

## The Valdez Snowmachine Club Celebrates 20 Years

Whether one rides a snowmachine in the backyard, the backcountry, or on the race track, snowshoe, hike or ski, the Valdez Snowmachine Club has something for you. Riders, racers, spectators and everyone who enjoys the thrill of the outdoors can benefit from an event or program the club has to offer.

The Valdez Snowmachine Club has become part of the fabric of the community, enhancing the quality of life for residents and contributing to the winter tourism market, an important piece of the local economy. In 2010, the club celebrates its 20 year anniversary as one of the oldest clubs in Alaska. The Valdez Mayor's Cup race was actually one of the very first competitive races in the state dating to the early 1970s. The Club also provides education and instruction, and they conduct search and rescue missions. The Snowmachine Club is a partner in the community providing equipment for use on cross country ski trails and makes available the Club's assets, talent and communications equipment to help support other community organizations and events like the Valdez Fish Derbies and high school sporting events.

The club was created two decades ago to provide a safe and controlled environment for competitive snowmachine racing in addition to education of backcountry environments and snowmachine safety. They accomplish their mission through several controlled racing events and an extensive outdoor safety education program.

The club is funded by annual dues collected from their members and registration money from the competitive



events. Outside of expenses, money raised goes directly into funding the Search and Rescue and safety education programs. In addition, the City of Valdez is a huge supporter assisting the club with events and expenses. They also provide in-kind support, allowing the Club to use the groomer to help set up event courses in addition to Emergency Medical Technicians and equipment being on site at events. According to Laura Saxe, Club treasurer, "the City of Valdez is very supportive. The club could not do what it does without their help."

Each year the Club hosts five events; three Sno-X, the Mayor's Cup, and the Mountain Man Hill Climb. The Sno-X races can be considered the snowmachine version of Motor-X motorcycle racing. The participants, starting as young as five years old, ride multiple laps in three heats on a constructed snow track, consisting of tight turns and jumps. These races are broken up into classes based on age, engine size of the snowmachine, ability and skill of the racers.

It is a primary concern of the Club that all races are safe for participants and spectators. While fast and exciting, the Sno-X races are held in a controlled environment where a technical review of the equipment and safety gear for the racer is mandatory. The Club encourages youth participation as they believe that if kids are trained in safety for racing, they will choose safety during every day riding as well.

The Valdez Sno-X is also part of the Alaska State Sno-X Championship Series which is in its 7<sup>th</sup> year. This series is similar to the NASCAR system where competitors travel to different cities, compete, and earn points. At the end of the season, based on those points, a statewide champion is crowned. Valdez has many riders that compete for the statewide championship, with several competitors winning multiple championships and others continuing on to the National level.

The Mayor's Cup race consists of a timed, 200 mile cross country race where riders traverse a variety of ter-



rain including groomed trails, mountains, river beds, forests and water crossings. The fastest time wins this race, with the average speed clocked near 60 mph!

According to Snowmachine Club President, Joe Freitag, this race “ain’t for babies”, a long time slogan of the Cup Race. The pro class racers include the premier cross country racers in Alaska, second only to the Iron Dog in the level of competition. Other classes are a Women’s Class and a Veteran’s Class for experienced riders and a Sport Class for the “ditch bangers” that want to test their mettle on an established course.

The Mountain Man Hill Climb is a large event, with an average of 70 entries. When you include racers, their teams, friends, families, and spectators, this event draws roughly 2,000 people to Thompson Pass each spring. At the Hill Climb, competitors from all over the state and Canada race up the mountain and through course gates at top speeds, racing for the fastest time. Several years ago, this event even became a qualifying event for the National Championship Hill Climb in Jackson Hole, Wyoming.

This event is great for spectators and others looking to enjoy the outdoors for the weekend. Many get out their binoculars and keep track of the racers on their way up the mountain.

Those who are not competing enjoy riding snowmachines, sledding, snowboarding, and snowshoeing, or just shaking off the winter at this Thompson Pass staple. One attendee recently said, “the Valdez Hill Climb is the best weekend of the year. Awesome people, great event, awesome weekend!”

In addition to competitive events, the Club has a Search and Rescue team (SAR) and an outdoor safety education program. Mike Buck is the Search and Rescue Coordinator for the Club. He said that education remains a focus because, “the more people know about general safety in the backcountry, the fewer search and rescue missions will be needed.”

Approximately 40 SAR volunteers are trained to respond to search and rescue missions throughout the region. The SAR team is on a 24-hour on-call basis, responds with the City of Valdez Search and Rescue Department, and is recognized by the Alaska State Troopers as an asset when needed. The Club maintains an inventory of specialized rescue equipment including a self contained mobile command station with satellite communications capability. The team has responded to calls as far as Eureka, over 150 miles away. The SAR volunteers train throughout the year on avalanche awareness, beacon and crevasse training, glacier travel, patient packaging, specialized equipment and communications training. Hands on training and experience is necessary to ensure responders



**Top Left: Devin Freitag races in the Valdez Sno-X in March, 2009. Bottom Left: Racers at the start of the 2009 Mayor's Cup. Photos by Patti Balzarini/freestylefoto. Above: A victim of a 65 ft. crevasse fall on Worthington Glacier is being raised out by Snowmachine Club Search and Rescue team member, Tony Mann. Also on the scene were Mark Kelly and Sean Wisner, SAR team leader. Photo by Mark Kelly.**

are prepared to handle difficult situations in the backcountry.

The Search and Rescue team is always looking for more volunteers and wants you to know that one doesn't have to perform a search and rescue mission to be helpful in making a mission successful. The needs are varied and depend on the situation, but opportunities exist for people to help coordinate logistics, make calls and answer phones, run for supplies, and keep track of volunteer location, as well as many other things. They encourage you to consider participating and will provide the training you need.

The Valdez Snowmachine Club is focused also to educate people experiencing the great Alaskan outdoors. The Club offers avalanche awareness classes, glacial travel training, safe rider courses, and general backcountry safety classes throughout the winter season at no cost to attendees. When asked who should attend these classes, Mike Buck answered simply, “anyone and everyone who likes the outdoors should take these classes.”

Glacial travel classes will teach riders how to ride safely on glaciers including how to recognize and avoid crevasses. Avalanche awareness classes teach people how to understand mountain conditions, identify high hazard days and avoid them, and what to do if caught in an avalanche. General backcountry safety provides an overview of the backcountry, from equipment to do's and don'ts.

The Club wants people to know that they have something for everyone, whether you are a person who likes to compete, spend time in the backcountry, or just ride snowmachines around your yard. You can become a member of the Club, volunteer to help with an event, attend or lead an educational class or training, participate in one of their events, or simply enjoy as a spectator.

The 2010 schedule of events and educational courses will soon be posted at [www.valdezsnow.com](http://www.valdezsnow.com).