

Skiers, make tracks, but not near the rails

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Skiers, snowshoers and snowboarders disembark the ski train at Curry on Saturday, Mar. 12, 2016. Hundreds of participants enjoyed above-freezing temperatures and deep snow. (LOREN HOLMES / Alaska Dispatch News)

The Nordic Skiing Association of Anchorage has been working with the Alaska Railroad to bring Anchorage ski enthusiasts the NSAA Ski Train for more than 40 years. The NSAA Ski Train is a fun-filled, once-a-year chance to explore the former ski resort town of Curry. And, while we certainly want everyone to have a great time, safety is always top of mind for both NSAA and the Alaska Railroad.

Winter always presents an extra set of track safety challenges for the Alaska Railroad. With Thanksgiving and the holiday season creating more leisure time for many families and new winter recreation equipment showing up under Christmas trees around the state, now is the ideal time to talk about winter track safety.

From our experience working with the Alaska Railroad, it puts safety procedures into effect because it truly cares about the well being of Alaskans. The railroad wants to continue moving people and freight through the state year-round, and it wants to do it while keeping its personnel and the public out of harm's way.

Whether you are cross-country skiing near Talkeetna or backcountry skiing in the Chugach Mountains, heed railroad signage and secure necessary permits. It's imperative to the safety of all Alaskans.

Maybe you steer clear of the tracks in summer but think winter is an okay time to use the tracks as a travel route – perhaps it appears to be an easier way to go when skiing or snowshoeing. Think again.

It is incredibly dangerous to travel on the tracks or in the railroad's right of way, and over 500 people are reportedly killed every year in the U.S. trespassing on railroad tracks.

While the railroad's passenger services do decrease in the winter, there are still many freight trains that run up and down the Railbelt year-round and are not on a set schedule. In addition, the railroad has significantly expanded its winter service around the holidays, with more trains running in the middle of the week, so you should always expect a train.

Think about how difficult it is as a skier to come to a complete stop after you've picked up a lot of momentum. Now think about how difficult it would be to stop

if, instead of a 200 pounds at most, you weighed 10,000 tons. Because of their size and weight, trains can't stop quickly to avoid a person or object on the tracks.

In fact, trains often require a full mile to come to a stop; and they're faster and move more quietly than you think, an optical illusion based on the large mass of the train makes it appear to be moving slower than it actually is. It's also more difficult to hear a train coming when it is snowing, as it muffles the sound.

The train's right of way is 100 feet on either side of the tracks because even walking on the shoulder of the tracks is not safe. If you need to cross the tracks, look for a designated crossing area. If you must cross outside of a designated crossing area: stop, look both ways, get across the tracks and immediately get out of the train's right of way.

For over 50 years, NSAA has provided a cross-country skiing community for Alaskans through an extensive trail system. Today, there are thousands of winter enthusiasts who use the trails around Anchorage and beyond for skiing, fat biking, skijoring and other recreational activities.

There are trails – both multiuse and those strictly for skiing – that come near the tracks. We want to continue having fun on these trails with Alaska's winter recreation community for years to come. So, no matter how you utilize the trails, remember to always practice track safety.

For more information about the NSAA, visit www.anchoragenordicski.com.

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The views expressed here are the writer's and are not necessarily endorsed by Alaska Dispatch News, which welcomes a broad range of viewpoints.

