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Fresh snow brings out the trail groomers

Nonprofits prepare hundreds of miles of trails for snowmobiles, skiing



Bill Inman, vice president of Moon Country Snowbusters, a nonprofit club that grooms for snowmobiles, rode his quad on the trails near Wanoga Sno-park Jan. 19, 2018. Sparse snow means Inman opted for the four-wheeler instead of one of his six snowmobiles to assess trail conditions and check in on the club's snow groomer, which is on loan from the Oregon State Snowmobile Association. (Andy Tullis/Bulletin photo)

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After a slow start to winter, Central Oregon's snow-grooming clubs are weighing in with a mix of exuberance and guarded optimism after the recent snowfall.

“And we’re GROOMING!!!” Moon Country Snowbusters secretary Lisa Mahoney wrote in an email to nearly 100 members. The snowmobiling nonprofit grooms 250 miles of trails, including those that connect Wanoga, Vista Butte, Edison, Kapka and Dutchman snow-parks. The group also grooms the Cascade Lakes Highway, starting near the Mt. Bachelor Nordic Center’s oval and out toward Crane Prairie Reservoir.

“Yes folks, we FINALLY have enough snow!” she wrote. “We will be out there grooming from Kapka to the high country all this week.”

Susan Hopkins, the Meissner Nordic president, offered a more reserved take on the recent snowfall. She described the mood at the nonprofit group, which grooms for nordic skiing at Virginia Meissner Sno-park — the lowest elevation sno-park along Century Drive — had been one of “quiet anticipation.”

“It’s like, ‘Ugh, I hope it’s not another year like we had a couple years ago,’” Hopkins said with a laugh before the this week’s snowfall. “We’re just looking at the weather and hoping. That’s all you can do.”

A late snow season doesn’t mean Central Oregon snow-grooming nonprofits have been hibernating. To the contrary, the usual tasks such as repairing and replacing trail markers, trouble-shooting grooming machines and keeping channels open with the U.S. Forest Service and snow users alike remain a constant.

Last week, before the bulk of the weekend’s snow had fallen — more than a foot had accumulated at Mount Bachelor’s base — snowmobiler Bill Inman worked his way through narrow trails and snow-dusted Deschutes National Forest Service roads at Wanoga Sno-park. An inch of powder carpeted the otherwise barren trails. Making his rounds last week, Inman, the Moon Country Snowbusters’ vice president, opted to ride a four-wheeler instead of a snowmobile as he surveyed a 10-mile loop of trail. On the way, he checked for missing or obscured trail markers before looking in on the snow groomer the club has on loan.

It sat, unmarred by snow, in its storage shed near the Sunriver turn out.

“It’s not snowmobiling, but riding a quad is pretty fun,” said Inman, 77, a lifelong snowmobiler who first caught the bug in 1969. The Moon Country Snowbusters hadn’t been able to groom any of the 250 miles of trails it typically maintains because the trails were either snow-free or insufficiently covered.

After Inman cut the engine, he opened the garage and turned off the security alarm.

Inside the tidy shop stood two enormous snow groomers.

One, a yellow and black monstrosity, was festooned with decals: “Sisters Sno-Go-Fers,” another snow-grooming club. Next to it, the Prinoth Bison snow groomer read: “Central Oregon Snowbusters,” as Moon Country Snowbusters was known before a recent re-branding. Despite the club stickers, both of these cutting-edge groomers belong to the Oregon State Snowmobiling Association, which lends groomers and diesel fuel to snowmobiling clubs throughout the state.

Eighteen inches is an ideal snow base for grooming, Inman said, an accumulation that dumped last weekend and unlocked grooming opportunities, particularly at Kapka Sno-park. Kapka, the second-highest sno-park along Century Drive, was created by the Forest Service in 2014 to give snowmobilers more places to launch their adventures.

While the trails at Wanoga Sno-park remained ungroomed and conditions were far from ideal, snowmobiling was still possible last weekend. Like all snow users, the Moon Country Snowbusters is hoping this batch of snow sticks around — and that more keeps coming.

As for the slow start to the snowmobile season, secretary Lisa Mahoney said the club got busy catching up on the trail maintenance work delayed by smoke from summer forest fires.

“We’ll take advantage of the mild weather while we’ve got it,” she said. “Make the best of it.”

Still praying for snow

On Friday, the same day that Inman rumbled through Wanoga Sno-park, Hopkins strolled through Virginia Meissner Sno-park, just across Century Drive. A light snowfall was beginning to collect on the grassy clearing near the pinewood lodge. Having lived in

Bend since 1988, Hopkins knows not to hold any concrete expectations of what winter might bring. She remembered a couple seasons when Virginia Meissner received no snow at all. On this day, Hopkins stopped at Virginia Meissner after skate skiing at Mt. Bachelor Nordic Center. She said her abilities to predict the weather were predicated on reports by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. After the snowy weekend in Central Oregon's Cascades, Hopkins expressed a guarded hope that the nonprofit will be able to return to grooming some of the nearly 25 miles of the sno-park's trails by this weekend.

For Meissner Nordic, there has been a silver lining to the snow season's slow start. The coffers of the volunteer-driven, donation-dependent nonprofit have remained relatively untapped so far since its November season kick-off fundraiser party. That means its cash reserve may afford enough diesel for its team of paid groomers to imprint corduroy and nordic tracks every day this season — up from the last year's five-day schedule, Hopkins said.

“That money is sitting there, waiting for it to snow,” said Brooke Blackwelder, Meissner Nordic's communications liaison.

Virginia Meissner has been unskiable since brief periods of snow around Thanksgiving and at the end of December.

“Everyone wishes there was more snow,” Blackwelder said. “But you can't control those things. Our users and supporters aren't mad at the (Meissner Nordic) board because it hasn't snowed,” Blackwelder said with a chuckle. “They're pretty understanding.”

During the atypically brown start to winter, Meissner Nordic Operations Manager Larry Katz kept busy. He ran the Pisten Bully's engine once a month, replacing any expired filters so that Meissner Nordic “is ready the second we get snow,” Hopkins said. “If we get a foot of snow, we'll want to be able to groom immediately.”

The downtime has afforded the nonprofit time to repair damages caused by recent episodes of vandalism and theft and to install security cameras. These expenses, however, eat into the money the nonprofit otherwise reserves for grooming.

“That’s our mission: to groom snow so people can ski,” Hopkins said. “(It’s) not to spend money on security, but we’re going to do the bare minimum ... to protect our assets.”

Meissner Nordic members have also kept busy staying in touch with the Forest Service, with which the nonprofit has a special-use permit. New this year, the Forest Service has granted the nonprofit permission to groom the entirety of the Wednesdays Trail, which features roller coaster-like hills. The Forest Service has yet to approve the proposed addition to the Bitterbrush loop, which will connect the presently pronged out-and-back Bitterbrush Lower and Bitterbrush Upper trails with the Gentian trail, Hopkins said. The add-on will expand the trail network by several kilometers. That the addition would happen at one of the sno-park’s highest elevation points means it would, in turn, prolong the ski-able window at Virginia Meissner.

Planning events such as the Luminaria, which is scheduled for Feb. 3, has also kept Meissner Nordic busy, along with helping other ski groups such as Mt. Bachelor Sports Education Foundation, Bend Endurance Academy and XC Oregon host their events, too, Hopkins said.

Service, with or without snow

The lack of snow hasn’t deterred some people from enjoying Meissner, which is still open to the public. During Hopkins’s visit last Friday, she noticed a couple pairs of boot prints that stretched down a Forest Service road. The gravel expanse is otherwise known as the Tangent corridor and is typically bustling with skiers this time of year. Last month, Hopkins anticipated that New Year’s Eve revelers, snow or no snow, would still venture 1.5 miles from the Meissner parking lot to the wood-stove-heated Meissner Shelter to celebrate. Accordingly, she stocked the shelter with plenty of firewood for them to enjoy.

“I wanted them to have fun up there,” Hopkins said. “Even though it wasn’t a skiing kind of thing.”

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