

A photograph showing two all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) crossing a river. The ATV in the foreground is green and is partially submerged in the water, with a person riding it. The ATV in the background is red and is also crossing the river, with a person riding it. The water is splashing around the tires of the vehicles.

All-Terrain Vehicles: Blessing or Curse?

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Many of us own – and even more of us wish we owned – an all-terrain vehicle, commonly called an ATV or four-wheeler. They are fun to ride and can be a great asset while hunting or maintaining property. Occasionally, it is good to be reminded of the responsibilities that must be assumed by all ATV users. ATVs used responsibly can be a blessing to have. Used irresponsibly, they can be a curse to landowners, hunting clubs, and drivers on public roads.

ATVs were first mass produced in the 1970s, but did not become readily seen in the field until the 1980s. Farmers and other landowners found that these vehicles filled a valuable niche between a pickup truck and a farm tractor. Today, ATVs are often used to do a variety of chores such as carrying tanks to spray herbicides along road edges, field borders, fence rows, and other hard-to-get-to places, as well as assisting with patrolling boundary lines, checking or repairing fences, and even checking on the condition of livestock. The list for these useful vehicles is endless for a farmer or landowner.

Hunters also have found these vehicles to be useful in the field. ATVs often provide easy access into hard to reach places by using old logging roads or other trails that are impassable for a pickup truck. Elderly or disabled hunters have greatly benefited from the use of ATVs for this reason. Others have found that they do not need a four-wheel-drive truck with expensive mud grip tires if they have an ATV. Some hunters have also found that they can manage small wildlife openings without the need of an expensive tractor. Many brands of smaller farm implements are now available as attachments for ATVs and can handle such maintenance chores as mowing, disking, or seeding small wildlife openings. Openings can even be located in areas that were previously inaccessible by a farm tractor.

Hunters are also using their ATVs to assist them with carrying materials and supplies into secluded areas to build tree stands or shooting houses. Probably the most common use of an ATV by the average hunter is to assist with transporting a harvested deer or other large game back to their vehicle at the end of a successful hunt.

Unfortunately, some users have forgotten how to use, or refuse to use, their ATVs responsibly. Unwanted guests driving around gates or signs, crossing creeks, or other natural barriers, to access private properties without permission are plaguing landowners and hunting clubs across Alabama. Some ATV users seem to believe they have the right to ride their ATVs anywhere, at anytime, and on anybody's land. Others seem to think it is okay to operate ATVs on public roads, even though they do not meet the safety requirements of the Department of Transportation. Some parents are even allowing or giving their approval for children to operate ATVs without their supervision, often with devastating results. As with any type of vehicle, owners should familiarize themselves, and others who may use them, with their safe and responsible operation. Users should always read and understand their owner's manual and safety guidelines, and understand their legal and ethical responsibilities when operating an ATV.

Wildlife populations need periods of rest from human disturbances, especially during nesting season and while rearing their young. ATVs can negatively affect wildlife during these crucial times. Many ground nesting species, such as wild turkey, quail, and rabbit will nest along the edges of roads and trails. If there is too much disturbance in the area, nests may be abandoned. The nests and young of small mammals and birds may even be run over by an ATV without the operator being aware of it. ATVs on many public areas are only allowed to be operated on regularly-used roads or designated trails to prevent habitat damage, soil erosion, as well as conflicts with hunters and other users. On these lands, ATV users are legally bound to abide by all laws for the protection of wildlife, wildlife habitat, landowner rights, public safety, and even the ATV user's safety.

ATVs fill a valuable niche, providing a useful utility vehicle to landowners and hunters that can assist them with completing a variety of tasks. ATVs also provide a means of enjoying the outdoors, transporting users around and over a variety of obstacles, for long distances. ATVs are beneficial in many ways, but they should always be used safely, legally, and responsibly. 