

The first commercially produced all-terrain vehicle (ATV) that gained broad popularity was the Honda ATC. This three-wheeled machine was first sold in 1970 and sparked a revolution in travelling off road. In the 54 years since the introduction of this machine, ATVs have exploded in popularity, with some sources placing the annual US sales of ATVs at around 620,000 units. ATVs are a great tool for traversing the outdoors, but like any tool, they must be used safely and legally to avoid consequences.

To help explore the safe and legal operation of ATVs, I've enlisted the help of our local subject matter expert on ATV regulations and safety, Benton County Patrol Sergeant Jay Dingmann. Our primary goal in any education and enforcement efforts are to ensure people operate ATVs safely. According to Sgt. Dingmann, "for the last few years in MN the top three causes of ATV injuries have been speed, impaired riders, and careless operation. So, the best advice I can give someone is to slow down, ride sober, and ride responsibly."

ATV regulations exist to help ensure the safety of riders, the safety of the public, and the protection of public or private property. Before operating an ATV, it is important to understand the regulations for your ATV. Minnesota law divides ATVs into Class 1 and Class 2 ATVs, with different rules for each. Sgt. Dingmann outlined the distinction between these two classes as follows. "A class one ATV is an ATV with a width of less than 50 inches from outside of the rim to outside of the rim. These are the most common single seater ride-on ATVs. When registered as a public use Class 1 ATV, it may be ridden in the ditch of the road right of way. This type of ATV cannot be operated on the road surface of any county or state road other than to avoid a hazard such as riding over a bridge or avoiding a culvert. Riders are not allowed to operate an ATV in the ditches in an agricultural zone April 1 to August 1 unless the ATV is being used exclusively for agricultural purposes. For Benton County that would be any roadway south of Hwy 95. A Class 2 ATV is most commonly the side-by-side model, and has a width of over 50 inches but less than 65 from outside rim to outside rim. These ATVs are to be operated on the extreme right portion of the roadway NOT in the driving portion of the road. They may not be operated on a state highway, interstate, or in the road ditch unless the ditch is part of a designated class 2 ATV trail."

Rules also regulate who may operate an ATV, what training must be completed prior to operation, and what safety equipment is required. Sgt. Dingmann explains, "any person born after July 1, 1987, must have a valid ATV safety certificate to operate an ATV on any public lands or frozen waters. Anyone age 15 and under may not operate a Class 2 ATV. Helmets and seatbelts (when equipped) are recommended for all, but are required for any ATV operator or passenger under 18 years of age." Youth operating ATVs on public property must be of proper age. According to Sgt. Dingmann under Minnesota regulations, "children ages 10-11 may operate an ATV 110 cc or under on public land or frozen waterways when accompanied by a parent or guardian. Children ages 12-15 may operate a proper fitting Class 1 ATV (hands must properly fit the handlebars and feet must rest on foot peg while sitting upright) on public lands and frozen water with a valid ATV safety certificate. They may also make direct crossings of roadways when accompanied by a licensed adult and may operate in the ditch of a public roadway when accompanied by a parent or legal guardian." Sgt. Dingmann added that for adults, "a valid driver's license is required any time an adult is operating an ATV in a road right of way or crossing a roadway."

The Minnesota DNR publishes a summary of ATV regulations that is available at license agents or online at <https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/regulations/ohv/index.html>. Taking a few moments to become familiar with these regulations and applying some common sense can save you from an expensive

citation. According to Sgt. Dingmann, “the most common types of violations we see in Benton County are operating an ATV in the driving lane of a roadway, failure to display proper ATV registration and careless operation (such as tearing up gravel roads.)”

Finally, Sgt. Dingmann has some good advice for all riders when he says, “ATV safety is a responsibility for everyone that is out riding. Make sure you are following the rules and doing regular maintenance and pre-ride checks of your ATV to keep them in top riding condition. If you have any other questions on where you can and can’t ride, feel free to contact your local sheriff's office or the DNR. You can also check out the DNR website for ATV trail locations and conditions.”

Whether at work or at play, we hope you’ll use these tips to make your time on an ATV a safe experience for everyone. For more crime prevention information and safety information visit the Benton County Sheriff’s Office website at: <https://www.co.benton.mn.us/211/Crime-Prevention>. You can also like and follow us on Facebook and Twitter at @BentonMNSheriff for regular updates and crime prevention messages.