

BY RICK BUSSLER PUBLISHER

Hundreds of motorists were stopped cold in their tracks this past weekend as a blizzard swept across Steele County and much of southern Minnesota. Sheriff Lon Thiele said more than 200 motorists have been rescued and placed in shelters at Trinity Lutheran Church and the National Guard Armory in Owatonna. He said most of those rescued were from Iowa

and Nebraska trying to head southbound. Gov. Tim Walz declared a state of emergency in order to mobilize the Minnesota National Guard and open armories as makeshift shelters.

National Guard members assisted Sheriff Thiele and his deputies with rescuing numerous stranded motorists around the county. Thiele estimated that at least 50 motorists were rescued from all parts of the county.

"There were numerous vehicles from small cars to semis all over the county," Thiele said.

One of the more daring rescue efforts came Sunday afternoon when emergency workers rescued stuck motorists near the Steele-Waseca county line. They had become stuck Sunday morning and were not found until about 5 p.m. The rescuers utilized a small utility vehicle with tracks from the National Guard to get to them.

"We went through some enormous snow drifts to get to those people," Thiele said. "They would have been stranded and frozen," he said, adding one of the vehicles was almost empty of gasoline at the time the rescue was made.

The rescued motorists were brought back to the armory in

Blizzard closes roads, strands hundreds

GROUNDED

"It's just stunning. Some of the main roads look like a cow path behind an apple tree."

> **Michael Dougherty MnDOT**



COURTESY STEELE COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

Members of the Minnesota National Guard were deployed this past weekend to assist with rescue efforts of stranded motorists throughout Steele County. They utilized a small utility vehicle with tracks to rescue people grounded by the blizzard. Sheriff Lon Thiele, far right, is shown with the guard members. "They were a great group of National Guard personnel to work with," Thiele said.



BLIZZARD BY THE NUMBERS

12	Inches of snow
50	Mph winds
1	State of Emergency declared
187	Stranded motorists at armory
50	Stranded motorists at Trinity Church
0	Injuries or fatalities

218 from Owatonna to Austin was also closed. In addition, MnDOT issued a no travel advisory on many highways throughout southeastern Minnesota for most of the weekend into Monday.

"It's just stunning," said Michael Dougherty, spokesperson for MnDOT. "Some of the main roads look like a cow path behind an apple tree. It seems strange to think someone would get stuck in the middle of the highway.'

Of those vehicles that became stuck in the roadway, Dougherty said the motorists were rescued, but their vehicles could not be moved and remained right where they were left.

Contributing to the problem was that once motorists realized the interstate was closed, they got off and tried to use the county roads, according to Thiele. "They found themselves in worse conditions on the county roads," he said.

Highways were strewn with cars facing various directions and nowhere to go.

Dougherty said southeastern Minnesota was blasted with a trifecta of things to hit. First, heavy amounts of snow fell at rapid rates with up to a foot. Next came the heavy winds that created snow drifts as high as vehicles followed by plunging temperatures Sunday night into Monday. "It all combines to make challenging conditions," Dougherty said. "We just don't see snow events like this." Salt used to treat the roadways becomes ineffective when temperatures dip under 15 degrees, according to Dougherty. He said MnDOT was bringing in trucks from the Twin Cities metro area equipped with chemicals mixed with beet juice to help clear the roadways. MnDOT also deployed big mounted snow blowers, known as SnoGos, which are mounted on the front of snow plows, from the metro area because the regular plows are unable to handle the drifts, Dougherty said.

Owatonna. In another rescue, a father

and small child were found stranded and brought to safety. 'We were fortunate to have no one injured," Thiele said. He

noted he has never seen rescue operations of this magnitude before in Steele County.

Thiele said in some cases snow was piled up to the windows on the car and there was no way for anyone to get out of their vehicles. "We had to shovel the car doors so we could get people out," he said.

The sheriff also saw some instances where guard members gave stranded motorists their coats off their backs for those who were underdressed for the conditions.

The Minnesota Department of Transportation closed Interstate 35 late Saturday from Owatonna to the Iowa border. U.S. Highway



COURTESY MNDOT

This is Interstate 35 between Ellendale and Hope Sunday night where it would normally be two lanes in each direction. However, after this weekend's blizzard, the roadway was down to a narrow path with huge banks on each side. Snow drifts of five or more feet were reported in many areas of Steele County. This was taken by a plow operator trying with little luck to open the interstate, which remained closed much of Monday.



MnDOT workers had their hands full trying to clear off highways throughout southeastern Minnesota this past weekend after a blizzard dumped a foot of snow. In this photo, MnD-OT was working to clear away I-90 by Dexter so the highway could be opened up again.

"They just started carving into

SEE GROUNDED, A6

Even local residents become stranded by blizzard

BY ALEX MALM STAFF WRITER

When Medford resident, Timothy Summer, finished his 10 p.m. to 8 a.m. shift on Sunday morning, in Faribault, he knew it would be a difficult journey.

What he didn't know, however, is that he would find himself stranded in a local Kwik Trip parking lot.

Summer explained that he when he left the city plows were out, and streets were clear.

Because he lives in Medford, he took I-35 south to Medford exit, and found that only one side of the roundabout was plowed at that time

After making it into the Kwik Trip parking lot, which was some-

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what plowed, he was able to fill up his tank.

At that point, Summer realized he would be stranded in the parking lot, for a while.

"This is the **worst storm I have** ever experienced in my 50 years

of Minnesota winters."

Timothy Summer

Local stranded driver

"I could see there was no way I was going to be able to travel back to Medford or get back on 35 south or north bound," Summer explained.

For Summer, he never had been stranded like he was on Sunday.

"This is the worst storm I have ever experienced in my 50 years of Minnesota winters. It will take many big tow companies just to pull out the Semis stuck In and around parking lot," Summer said.

Although he was stranded for many hours in a parking lot, he was able to still stay positive.

'The plus side to this is I am safe, I can walk into store purchase food for me and my dog Sheldon," Summer said.

Summer was eventually able to get out of the parking lot, to make his way home at about 5:45 p.m., after being stranded for nearly nine hours.

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AREA DEATHS

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