

THE HOODOO BLUES

REVELERS KEEP LAW ENFORCEMENT BUSY AT ARCTIC MAN



Alaska Wildlife Troopers Brent Johnson, left, and Mike Potter patrol the streets at Arctic Man.

ARTICLES AND PHOTOS
BY BETH IPSEN, PIO

Once a year, as the days get longer in Interior, roughly 10,000 people converge on the Hoodoo Mountains for one last bash of the snowmachining season. Most people are there to do two things – snowmachine and party. It’s like Mardi Gras with snow.

It’s up to a handful of Alaska law enforcement officers to keep the peace and ensure everyone’s safety amidst the festivities.

During the day, snowmachiners of all ages hit

the mountains in search of good snow and fun. The Arctic Man Ski and Sno-Go Classic attracts extreme snowmachine enthusiasts who like to test their skills. The event was built up around races that have been coined “the ultimate adrenaline rush.” Skiers and snowboarders race down a 1,700 foot mountain and hook up with their snowmachiners. The sleds tow their racing partner up the second summit and launch them down the other side, sometimes reaching 85 mph before the skiers and snowboarders finish the 5-1/2 mile course. In years since, the event added snowcross, freestyle jumps and snowmachine drag races.

Then there are those who flock to the event not necessarily to hit the snow, but to reconnect with old friends and to party.

It’s all enough to keep officers from Alaska State Troopers, Alaska Wildlife Troopers, Wasilla and Palmer Police Departments busy. Not only did troopers patrol the bar and campsites during the night, but a few hopped on sleds during the day to patrol the mountains, sometimes to help a snowmachiner in distress. Others, to include the two city police officers, patrolled roads leading to and from the parking pad entrance as peripheral camps dot pullouts along the Richardson Highway for miles in the days during the enforcement effort on Wednesday, April 8 through



Alaska State Trooper Lt. Dane Gilmore, E Detachment’s deputy commander based in Soldotna, hands out junior trooper badges to a boy and girl who were taking a break from a sunny day of snowmachining at Arctic Man.



Alaska Wildlife Trooper Brent Johnson shows a group of people drinking at a camp the reading from a portable breath test one of the girls took to explain how little alcohol consumption it takes to reach a 0.08 alcohol level.

Sunday, April 12.

They aren't there to keep people from having a good time, but are there year after year to make sure people are safe while they're having a good time. Many times, a trooper stopped to pose for a photo with a reveler or chat with a friend they haven't seen in a while. Later, the trooper needed to check on a drunk person barely able to walk. In some rare cases, when there was an immediate concern for someone's safety, troopers gave a reveler a ride back to their camp to sleep the good times off.

"We've dealt with probably about a dozen people who don't know their names," Alaska State Trooper Lt. Dane Gilmore said about some partiers high level of inebriation. But not everyone was there partying. Earlier that day, Gilmore handed out a couple of junior trooper badges to a brother and sister as they took a break from snowmachining with their father on a sunny and warm Friday.

That night, after the races finished and people migrated in from the mountains, the camp came alive. Troopers responded to a report that a girl fell down at the bar, possibly bumping her head on the wooden floor. Alaska Wildlife Troopers Mike Potter and Brent Johnson helped a medic carry the young woman, who was barely conscious due to the large amount of alcohol she drank. The woman got sick on Johnson during the short trip to the nearby medic hut.

"This is why I deal with four legged critters," Johnson said while wiping it off his jacket sleeve.

But there was Johnson, helping out with efforts to keep those who attend Arctic Man safe. Johnson, who calls the Tok post home, has worked at Arctic Man for the past five years. For him, it's an opportunity to see old friends, both troopers and civilians, and to freshen up patrol skills that sometimes get lost among his regular wildlife enforcement work.

"I tell people all the time that this is one of the primary reasons I love the job so much," he said. "There is always variety, unique and challenging working environments."

Arctic Man fits the description. The event camp site sits in a valley surrounded by mountain peaks. A road leads off the Richardson Highway just north of Paxson at mile 197 to the parking pad where rows upon rows of RVs make up mini-camps where people gather, some of them to party into the morning hours. The parking pad crawls with not only snowmachines, but four wheelers that many use as the source of transportation around the parking pad.

Beyond the parking pad is the expansive Alaska Mountain Range. Most of the snowmachiners stick to the Hoodoos, the mountain pillars that climbs to 4,528 feet above sea level and serve as the backdrop to the event. A few others venture out beyond.

It is here where the talents of Howie Peterson, an Alaska State Trooper based out of Girdwood, come into play. Like many at Arctic Man, Peterson is an accomplished snowmachiner. His skills are often tested on numerous search and rescue operations in the Turnagain Pass area each winter. On Saturday, April 10, Peterson was at the nexus of two search



Alaska State Trooper Howie Peterson tows a litter loaded with an injured snowmachiner and a medic.



From the left, Alaska Wildlife Trooper Brent Johnson and Alaska State Trooper Sgt. Rodney Johnson wait as Pilot Mel Nading lands Helo 1 atop a hill to pick up an injured snowmachiner. Meanwhile, PSG Films Producer Josh Becker, films the landing for a documentary on troopers to be aired on National Geographic at a later date.

and rescue operations because medical personnel staged at the camp had difficulties reaching two injured snowmachiners. In the first, Peterson needed to hook the litter cart with skis up to his state-owned 700 Polaris RMK and tow it up the mountain after medics became stranded part way up. He then towed the cart loaded with the patient and a medic, down the windy path along a slope, on a snowcross course in between races and then over a bumpy section at the end of the trail. The man, who had two broken ankles, a broken leg and lower back pain, was loaded onto the ambulance bound for Fairbanks. Even before the snowmachiner was out of the litter, a call went out regarding another injured snowmachiner. Peterson and Johnson zoomed the three miles out to the second snowmachiner who was suffering from a possible broken back. This patient was worse off and quit breathing twice before medics stabilized his condition. After trying different airborne medical evacuation companies, the Department of Public Safety's invaluable A-Star helicopter and pilot Mel Nading were called out to pick up the injured snowmachiner from the top of a hill. The journey from Anchorage to the pick up site took roughly two hours. Nading then flew the patient to the Glennallen airstrip where a fixed wing aircraft was waiting to whisk the patient to Anchorage.

A few hours later, Peterson was off his sled and

on foot, patrolling different campsites, checking birthdates on identification cards to ensure no one underage was drinking and potentially putting themselves in harms way.

The night before, troopers found a 19-year-old passed out in a snow bank, sleeping out in 20 degree weather. Sitting in the AST command center while a



Alaska State Trooper Howie Peterson checks the birthday of a minor he spotted holding a beer while watching the snow-machine drag races. The young man gave Peterson his name, but the wrong date of birth according to the check in records. Peterson had a lengthily talk with the man and his father before letting him go with a stern warning.

trooper filled out paperwork to cite the young man for minor consuming alcohol, the young man thanked the troopers who found him.

“I really appreciate this,” he said with slurred speech. His clothes were soaked; and he was just starting to warm up.

Lt. Lonny Piscoya, deputy commander for D Detachment based in Fairbanks and the incident commander at Arctic Man, told him it was okay.

“We just saved your life,” Piscoya told him.

Piscoya was in charge of organizing the Department of Public Safety’s enforcement efforts for the first time.

This year, the enterprise included seven troopers concentrating on patrolling the festivities. In addition, six troopers and two police officers from Wasilla and Palmer with the newly formed Alaska Bureau of Highway Patrol (BHP) were on the road trying to curb the speeding and aggressive driving. The entire effort not only nabbed drunk drivers, but five minors consuming alcohol, two minors operating a vehicle after consuming alcohol, two probation violation arrests and garnered three prisoner transports to jail in Glennallen. The BHP kept busy because many people



Jonnathan Stroebele, an Alaska State Trooper out of Nome, unlocks the handcuffs on a suspected drunken driver after the suspect’s mother posted his bail.

ignored the 55 mph signs posted on the Richardson Highway leading to the site of snowmachining mecca. They wrote more than 300 traffic citations.

The operation also included the AST Command Post RV equipped with a radio that, coupled with a satellite phone, was the only communication with the world outside the remote camp for law enforcement. Troopers relied heavily upon two dispatchers in Tok – Margie Carlson and Diane Kendall – who gallantly handled all the radio traffic for the group working Arctic Man. They each worked 12-hour shifts for the days troopers were at Arctic Man, doing a variety of tasks for the working uniforms.

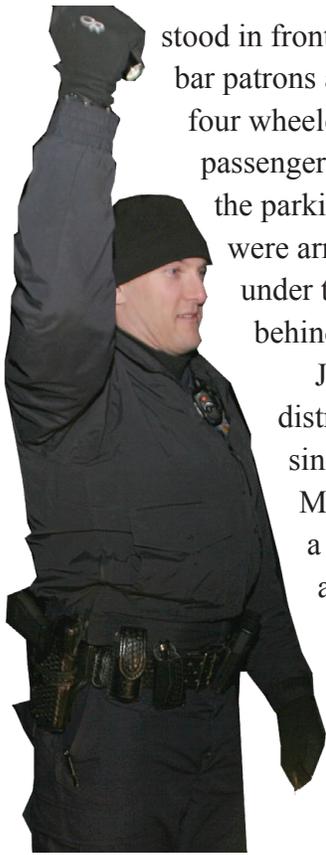
A Datamaster, which measures the amount of alcohol in a person’s system from a breath sample, was set up in the front room of the RV. The Datamaster’s measurement is what is used in DUI court cases. There were power outlets for laptop computers where troopers wrote reports. The bed nooks and bathroom were full of equipment such as avalanche beacons, shovels and probes.

But the main purpose of law enforcement presence at Arctic Man was not to arrest people, but rather to serve as a deterrent for bad or risky behavior.

At night, some of the BHP migrated into the camp to help with keeping an eye out for motorists under the influence, whether they were moving between camps on four wheelers or trucks, or stumbling out of the bar only to hop on a snowmachine. Troopers sometimes



Alaska Wildlife Trooper Brent Johnson, left, and Alaska State Trooper Howie Peterson stop to do a foot patrol through the crowd at the race finish line.



Alaska Wildlife Trooper Mike Potter checks on a couple of people riding on four wheeler to ensure they were riding it safely.

legal questions.

“It helps to have a decision up front,” Bangerter said. “Not that they can’t figure it out themselves, but Arctic Man presents unique issues because it takes place in a remote area and nearly all vehicle-related crimes occur on snowmachines and four wheelers.”

Bangerter brought his state statute book to the Troopers’ command center for research. All cases generated at the camp will be settled at court in Glennallen, Bangerter’s jurisdiction for the 3rd

stood in front of the tented bar and steered bar patrons away from snowmachines and four wheelers parked outside and onto a passenger bus that made the rounds of the parking pad. Nonetheless, 11 people were arrested and charged with driving under the influence, and most of them behind handlebars and not a wheel.

Jarom Bangerter, an assistant district attorney out of Palmer, said since the bus appeared at Arctic Man two years ago to give people a lift from the bar tent to other areas of the pad, Troopers have seen a significant decrease in DUI cases. This year’s number of 11 was an increase of 10 from last year, but Troopers attribute last year’s lower numbers on the bad weather that kept people indoors.

Bangerter has attended Arctic Man for four years, with the last two for work. He’s there mainly to answer Troopers’

Judicial District out of Palmer. By being at Arctic Man, he’s able to take a look at the case from the start and can provide direction before it reaches his desk later.

“It is nice to be able to confer directly with the Trooper,” he said. “It’s fun for me to be there, see what’s going on and just get to know the Troopers a little better. I would say I am a very small part of the overall Arctic Man enforcement presence, but I look forward to it every year to get some fresh air out of the office and help the Troopers.”

By Saturday night, all the organized races were done and the bar and camp were hopping for the last night of partying before many made the trip back home.

Johnson and Potter, an Alaska Wildlife Trooper in Galena, were out walking around, visiting with people at the different camps. An occasional fireworks display illuminated their way, but otherwise, they walked in the dark while sounds of revelers reverberated against the starlit sky.

A report came across their radios that some people were causing a commotion at a camp. Potter and Johnson hopped in their patrol truck and wove their way through the parking maze to the area where the report was generated. The pair walked along the ridge of the snow berm, talking to other people mingling about, trying to get a better location for the culprits. Alaska State Trooper Edward Halbert of Delta Junction met them at the camp and after a stern conversation with the men at the middle of the disturbance, Halbert had a few parting words for them as all three Troopers left.

Halbert told them not to ruin someone else’s Arctic Man experience.



Spectators line up to watch the end of the races at the Arctic Man Ski and Sno-Go Classic.

ABHP SETS THE TONE AT ARCTIC MAN

The Richardson Highway near Summit Lake and Paxson is normally a lonely stretch of road during the winter months. However, it changes for a week in April, as people flock to the Arctic Man Ski and Sno-Go Classic situated at Mile 197 of the Interior highway.

The event, which included some 13,000 people and roughly 1,000 RVs from all over the state and even the Lower 48, was the first special event to test the newly formed Alaska Bureau of Highway Patrol. In past Arctic Man events, Alaska State Troopers didn't do a lot of highway enforcement, but kept the focus mostly on activities inside the parking pad and in the mountains surrounding the races. This year, the bureau concentrated its efforts on the highway in the area about 15 miles north and south of the entrance to the event.

"The hope that those people were coming and saw that troopers were there and that would hopefully spill over into the event itself," said Alaska State Trooper Lt. Jeff Laughlin, bureau deputy commander.



Sgt. Steve Adams, of the Mat-Su Bureau of Highway Patrol unit, watches traffic stream past the bar as dusk falls on a Saturday night at Arctic Man.

and speeding enforcement, as well as young driver education and collision investigations.

Palmer Police Officer Pete Steen, Wasilla Police Officer Bill Rapson and six Alaska State Troopers made up the bureau's Arctic Man enforcement team this year. At night, when traffic lightened up on the highway and people settled in at the camps that line the parking pad, bureau members moved inside the camp and helped with looking out for impaired drivers on snowmachines and four wheelers. They were also available to take calls if the other troopers had their hands full with other requests for assistance.

Sgt. Rodney Johnson, a member of the bureau's Fairbanks team, came in from patrolling the highway to help with the evacuation of an injured snowmachiner when back-to-back medical evacuations occupied most of Saturday's resources. He stood atop a snowmachine parked on a hill top with radio antenna pointed in the air for better communication with Helo 1 as he helped guide the Alaska State Troopers' rescue helicopter in from Anchorage.

"We couldn't have done it without them," Piscocoya said.



Bureau of Highway Patrol member Alaska State Trooper Matthew Wertanen cites a motorist for speeding along the Richardson Highway near Arctic Man and within the Trans-Alaska Pipeline corridor.

Alaska State Trooper Lt. Lonny Piscocoya, who was in charge of law enforcement efforts at Arctic Man, said that goal was accomplished.

"They set the tone that we are here and our job is public safety," Piscocoya said. "It was highly beneficial."

The bureau was formed in January to make Alaska roads safer. The bureau has two units based out of Fairbanks and Mat-Su with plans for an additional unit in the Kenai Peninsula. These multi-agency units consist of Alaska State Troopers and patrol officers from local police departments that have statewide jurisdiction and will work to reduce fatalities and major injury collision through proactive, sustained and high-visibility enforcement, education and technology. The focus of the bureau is on impaired driving enforcement, aggressive driving



Sgt. Rodney Johnson, middle, holds up the radio to get a better signal while talking to Helo 1 pilot Mel Nading to help guide him for a medical evacuation at Arctic Man. Alaska State Trooper Howie Peterson, left, and Alaska Wildlife Trooper Brent Johnson wait for helicopter to arrive.