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Snowmobilers damage restoration work at Pine River Nature Reserve]

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The Bruce Trail Conservancy is reminding community members in Dufferin County to keep all vehicles, including snowmobiles, out of the Pine River Nature Reserve following recent damage to the habitat.

The conservancy told the Free Press that on Feb. 12 and Feb. 13, several snowmobilers trespassed on the reserve and caused serious damage to their restoration project.

?The last few days, several snowmobiles have been trespassing on the property and purposely evading our fencing and barriers, and have caused serious damage to the restoration work that we've been doing,? said Michael McDonald, CEO of the Bruce Trail Conservancy. ?It's going to be setting us back tens of thousands of dollars, but more that that, it's also hundreds of hours that local volunteers have put in to restoring this property. We're really sad to see it completely undone.?

The Pine River Nature Reserve is a 192-acre area of the Bruce Trail Optimum Route and is one of two natural areas protected in the Dufferin Hi-Land section. The local nature reserve is home to wetlands inhabited by bullfrogs, newts, salamanders, and snapping turtles, and forests with trees such as the eastern hemlock, American beech, and white cedar.

The Bruce Trail Conservancy acquired the property in 2021 with support from the local community and began the restoration project with the removal of invasive species and garbage.

?There's something really special about this nature reserve where the entire local community has stepped up to help us with restoration. People care about this nature reserve and I know the volunteers are heartbroken to see their hard work undone,? said McDonald.

The damage to the reserve occurred in an area known as the pinnacle. Most recently, the conservancy brought in soil to work on addressing erosion caused by the previous use of vehicles on the property. The entire area was also seeded with native wildflowers.

?And once that soil was brought in, we seeded the entire area with native wildflower seeds. And that's the area that was specifically and purposefully torn up by the recent trespassing,? said McDonald.

She added, ?This is criminal activity, and it's going to set back our restoration plans.

?We can absolutely see the damage now, but the full effect of how much was done will be a lot more apparent in the spring once our ecologists get on site and do a full inventory,? McDonald noted.

This is not the first time the Pine River Nature Reserve has been the subject of trespassing and damage. In May of 2021, the reserve saw trespassers destroy fencing, blockades and signage and damage the already sensitive habitat.

McDonald said they've been in contact with Dufferin OPP and intend to press charges when the individuals are found.

?The purposeful trespassing, destruction of sensitive ecosystems is absolutely unacceptable and we're asking for the community support to stop this from happening and for people to step up and help protect nature,? said McDonald. ?The activities that we're witnessing here on this property are absolutely criminal.?

No vehicles of any type are permitted on the Pine River Nature Reserve, but there are several kilometers of the Bruce Trail available for people to explore.