



Rider On The Storm

Enjoying a lake effect snow squall

By Craig Nicholson

Like all snowmobilers, riders from the Kawarthas, Haliburton and Bancroft regions are winter lovers, always hoping for more white stuff. But in my sledding travels across Canada, I've discovered there can be too much of a good thing...

An over-abundance of snow interrupted my first trail ride near Cochrane. A foot and half obliterated the snowmobile trail with more falling; the going became progressively tougher. So, we slogged our way to a weather-closed Highway 11 and rode that smooth and untracked white ribbon back to town.

I had a similar experience in Northwestern Ontario. During our tour, four feet of snow fell over two blustery days. Our pace became a crawl trying to follow the entombed trail. Every kilometre, one sled or another dropped a ski off the groomed trail's edge into the bottomless depths beside. Then came the gut-wrenching extraction work.

Our weary crew finally found a remote gas station shut down by the blizzard. Fortunately, the owner lived on site and let us get warm and fuel up. Soon an OPP cruiser arrived, and the officer said: "Follow me!" So riding behind its lights flashing for two hours, we arrived by highway at our next hotel.

We hit another major one in New Brunswick. A blizzard raged as we arrived, leaving over two feet everywhere. Next morning, we encountered buried trails and deep drifts, especially in heavily

wind-blown open areas. It was a real crapshoot trying to spot where the trail went without slowing down so much our sleds sank into that white quicksand. Continually digging out one stuck sled after another took its toll.

Darkness was falling when we lost the trail completely just outside the town that was supposed to be our lunch stop. So, after 8 hours of struggle and 112 very hard fought kilometers, we stayed there overnight. Fortunately, the storm ended and trails were opened up as we slept, so the rest of our tour was a breeze.

But a whiteout storm can be as bad as too much snow. While snowmobiling in Revelstoke B.C., we explored a high mountain peak on a bright, sunny day. Without warning, a whiteout enveloped us, so I couldn't see my hand in front of my face. Scary stuff when you're already wary about riding off a cliff! Our local guide said to stay put and wait for it to blow over, and after one of the longest hours of my life, the white shroud suddenly dissipated. Boy, was I happy to see the sun again!

Ontario's Grey Bruce is notorious for abrupt lake effect squalls, localized pockets like the wall of white we ran into. In the blink of an eye, visibility dropped to near zero for about half our day. But other riders we talked to had enjoyed only sunny blue skies, so go figure. Whiteouts are a good reason snowmobile clubs stake open areas to mark the trail. We wouldn't have found our way otherwise!

Speaking of riding blind, we suddenly ran into an ice fog storm in Saskatchewan. This whiteout totally concealed the trail ahead, as if we'd entered a frozen steam bath. But glancing up, I caught a glimpse of light. We discovered that we could get our bearings by standing on our sled seats, raising our heads above the ground fog. Hard to steer standing, but by poking our noggins up periodically we were able to navigate out of that icy shroud.

I've also been snow bound for two days in a closed Gaspésie town surrounded by impassable trails. And I won't forget the Great Ice Storm of '98, when we looked outside one morning of our ride to see the entire world transformed by a thick, frozen coating. Slip-sliding to our sleds, we were shocked to find them encased in over half an inch of solid ice! Breaking that rock-hard covering off required brute force – our first taste of what lay ahead. When the storm ended, the trails were treacherous skating rinks. Without studs and ice scratchers, we couldn't have returned to the trucks.

Even so, a massive power outage extended across much of Quebec and into Ontario. Roads were eerily empty of traffic. Highway ramps closed. Stranded vehicles and impassible snow banks everywhere. Hydro towers entombed in ice or collapsed by its crushing weight. All services closed, including gas pumps. But filling our tow vehicles from our sleds tanks and spare fuel caddies, we drove the 401 home on fumes, with yet another remarkable storm story to tell!

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Another sled buried, but still smiling!



Deep fresh snow makes for slow trail riding



Trying to navigate through a whiteout