

Forest Focus

The Bureau of Forestry Newsletter
Winter 2024

Investing in Winter Recreation in State Forests

With the changing of seasons come new opportunities to explore and appreciate Pennsylvania's state forests. When cold weather hits, some may retreat to the warmth of a woodstove while others long for wintertime and the arrival of snow and ice. The beauty of each season is unique and the experience of gazing upon a towering, frozen waterfall or hearing the still of the forest and sounds of friendly chickadees can bring a recharged spirit. For those seeking to experience the beauty of this season, there are numerous activities available throughout our forests, ranging from the most relaxing to adventurous and unique.

Hiking and snowshoeing are common along many traditional footpaths and remote areas, while the challenge and adventure of cross-country skiing is available throughout the state forest system with several locations being truly exceptional destinations. Snowmobiling is a common activity that allows visitors to easily access interior portions of the forest that are otherwise difficult to reach in winter. Riders can travel long distances and often visit numerous businesses and points of interest. A few of the unique pursuits include dog sledding and ice climbing. Winter is also the height of many hunting seasons.

Providing access and maintaining a quality opportunity takes investment, time, and



Photo 1 State forest visitors capitalize on prime winter conditions and enjoy numerous pursuits.



Photo 2 Dedicated staff prepare and maintain many trails and access areas. There are 32 groomers available through 13 districts.

resources. Bureau of Forestry staff spend many hours preparing snowmobile and ski trails for riding even before winter hits, including cutting blowdown, fixing wet areas, and then actual grooming when the snow finally arrives. Numerous parking areas are promptly plowed immediately by dedicated staff and those at district offices are ready and eager to help visitors plan for a trip and inform of current conditions.

There are over 1,770 miles of joint-use roads and 885 miles of snowmobile trails. Over 4,100 miles of non-motorized trails are also suitable for cross-country skiing for varying skill levels. Staff and volunteers work tirelessly to ensure an enjoyable and memorable experience!

Additionally, the bureau and department provide written and digital resources to illustrate opportunities and trails as well as educate the public on etiquette and outdoor ethics. Current snowmobile conditions can be found on the [DCNR website](#) and general information on winter activities can be found on the [What to Do](#) page or each state forest's [individual webpage](#). Some forests also have Facebook pages which are updated with current conditions and ideas for visits. For more information, staff are also just a phone call or email away.

Public contact is another important investment in wintertime recreation. Staff routinely patrol snowmobile trails to ensure safety of visitors and provide opportunities for interaction and education.



Photo 3 PACCSA sets ski tracks and grooms trails in the Forbes State Forest

With many user groups enjoying the short window of prime snow conditions, proper etiquette is essential. To educate visitors on how to respect each other, several districts have developed materials for education, including [Forbes](#) and [Pinchot](#) State Forests. To deconflict activities, staff have also undertaken planning exercises and laid out optimized trail routes for different types of users providing for the best experience with minimal conflict. This can take into consideration public feedback, trail conditions, remoteness, connectivity, etc. and tools utilized range from GIS to in the field assessments.

The investment of time while building relationships with volunteers and stakeholders and helping lead projects is noteworthy. The PA Cross Country Ski Association (PACCSA) volunteers to groom ski trail in Forbes State Forest and participates in organized workdays. There is a warming hut centrally located where the public can visit and rest. The Laurel Summit Nordic Ski Patrol is housed here who volunteer to ensure safety of visitors. The forest district provides firewood for the burner in the hut and helps maintain their snowmobile.



Photo 4 Investments in winter recreation can occur year-round. Here, Forbes worked with volunteers to re-stain their warming hut.

The Tiadaghton State Forest also has an extensive and popular cross-country ski trail system. Substantial work needs to be done in a short period each autumn before seasonal staff is laid off. Every year, in October, maintenance staff work with the recreation forester and technicians to prepare trails for winter. Other work is suspended for two days each week until the trails are completed. Each trail is cleared to remove down trees and branches. Smaller branches are removed from the trail corridor. In addition to saw work, the forester usual pre-determines sections of trail that need additional work such as brushing and limbing. Thick mountain laurel, young birch, and beech grow quickly and encroach the trail. It is not unusual for several people to be cutting brush to widen trails and to expose trail blazes obscured by vegetation. Once the saw work has been completed, DR mowers are used to mow through the laurel, huckleberry, blueberry, dense fern,

and grasses that would make skiing more difficult. When needed, blazes may be refreshed or added follow the other work.

Once snow has fallen, staff prepare for grooming. First, parking lots must be plowed. After plowing, the maintenance division alternates grooming the Pine Creek Rail Trail and other ski trails. With its easy grade, the PCRT provides an excellent place to access quickly and to learn how to ski.

Most trails are groomed with a work sled that pulls a trailer that both compacts snow and sets parallel ski tracks, which are set on both the PCRT and many miles of other ski trails. The recreation forester typically skis areas that cannot be groomed by snowmobile. These areas typically are more sensitive or have slopes unfit for a snowmobile pulling a trailer. While skiing at work as part of the job may sound like fun, it's often more work than play. PPE, a chainsaw, and extra fuel are carried in a pack. For both the snowmobile operator and the skier setting track, the outing includes cutting open the trail again. Oftentimes numerous fallen trees and large branches are encountered frozen under the snow. Laurel and seedlings will often bend over the trail and must be trimmed back.

With environmental educators now providing public programs in some districts, there are opportunities to reach people with forms of recreation they may not have tried or educate them on things like winter tree ID. Susquehannock State Forest even has loaner skis available.

Of course, it is noted by many that winters aren't what they used to be in some areas of the state, and snowfall is often less. With temperatures expected to continue to rise the frequency that snow-reliant activities occur could decrease. Land managers will continue to integrate this consideration into trail and recreation planning and ensure appropriate return on investments. Sustainable trails and recreation infrastructure can accommodate use year-round. Regardless of snowfall, there are ample opportunities to explore Pennsylvania's state forests during the winter months.

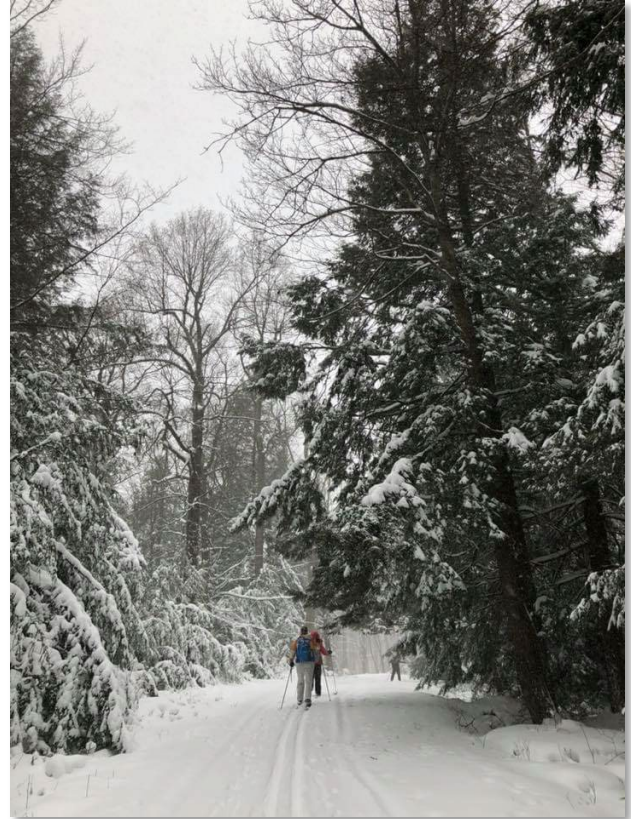


Photo 5 Spending time outdoors in winter can provide a new perspective on forests and many health benefits. Investments by staff and volunteers are needed to make it happen.