

Cops crack down on e-motorcyclists

Complaints pile up as riders hit streets, trails near Lake Minnetonka.



Off-highway motorcyclists flee officers of the South Lake Minnetonka Police Department. The motorcycles are illegal on any roadway.

BY TIM HARLOW THE MINNESOTA STAR TRIBUNE

Riders of electric-powered, off-highway motorcycles that look similar to e-bikes have been speeding on city streets in some west metro communities surrounding Lake Minnetonka, and it's causing problems and generating complaints.

"Residents are calling and saying kids are blazing right past them," said Laura Holtan, community outreach and public information officer for the South Lake Minnetonka Police Department. "They are taking over trails and paths."

It is against state law to drive an off-highway motorcycle on any roadway at any speed. Yet officers have spotted bikers zooming along at more than 45 mph on highways and

city streets and fleeing from officers attempting to pull them over, Holtan said.

Videos from the department serving Excelsior, Greenwood, Shorewood and Tonka Bay posted online show riders zipping through parking lots and blowing through stop signs with police right behind trying to initiate a traffic stop.

“This is super, super dangerous,” Sgt. Zach Robertson said in one of the videos. “Don’t take off from us. This is a felony violation, and if you get caught, you will be arrested.”

Police suspended the pursuit of three bikers shown running stop signs in one of the videos, which were posted this week as part of an education campaign to curb the illegal activity before somebody gets hurt or worse.

So far, no injuries have been reported, but “sometimes a tragedy has to happen before there is a change,” Holtan said.

Confusing difference The difference between the two can be confusing, Holtan said, because there are some similarities. But there are obvious differences, too.

An electric-assisted bicycle, which is allowed on city streets, has pedals like a traditional bicycle, whereas off-road motorcycles do not.

Another difference is that pedal-assisted e-bikes have a motor with a power output of less than 750 watts and stop providing assistance when riders reach speeds of 20 mph, or in some cases at 28 mph when the rider is pedaling and the bike does not have a throttle.

Bicycles with a power output between 750 watts and 1,500 watts that reach a maximum speed of 30 mph are considered a motorized bicycle. Riders can’t use them where vehicles are prohibited (like trails) and must have a driver’s license or motorized bicycle permit, according to the DNR.

Off-road motorcycles have motors with a power output of 1,500 watts or more and are not considered bicycles, according to state statutes. Operators must be 16 years old and have a valid driver’s license or safety certificate.

State law requires anybody operating an e-bike to be 15 or older.

Education campaign

Holtan said the summer push to educate the public includes getting off-road motorcyclists to stay off the roads and follow safe riding practices such as wearing helmets and traveling at a safe speed.

Riders who are stopped by police are given the “do’s and don’ts,” and if they are underage, their parents are called to the scene, Holtan said.

The campaign also seeks to inform parents that they can be held accountable. In one case, police issued a citation for contributing to the delinquency of a minor after having “multiple contacts,” Holtan said.

“Thank you for policing this,” Sharla Stafford wrote in a comment on the Police Department’s Facebook page. “They are out of control.”

Holtan said police are not trying to stop kids from being outside and having fun.

But “they need to be on appropriate equipment,” she said.

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