

Horses and dogs take to the trails in Hastings Highlands



A team of huskies guide young mushers through the local Heritage Trail, from their location at Highland Wilderness Tours in Hastings Highlands. Photo by Penny Nichol

By Sarah Vance

While icy conditions and an overall lack of snow have stalled the 2016 snowmobile season, Hastings Highlands dogsledders are out on the trails in force.

It is business as usual near Maynooth, where Highland Wilderness Tours began hosting their popular excursions, from East Lake Road by Whitney, in December.

You will hear the howls of huskies when you step into this rural wonderland, at the outskirts of Algonquin Park, along the southern tip of Northern Ontario.

You will also find an extensive heated barn system and a team of well cared-for horses.

"We have a great core group of horses and we keep them year round. All our dogs and horses are very special to us, and we do our best to make sure they have a good life," said Penny Nichol, who operates the outfitting business with her husband.

"We don't run public trail riding on the weekends in the summer, because that way the horses get two days off every week."

Nichol is a member of the Equestrian Federation of Ontario, and cares for both horses and huskies.

Patrons are just as likely to engage in snow-oriented horseback riding as they are to find themselves behind a dogsled team, at this busy four-seasons Hastings Highlands estate.

"Our winter program is actually bigger than our summer program and that always shocks a lot of people. But our wintery wilderness is a special thing, and people come to see it when they get the chance," said Nichol.

"We do provide a lot of accommodation traffic for our local hotel and B&B partners, as pretty much everyone that comes to do the winter tours is going to stay overnight."

While Highland Wilderness Tours would like to see more local families accessing their facility, they continue to cater to an international clientele of patrons who travel great distances to participate in their programs.

"Our clients typically come from all over the world. We have had people from countries I have never heard of," said Nichol.

"We get them via Toronto and Ottawa. Usually they are there on business for the weekend, and looking for a getaway. But sometimes it's the reverse; they plan a trip specifically to do the wilderness activities, then plan other business around that."

Offering two-hour mushing tours, four season horseback-riding, and ATV treks, Highland Wilderness tours is a diverse and well-established facility. They have invested lots of money to make sure they have the best equipment and have ensured their

branding is consistent throughout.

They have got the same graphics on their fleet of ATV's and are planning to get more from Senge Graphics (or somewhere similar) as they have recently bought 3 new ones due to their popularity. They want people to easily recognize their equipment whether it's an ATV, a horse, or sleds, hence the graphics.

A youth-oriented March Break Camp, which has been offered since 2003, continues to cater to girls who are looking to tap into the best-of-the-best when it comes to rural living.

Young women from across Ontario mark their calendars for this annual residential camp, which allows participants to mush on the dogsled trails during the morning and then warm up in the heated barns, riding the facility's show horses in the afternoon.

This widely sought-after program sees registration spaces filling quickly; participants are encouraged to book soon.

For keeping warm, inner, outer and middle layers of clothing are the best protection during the winter months; synthetic polypropylene is this outfitter's fabric of choice. To learn more about this dynamic Hastings Highlands facility visit their website at www.ridethewilderness.com.