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It's easy to get a snowmachine stuck; getting it out is another matter

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FAIRBANKS — Every winter, usually sooner rather than later, Jim Masek knows he will get his snowmachine stuck in overflow.

It's a fact of life for Masek, who has been trapping on the Minto Flats, east of Fairbanks, for more than 30 years.

"I have an awful lot of swamp that doesn't freeze up," Masek said of the country he traps. "It looks frozen but it's not."

Some winters, Masek said he puts as many as 10,000 miles on a snowmachine, which is more than most people in Fairbanks put on a car over the course of a year.

"Going that many miles, you're going to run into trouble," he said.

Trouble for Masek usually means overflow, water on top of ice that is often times hidden underneath snow. It's the arctic version of quicksand.

"It can be completely hidden and you don't even see it," Masek told a group of about 100 trappers last week during a presentation at the Alaska Trappers Association monthly meeting at the Mushers Hall. "The next thing you know you're in this big quagmire of slush and snow one to two feet deep. You're stuck. You've got a real problem at that point."

Just how big that problem is depends on a lot of things — how many people and machines you're traveling with, what kind of equipment you're carrying, what the temperature is, how far from civilization you are.

Twice, Masek has had to walk more than 20 miles to reach his cabin after getting stuck in overflow.

"Long walks are no fun," he said. "If your machine has gone down and you're dry, you're in pretty good shape; you can make that walk home. If you're wet from head to toe, you're not going to make it."

Hard to avoid

The best way to deal with overflow is to avoid it, but that's easier said than done in Alaska, where overflow is as common in the winter as potholes are on roads during breakup.

"Sometimes it shows up where you don't ever expect it or where you've never seen it before," said Healy trapper Coke Wallace, who also has plenty of experience with overflow.

But there are some simple precautions to avoid getting stuck in slush and ice. For example, if you're traveling down a river or creek in severely cold temperatures and you see fog or steam rising from the creek or river bed, it's a good idea to be suspicious, Masek said.

"That's telling you there's moisture being generated from somewhere," he said.

It's also wise to be automatically suspicious before heading onto a lake or stream covered with a heavy load of fresh snow. The snow pushes the ice down and forces water up on top of the ice, which remains hidden by the snow.

The best thing to do, Masek said, is to investigate before venturing into a questionable area by stopping and walking in front of your machine to ensure there isn't overflow or thin ice lurking ahead.

"That little walk can save you a lot of headaches and back injuries," said Masek, who wrecked his back long ago trying to yank snowmachines out of overflow and deep snow.

The first few times he travels around his trapline in the winter, Masek doesn't tow a sled behind him.

"The first time or two around my line, I go through the ice probably 20 or 30 times," Masek said. "I'll break the trail, let it freeze overnight and then I'll think about coming back with that sled."

Air bubbles or pockets are another danger. Sometimes a river freezes and the water drops, creating an empty air pocket under the ice that can be several feet deep. If you hear a hollow, drumming sound as you drive over ice, don't stop to check it out, Masek said.

"Don't slow down; you want to get off as quick as you can."

If you see a hump in the ice, it's also wise to be suspicious.

"I won't drive over a hump," Masek said. "I'll go around."

If you do find yourself in overflow and you're still moving, the best thing to do is keep going, Wallace said.

"When in doubt, power out," he said, using a common snowmachining motto.

"Momentum is your friend. Stay on it and hope you get through it."

Getting unstuck

Once a machine is stuck in overflow or goes through the ice, there are all sorts of techniques for getting it out, from yanking it out by hand to using come-alongs and rope-alongs to pull it out, to building ramps to pull it up, to erecting a tripod to pull it out by cutting holes in the ice, planting poles in the holes and letting them freeze.

Both Masek and Wallace carry similar gear to extract machines from overflow, including a cable come-along, a rope-along, at least 200 feet of 5/8-inch, nylon, double-braided rope, an aluminum scoop shovel, ice screws that can screw into the ice and be used as deadmen in the absence of trees, an ax and carabiners.

All the gear needs to be readily accessible, either in a box on the back of the machine or under the cowling. Masek coils at least 100 feet of rope around his handlebars so he can grab it before the machine goes down. It's also not a bad idea to attach a pair of carabiners to the skis. A rope with a hook on the end isn't a bad idea, either, as it can be used to hook onto the machine.

"I don't want to have to reach down in the water to tie skis off," Masek said.

You can never have too much rope, both trappers said.

"It always seems like you're a little bit out of reach of what you need to get to," Masek said.

"A lot of times there isn't a willow bush within 100 feet of you," Wallace added. "You're only limited by the amount of rope you're willing to untangle."

In cases where there aren't any trees around to pull from, ice screws that mountain climbers use for anchors come in particularly handy. Wallace said he carries three ice screws — a pair of 8-inchers and a 6-incher — and has used all three of them at times.

"Ice screws are huge," Wallace said. "They go in quick and they're easy to use. I've pulled a machine out using just one of them before."

The shovel can be used to dig a machine out or to help build a snow ramp to pull or drive a machine out.

"If you keep packing the snow and adding to it, you can build a pretty hard surface and it doesn't take too long to get it hard," Masek said.

Birch, spruce or willow trees can also be cut and used to build ramps under the skis of a machine.

"If you're down below a slab of ice you need something to bring the ski tips up," Masek said. "Your back isn't a good thing to do that with."

Masek advises using more than one pole under each ski.

"Take a couple of poles and wire them side by side and it creates a little V pole that the ski will stay on," he said. "If you use just one pole there's a good chance it will slide off."

Whatever you do, you should do it as quickly as possible. It doesn't take long for a machine to freeze into the ice, Wallace said.

"You don't want to leave them in overflow," he said. "They'll freeze in hard as a rock. Then you have to deal with chainsawing ice and beating them out with an ax."

It's also important to pack plenty of patience.

"It's going to take you some time," Masek said. "You might spend two or three hours getting a machine out to only go a couple hundred yards."

Likewise, it's always a good idea not to travel alone. Having a buddy or two along can make all the difference in the world.

"What might take you two or three hours to get out of might take two or three guys 20 or 30 minutes to get out," Masek said.

Wet engine

The worst-case scenario is when a machine goes into the water and sinks.

"If it's deep enough so the water is up to the cowling and the belts get wet, you're not going to get the machine out by driving it unless you raise it up and dry it out," Masek said.

The situation is even worse if the machine is running when it goes in the water because it will suck water into the engine.

"If you know you're going down, hit the kill switch and abandon it," Masek said.

If a machine does suck water into the engine, you have to dry it out before starting it, he said.

"Don't try to immediately start it; you're likely to hydro lock the cylinders and break parts inside," Masek said. "Pull the (spark) plugs and pump it and pump it and pump it.

You want to get as much water out of it as you possibly can."

You'll also have to drain the carburetor, he said.

"Then put the plugs in and start pumping it," Masek said.

Once you get it started, bring it up to full temperature so it will dry out internally, he said. Don't let a machine's engine cool down until you're sure it's completely dry. If ice forms because there's still moisture in there, it could wreck the engine the next time you start it, Masek said.

Getting a four-stroke machine dried out is virtually impossible and requires multiple oil changes, Masek said.

"They've got all kinds of nooks and crannies water goes in and stays," he said.

Likewise, drying a foam seat that has been soaked is next to impossible, Masek said. The best thing to do is take the plastic off and hang it in a warm shop for several days.
