

GUESTS IN THE HOME OF THE WILDLIFE

A Look at your Public Lands by Dwain Abramowski

Opinion and advise (with direction from a local DNR Wildlife Management Official) on the use of game areas and other public lands.

In terms of state lands and mountain biking, there are many choices. Virtually all state forest trails are open to mountain biking. In many of the state parks/recreation areas where there is room and trails available there are both multi-use trails and designated mountain bike trails. There are national forest trails, ski area trails, county and city parks, too that are open to mountain biking.

There is however a group of lands that remain in a gray area when it comes to mountain biking – the state game areas. Five years or so ago when I first got into mountain biking, the multi-use (hunting in the fall, cross-country in the winter) state game area near my house was rarely used in the summer. In fact, come June each year you could not even find many of the trails because they would be covered in overgrowth.

Today, it is a favorite spot for those late evening rides all summer long.

Game areas are managed through the DNR separately from other public lands with the main focus on wildlife management and hunting. With this in mind, other activities such as cross-country skiing, hiking, mountain biking, etc. are secondary concerns of the management of game areas in Michigan.

In consideration of this, it is important that we (mountain bikers) understand the game area management goals and take the steps necessary to co-exist in this framework.

First and foremost, we should take it upon ourselves to assist management of these game areas in achieving their main objective of wildlife management and hunting.

Here's a list of what you can do to help:

1. When it is possible, choose other areas to mountain bike. And, remember some games areas have not designated hiking, cross-country skiing, mountain biking, [or horseback riding], so activities others than hunting may be severely limited.
2. During hunting season (Check the DNR web site for details), choose other areas to ride. At the very least wear appropriate hunters orange clothing.
3. Buy a hunting license and wear it while in the game areas to show your willingness to contribute to its management and preservation. If a license is not possible, contact the management of the game area and express your willingness to contribute time and/or money to game area management projects.
4. Educate yourself and other riders on the land management directives for the lands that you ride. This does not necessarily limit your involvement in game areas.
5. Recognize your impact on the lands you ride and take appropriate measures to mitigate the impact. Meaning, don't ride when it is muddy, cut new trails in the woods, and in short follow the IMBA/MMBA rider responsibility code.
6. Keep eyes and ears open to what is going on in the game areas (as well as other public lands.) At the local game area where I have the privilege of riding, I have run across individuals who dump trash, discard appliances, junk cars (yes, cars!) and other such garbage. Report these offences to your local land management officials.
7. Remember that a use permit is required for all maintenance activities in game areas. It is advisable that you develop a working relationship with land management officials before you walk in out of the blue and say, "I need a permit" to do this or that.

Lastly, remember that we are guests in game areas and as such we need to make sure we are invited back by being sensitive to the needs of the land managers who administrate over the lands and those who the lands are purchased for, the hunters.