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ATVs suspected of damaging alpine tundra north of Silverton

Drivers accused of going off-road, leaving tire marks in wetlands

By Jonathan Romeo Staff reporter

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The San Juan County Sheriff's Office has identified six ATV'ers suspected of illegally going off road and damaging alpine tundra north of Silverton.

Courtesy of Wesley Berg



The San Juan County Sheriff's Office is investigating an incident from Sunday in which two all-terrain vehicles went off-road illegally and damaged pristine alpine tundra north of Silverton.

Two ATVs were spotted about 1:30 p.m. driving across the alpine wetlands in Velocity Basin below Storm Peak. The area is adjacent to Silverton Ski Mountain, and many ski runs go through the basin.

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Silverton resident Wesley Berg was in the area to go hiking with his wife and a friend when he spotted the ATVs. Berg immediately took out his camera and took photos of the vehicles.

"They came around to us ... and I said, 'Are you aware driving off-road like this is illegal?'" Berg said. "He said they didn't know the road ended, which it's pretty obvious. I didn't buy that excuse."

Angered about the damage the ATVs caused to the alpine tundra, Berg posted the photos to Facebook hoping to identify the driver and occupants of the vehicles.

Word of the illegal ride caught the attention of the San Juan County Sheriff's Office, which immediately began an investigation, Sheriff Bruce Conrad said.

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“Anywhere that’s not obviously a marked road is illegal, and we’re very determined to catch people doing such,” he said. “When in doubt, don’t go there.”

Deputies went up to the area and took drone footage of the damage, Conrad said.

“They were literally sliding sideways over the marsh, through heavy wetland into rock, over snow, leaving tire tracks all over up there,” Conrad said. “That damage will last a long time.”

Through social media, Conrad said authorities were able to identify the people involved in the incident. He said six people from Colorado Springs were involved. The group had rented the ATVs from a company in Ouray.

“It was our Facebook community, really, that got on it quickly,” Conrad said. “And, the OHV (off-highway vehicles) community really stepped up to the plate to police themselves and make sure these folks were brought to justice.”

Conrad said the people have yet to be ticketed. Penalties for the illegal ride can include fines and restitution costs.

With a growing number of ATVerers visiting Silverton, illegal off-road rides that damage mountain terrain are becoming more common. The town of Silverton opened some streets to ATV use in spring 2014, which has drawn more visitors each year.

“It’s getting more and more common every year,” Conrad said. “There’s just more OHVs now. That segment of visitor is growing exponentially, and we have a certain percentage acting poorly.”

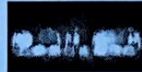
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