

A look at Yellowstone National Park's most restrictive snowmobile season

Is fewer better, or just more exclusive?

By BRETT FRENCH - The Billings Gazette | Posted: Wednesday, February 24, 2010 12:15 am |



Part of the tour in a snow coach is stopping and walking around the geyser basins in Yellowstone National Park. A tourist walks on the snow-covered boardwalk at Fountain Paint Pot in the Lower Geyser Basin in Yellowstone Park recently. (David Grubbs/The Billings Gazette)

With a full gray beard and forest-green wool pants and vest, Mike Bryers looks as if he's living in the wrong century. Yet he doesn't miss the "old days" when snowmobiles dominated Yellowstone National Park's winters.

"It used to be like driving in the Indianapolis 500. I used to come home with a headache from the two-stroke smoke," said Bryers, his large frame folded into the cozy confines of a 1950s-era red snowcoach. A snowcoach driver for Yellowstone Alpen Guides in West Yellowstone for 28 years, he has seen a lot of changes.

Now, the only rush is to use the heated restroom at Madison Junction when a snowcoach or group of snowmobilers pulls up. Exhaust emissions have been greatly reduced by requirements that allow only cleaner, four-stroke snowmobiles into the park. And snowmobile access, which was unlimited before 2004, is now the most restrictive in Yellowstone's history.

The once-dominant mode of winter transportation and cause of pollution has been marginalized. As the Park Service crafts yet another winter use plan over the next two years, will the agency decide that the machines should fade into history, like the park's fabled feeding of grizzly bears? Or will the Park Service recommend the cleaner snowmobiles remain with restrictions?

Fewer sleds

The National Park Service cut the number of snowmobiles allowed into Yellowstone each day from 720 last year to 318 this winter, an interim move while it develops its fourth winter use plan. In addition, 78 snowcoaches a day can carry tourists into the park, the same as last year. The figures will remain the same for this season and next. By March 2011, the agency plans to have its draft proposal ready and hopes to have it implemented for the 2011-12 winter season.

Despite this year's reduced number of snowmobiles, Old Faithful interpretive ranger Steve Ballou said he hasn't noticed any change.

"Snowcoaches are still bringing a lot of folks in," he said. "I'm much more concerned about the lack of snow than the lack of visitors."

Todd Stalcup, a snowmobile guide for Yellowstone Arctic Yamaha in West Yellowstone, relaxed on his machine at noon as his black snowsuit-clad clients tromped off to watch Old Faithful erupt. He said the reduction in snowmobile visits has hurt business for his employer as well as the town of West Yellowstone. It's also cut his work days. Last year, he worked six days a week. This year, he said, he's lucky to get four days. He's paying the bills, but not setting any money aside.

"I hope it goes back to at least what we had last year," he said. "I know a lot of people complain about the noise, emissions and safety, but that's outside the park. Inside, we're riding four-stroke machines."

Stalcup didn't always feel that way. He was once against snowmobiles in the park, but after guiding for the past two seasons, he now supports the activity, though with some of the restrictions in place.

Ride vs. rev

For now, visitors to Yellowstone have the ability to choose their own mode of travel. Canadian snowmobiler Dustin Harris decided to ride a snowcoach into Old Faithful from West Yellowstone on Presidents Day. He said he likes someone else doing the driving, which allows him more time to look around. The cost, with a park pass, was almost \$120.

Conor Sullivan, of Bozeman, Mont., feels the opposite way. He climbed off his rented snowmobile at Madison Junction and said it's the best way to see the park in winter.

"You're out in the air, and you don't have to share your seat," he said.

The cost to rent a snowmobile and clothing, hire a guide and pay for a park pass is about \$200.

Some have argued for plowing the road to Old Faithful in order to provide winter bus service, saying that would be more affordable. John Sacklin, who is in charge of overseeing the writing of the winter use plan, said one of the alternatives under development will include plowing as an option.

"Plowing would be cheaper for the visitor," he said, but it may be more costly for the Park Service and would also eliminate snowcoach and snowmobile travel along the route.

He noted that the park's North Entrance has always been open to wheeled vehicles in the winter between Mammoth and Cooke City, Mont. Visitation along the route has risen partly because the Lamar Valley, which lies along the route, has become popular with wolf watchers.

Court issue

No matter their chosen mode of transport, many people said the decision about winter use in Yellowstone is more likely to be settled by a judge -- if it's settled at all -- than by any new plan that the Park Service develops. Rightly or wrongly, lawsuits have strangled the Park Service in its past three attempts to settle the winter use issue. Will its fourth-generation plan be any different?

"This may be one of the most studied issues, not just in Yellowstone, but in any national park," said Al Nash, chief of public affairs for Yellowstone.

And that's a good thing, he said, because over the past decade, the Park Service has collected reams of data from various studies allowing it to back up claims with science and to make its eventual decision more defensible.

"No matter what the outcome of this process, we can't go back to unregulated use in the park," Nash said. "We have to believe there's an approach that we can get to that people will find appropriate."

Change has come

Sacklin noted that even without an approved winter plan, Yellowstone is a different place in the winter since regulations were first put in place in 2004. The air is cleaner, the woods more quiet, the wildlife less stressed and there are fewer snowmobile accidents.

But there are also fewer visitors. Last winter, 35,380 snowmobilers and snowcoach riders visited Yellowstone. Ten years earlier, in 1999, that number was 87,050.

The changes are probably most evident at Old Faithful, the iconic geyser to which most of the park's oversnow visitors make a pilgrimage. Two large parking lots that 10 years ago brimmed to overflowing with snowmobiles are nearly empty. About 100 snowmachines are lined up in one lot on Presidents Day, one of the park's busiest weekends for winter visitation. A throng of people had temporarily crowded the nearby Geyser Grill café at noon -- three people were seen crammed into a booth for two -- but they quickly dispersed.

While some environmentalists may see these as good changes and reasons to prohibit snowmobiles in the park altogether, others see the quiet and reduced visitation as a sign of restricted access to public property.

"I think you have a more quality experience now, but it's also an exclusive experience," said Mike Swanson, a snowcoach driver for Yellowstone Alpen Guides. "We have 308 million Americans and less than 1,500 can come into Yellowstone a day, so that's a pretty exclusive experience."