

# Pathways to a winter wonderland

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Get ready to explore a winter wonderland, courtesy of volunteers with Willow Creek Snowmobile Club. Thanks to months of preparation, the club's trail system is longer, smoother and more inviting than ever. Best of all, they have been blanketed in a thick coating of early season snow.

"This kind of winter puts you in mind of your childhood," said club president Norm Strotman. "If this weather holds, we should get a few extra weeks of riding in this season."

Snowmobile season typically runs about 13 weeks, from Christmas to early March. But with this year's early snowfall, winter sports enthusiasts are hopeful for a head start. The trails officially open Monday, but volunteers have been carefully preparing them for weeks. "Since the fall, we have probably spent over 300 hours in total getting the trails ready," said Strotman.

Volunteers have been posting signs, rolling and grooming the trails using their various equipment. Crowd favorites are the three grooming machines. They are so popular that volunteers offer public rides during special events.

"They help to pack down the trail and make it as smooth as possible so it's almost like pavement," said Strotman.

Founded in 2019, the Willow Creek Snowmobile Club was created to promote snowmobiling and maintain high-quality trails in the region. The 200-member club maintains 120 miles of trails in both summer and winter. This winter, riders will notice something new. "We built a brand new trail just south of the Marilla Reservoir that connects two existing roads," said Strotman. "That trail goes up to the new pavilion and connects to all the trails there." Since the club's creation, both membership

**The groomer is both a local favorite and a necessity to maintain the club's 120mile trail system.** Provided

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grown steadily. Local business owners have also reported a boost in their winter profits.

"It's great to get those tourism dollars back into McKean County," said Strotman. "These are businesses that otherwise wouldn't be as busy in the wintertime."

Strotman said it is easy to entice people to come and explore such a marvelous natural area.

"We have excellent trails in a beautiful part of the state," said Strotman. "Once people come and ride our trails once, they tend to want to come back again."

Supporting local businesses is a key part of the club's mission, but promoting safe, enjoyable recreation remains at its core. To that end, the club offers educational classes on snowmobile and winter safety. Strotman encourages riders to follow posted signs and stay on the path.

“At the end of the day, in addition to wonderful riding opportunities, we want to make sure everyone comes home safe,” Strotman said.

The club is also gearing up for Winter Fest, set for noon to 10 p.m. Jan. 17 at Pine Acres Golf Course, 1401 W. Warren Road. Along with snowmobile rides, visitors can take a turn on the beloved groomer.

“You’d be surprised, but the adults like it as much as the kids,” Strotman laughed. “Everyone loves a good day out in the snow.”

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