

## Road less traveled: 4x4 club takes to the dirt for good time, local goodwill

By Victoria Grabner (Contact)  
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Photo by Mike Lawrence

(L-R) Bret Cottingham, Mike Schinault and Mike McLeod members of the local Bluegrass 4x4 Club with their Jeeps. (Gleaner photo by Mike Lawrence • 831-8346 or [mlawrence@thegleaner.com](mailto:mlawrence@thegleaner.com))

The dirt sticks. But it's the enthusiasm that really lasts -- up steep hills and into the craggy wilderness, where they steer their Jeeps toward the staccato bumps, and not away from them.

When it comes to the wide and open road, the Bluegrass 4x4 Club's version is purposely unpaved. But that's not surprising for a group devoted to off-highway vehicles, where the point isn't necessarily to make it to a destination quickly, or even smoothly.

Sometimes going out for a ride is about meeting new people who share the same interests.

And sometimes, seeking out the tough spots isn't just for fun, like in the case of the January ice storm, when men like Mike McLeod, Bret Cottingham and Mike Schinault were the ones you wanted to call.

"We have experience driving in less than ideal situations," McLeod, the club's vice-president, said on Tuesday as he described the assistance he and others were able to provide through snow and ice to local emergency management crews.

That's because the club, which has about 30 registered families in the Tri-state area, tends to go out on the road and into the woods and trails when most people would rather stay indoors.

Of course, when you're a club dedicated to off-highway vehicles, remaining outdoors is pretty much a given -- especially if you have a jeep like McLeod's 1984 CJ7, which he said he tries to operate without doors or a top as much as possible.

"I'm not too worried about little scratches," the 45-year-old said of the brown CJ7 that his own father once owned when McLeod was a boy. "That's why I went with an older Jeep."

But there are all sorts of Jeep lovers in the Bluegrass 4x4 Club, which will be having its third annual 4x4 Cruise-In next to Advance Auto on Saturday. And that means that from 2 to 5 p.m., you'll see Jeeps right from the dealership, trucks converted to Jeeps and homemade buggies, as well as many other off-highway vehicles.

"A lot of people think, '4x4, oh you go to mud bogs,'" McLeod said. "But this group ... mud doesn't excite them. We are more into the trail riding. We take our club very seriously. (We do a lot of) environmental awareness to make sure that we don't tear up (the land we ride on). We respect other people's property rights."

Still, out in fields and in the woods, the mud is unavoidable. But McLeod, Cottingham and Schinault said they don't like mud bogging because it takes too long to get out of a bog.

What they like about trail riding is that it offers them a variety of terrains that change depending on the weather. Ground that is too wet makes it difficult for them to fix their vehicles, which is often necessary out in the field; too much dust, and that's no fun, either.

"The change is the challenge," Cottingham said as he stood in front of his 2002 TJ Model Jeep Wrangler. "We like the mixture."

That means that when the club goes trail riding in Turkey Bay in the Land Between the Lakes or Redbird State Riding Area near Dugger, Ind., or when the members go up near Lynnville, Ind., to ride there, they might come across a rocky path or a hill so steep they need assistance from others in the group.

And while those may seem like natural roadblocks to those who don't drive off-highway vehicles, the club members see those experiences as helpful to their own understanding of their hobby.

In fact, the members of the club spend a lot of time helping each other fix up their Jeeps. And that comes in handy when someone doesn't have any power steering fluid, or when the drive shaft universal joint breaks. That connects the gear box with the axle.

"Helping each other is (a big part) of the experience," McLeod said before Schinault drove up in his 1990 Jeep Comanche truck. "It's a team effort to get them on the trail and repaired. We are very much a group-oriented club."

He added that he got into Jeeps seriously about four years ago, when he didn't initially know much about the vehicles. But the experience of those he got to know really helped him gain new skills.

Meanwhile, the Bluegrass 4x4 Club has also meant more than just talk about off-highway vehicles -- like Christmas dinners, and summer picnics. McLeod said the members of the club are good friends, which was part of the reason for starting the club in the first place more than two years ago.

McLeod and Cottingham first got to know each other through their sons, who were part of the same Boy Scout troop. Then they and about eight other people decided to form an official group.

It turned out that there were other similar groups in the Tri-state area. McLeod said the club is an official 501-C7 non-profit organization that has members in a 30-mile radius from Henderson including Boonville and Evansville in Indiana as well as Owensboro and Madisonville.

"We are still finding lots of people in Henderson who don't really know about us," McLeod said. "The interest in the club continues to grow."

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For more information about the Bluegrass 4x4 Club, visit [www.bluegrass4x4.org](http://www.bluegrass4x4.org). The group meets at Pizza Hut in Henderson on the second Thursday of every month at 6:30 p.m.

## 4x4 group helped in storm

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The members of the Bluegrass 4x4 Club who volunteered to assist during the January ice storm are just some of many who helped during that difficult time, one emergency official said.

"It was a cooperative and coordinated effort to address the needs of as many people as we could," said Larry Koerber, the Henderson County Emergency Management Director.

He said Bret Cottingham and others who are part of the club checked with the Emergency Management Center to see how they could assist.

Some club members drove elderly people to shelters, while others transported nurses to Methodist Hospital, said Mike McLeod, the vice-president of the 4x4 Club.

He added that, going forward, the club would like to do what it can to help in more ways.