed sights to snowmobilers.

From the mists around Lake Superior, we climbed into the hills and into a day of bright sunshine. The trail wound through stands of huge, old growth pines, around quiet lakes thick with winter ice, and through the quiet marshes in the valleys. We rode steadily, but at no great pace, enjoying the day, the woods, and the smooth rides of our sleds on a well-groomed trail. At one point, we came to a high pass with a great view. By myself, I would have stopped for a stretch and an eyeful of natural beauty, but not being in the lead at that point, I had no way to signal the leader to stop. About two thirds of the way up the trail, we came to a log-cabin style restaurant on Poplar Lake. After a cold beer and a quick lunch, my companion headed back to his motel duties in Grand Marais, and I continued north on the trail.

My sled was running beautifully, and I increased my speed to about fifty. Now, I wasn't just touring, I was riding! Every turn and every hill required my full attention, forcing me to adopt the sled as an extension of my body. I knew I'd never be in the same league as snowmobile racers, but it gave me a taste of their sport. Even still, I was soon overtaken by three young fellows on more powerful sleds. I normally don't mind having people pass me on the trail, but this time I wanted to see if I could keep up with them. I increased my speed to fifty-five, and then to sixty. The woods became a blur as I strained to keep up with them. The trail curved hard to the right, but I missed the turn, overshot into some deep snow, and quickly came to a stop. I watched the would-be racers disappear down the trail and breathed a sigh of relief. Snowmobiling isn't just about speed, and for me it certainly isn't about competition, but it can be fun to push yourself a bit. Still, I was by myself, and I should have known better.

Before long, I came to the end of the trail. Snowmobile tracks continued out onto the ice of Lake Saganaga. I followed them for a few miles but had no idea where they were going or whether there would be gas available for my sled. So, I returned to the shore, where I stopped for gas and a candy bar at what is probably one of the remotest resorts in the lower 48 states. The old fellow who lived there clearly wanted to talk so I took off my helmet and sat in front of his potbellied, wood-burning stove with him. His talk was all about the woods and lakes, and about animals and snow. The normal troubles of working and raising a family in today's America were alien to him. I sat and listened and enjoyed his monologue until the angle of the sun coming through the window told me I had to be on my way.

I rode at a steady pace back toward Grand Marais, watching the changing shadows as the sun sank lower in the West. Finally, I came to that high place I had wanted to stop at earlier. A group of snowmobilers were parked there, each with a drink in hand. They offered me one and I dug out a bag of tollhouse cookies my wife had made for my trip. Together, we watched the sun sink below the western hills, and together we rode into Grand Marais in the dark. It had been a terrific day. I'd had some company for parts of my ride, but I'd also had the freedom of solo snowmobiling.

Maybe I should tell you how I got started as a solo snowmobiler. The simple answer is that when I began snowmobiling, I really didn't know anyone else who did it. All I knew was that I desperately needed a winter escape valve from the pressures of my job. So, I bought a used sled, a Ski Doo MXLT, and the first winter I just puttered around my cottage on the sand prairie between Wabasha and Kellogg. It wasn't much, but it sure whetted my appetite for more. Eventually, I did meet some other snowmobilers and joined the Drift Skippers, but because I was only in the Wabasha area on occasional weekends, I never really got active with the club.

Still, though, I did learn about the extensive trail system in both Minnesota and Wisconsin and had a great time exploring them. In particular, the high bluffs overlooking the Mississippi River south of Kellogg are really spectacular. But I also learned what fun riding on ice can be — and what danger. Peterson Lake is one of the Mississippi backwater areas, separated by a chain of islands from the main channel, which never freezes. I'd seen the cars and trucks of ice-fishermen out on the ice and assumed that it was safe enough for snowmobiling. But most of the lake was an unblemished blanket of white hiding dangers I was blithely unaware of. I found one of them, an area with a swift current running under a thin layer of ice.

My stomach tightened into a ball as I felt the ice give way under my sled. I tried giving it more gas, hoping that I'd be able to speed out of that area, but no luck. The sled sank through the ice, and I scrambled to get myself onto thicker ice. I made it, but the sled didn't; it sank all the way to the bottom — into about a foot of water. I stood there for a minute, laughing hysterically. I'd had visions of coming back for the sled in the summer, on a boat and with scuba gear. But there it was, sitting in a puddle. All I had to do was step into the freezing water and pull it up onto solid ice. Within five minutes, I had it restarted and was back in my warm cottage, stripping off my cold, soaked clothing and boots. An hour in the electric dryer for the clothing and a cup of hot chocolate for me and I was back out on the ice, but this time, I kept much farther away from the channel.

The next winter, I traded in the MX for a new Ski Doo Formula Plus two-seater. This made it a lot better for friends to come out with me for a day, but I still went out by myself a lot. There was something about the experience of being in the woods alone that I found tremendously appealing. It was the feeling of complete freedom and independence, the ability to ride at whatever pace I chose, to take whatever trails appealed to me, and to stop and enjoy the scenery whenever I wanted. All of these are hard to come by when you're riding with a group.

Still, it is nice to have some help when you get in a jam. On one bright day, I had been riding the bluff trails south from Wabasha to the Bass Camp at Lock and Dam #5. The trail coming down the bluff to the Bass Camp was steep and icy, and I had to drag my feet all the way down to keep in control. After a quick lunch in the restaurant, I tried to climb the trail back onto the bluffs but found the trail impassable. The track of my sled was spinning madly on the ice, but I wasn't going anywhere. I slid backwards down the short stretch I had climbed and sat there wondering what to do. The intelligent thing would have been to call my wife to come for me with the trailer, but I really hadn't had enough sledding for that day.

Instead, I tried to run the ditches along US 61, a divided highway that parallels the main North/South railroad track that runs along the Mississippi. While this wasn't much fun, I was making good progress until I came to a long section of guard rail. On my left was dry pavement for as far as I could see, and on my right was a gentle slope leading down into a drainage ditch between the highway and a railroad track. The slope looked runnable, so I went for it. The only problem was that it kept getting steeper and steeper until I finally had to stop. I was trapped between the guard rail and a slope I couldn't cross. And I couldn't turn around. Now what?

I sat there on the sled for about ten minutes studying the situation. The slope was steep, but only because I was running across it. If I could turn down into it at an angle and then pop up onto the railroad bed, I'd be OK. I gave it a try, with my weight as far over to the high side as I could manage. Down the slope I went with the brakes on full, struggling to turn so I'd hit the bottom of the ditch at an angle. It didn't work. The skis dug in at the bottom, and I went flying over the windshield into the snow on the other bank of the ditch.

When I finally extricated myself, I found my beautiful red machine on its side, buried in slush. I worked for nearly an hour to dig it out, all to no avail. The slopes were too steep, the snow too wet, and my snowmobile too heavy for me to free it by myself. Meanwhile, the winter sun was getting alarmingly low in the sky. I knew I needed to get help, so I climbed back up to the road and tried waving down one of the passing cars. Most people looked at me in my snowmobile suit and helmet like I was crazy and kept on going. One family stopped and wanted to help, but no one had any winter clothing or boots. Finally, though, a young fellow stopped, said he'd been stuck a few times himself, and followed me down into the ditch. The two of us worked together and in half an hour we freed my sled.

He wouldn't take any payment for his efforts, but I did get his name and sent him a gift certificate for a couple of steak dinners. It was the least I could do. Like the next guy, I tend to think I can get myself out of any scrape I get into, but it isn't necessarily so. There are times when you just need another set of muscles. Without a buddy to help, a solo snowmobiler has to be willing to ask for help when he's stuck, and to pay for it. There's no free lunch.

There is one more important lesson I've learned, but this one I learned from someone else. I had taken a long weekend solo trip into northern Minnesota, truly a snowmobiler's paradise. Starting at Tower, MN on Lake Vermilion, I took the Arrowhead Trail to International Falls, with excursions onto the painted-stick trails across Crane Lake, Lake Namakan, Lake Kabetogama, and Rainy Lake, probably the best lake riding that can be found anywhere. My sled was running beautifully. It had just been professionally tuned by trained Ski Doo mechanics, had new plugs, and a new drive belt. The idea of getting stuck in the wilderness with mechanical problems had always been a concern to me. Oh, I can change a spark plug or a drive belt, but that's the extent of my mechanical abilities, so I'd been happy to let the pros at Al's Specialty in Rochester do their thing.

The trail came down a hill and turned left to cross a plank bridge over a small stream. A solo snowmobiler was parked next to the trail with the hood up on his sled. I stopped to see if I could help in any way, but he was clearly too busy for chatter. He had all the little parts of his carburetors spread out on his seat. No, there was nothing I could do to help. It was his own fault, he said — too much monkeying around trying to fine tune his sled, and here he was trying to find out what was wrong with it. I volunteered to stay with him while he completed his repairs, but he said that wasn't necessary. He'd had the carburetors apart a dozen times and it was just a matter of time to see what the problem was. So off I went, shaking my head. Maybe he was a good enough mechanic to do that sort of thing, but I was riding my sled while he had his apart. I could just imagine some of those little parts falling into the snow, lost forever. No thanks, I'll gladly admit my limitations and pay someone who really knows what's what to keep my sled in top running shape.

Solo snowmobiling is great fun and gives me a tremendous sense of freedom and independence. I really don't know any better way of escaping from the day to day frustrations of a tough job. But I've also learned that freedom has some pretty strict limitations. Done sensibly, on well-marked trails, and with well-maintained equipment, solo snowmobiling is both safe and exhilarating. Give it a try, you might like it.