

Driving on snow and ice, Part 1



Ralph Seekins

Well, our first snows of the season remind us that we drive on snow and ice for the next five-plus months. And, based on the number of vehicles wrinkled and in the ditch the last couple days, we should probably talk about a some basics of driving on slick roads and highways.

Anyone who has driven in Fairbanks for a couple of winters has a story of near misses or hits when a vehicle got away on winter roads. I've been there myself. So, let's look at what a variety of experts tell us about safe driving on snow and ice.

Speed is not your friend! Tailgating is one great big enemy! Slow down and give yourself plenty of room to stop. Leave at least three times more distance between you and the vehicle in front of you than you would normally allow on dry roads. And, remember, 4 wheel drive vehicles don't stop any faster than two wheel drives.

Braking should be done gently. Think about having a raw egg between your foot and the pedal and you don't want to break it (no

pun intended). I many times slip the transmission into neutral as I brake in order to remove any torque from the drive wheels. If your vehicle has ABS brakes, keep a steady pressure on the brakes. They will pulsate and help keep you from sliding so you can maintain or regain control. If the vehicle doesn't have ABS brakes, light stabs where you press, release, press again in sequence will help get you under control,

Accelerate slowly. Once again, light, even pressure on the accelerator pedal in a manner that keeps the tires from spinning will help you get moving safely. Spinning the drive wheels loses traction and only makes things worse. Back off if you start spinning and then slowly and softly re-apply the gas.

Be particularly careful on side roads, bridges, shady areas or overpasses where ice builds up quicker and stays longer than it does on well-traveled highways. Statistics show that driving on clear ice is five times more dangerous than driving on clear roads and stopping on clear ice takes nine times longer than normal.

Cruise control on icy roads has put a lot of people in the ditch. Don't use it on icy or snow-packed roads.

Google "driving on ice" and cruise a few of the sites. You'll pick up some good tips including how to correct when sliding with rear wheel drive, front wheel drive and four wheel drive vehicles.

Finally, I can tell you the one thing that will help you drive safer on winter roads is to do everything you can to eliminate distractions while driving. We hear a lot of stories in our collision repair shop. A large number of winter collisions are caused because the driver's attention was diverted for just a moment. He was on the cell phone and didn't see the moose and went into a slide while trying to avoid it. She was reading a text on her phone and didn't see the car ahead stop or slow down until it was too late and slid into it. He didn't see the light change early enough and slid into the intersection. Story after story – some with tragic circumstances – because the driver was distracted and didn't have a cushion in which to react.

Please, as winter is upon us, resolve to put the phone down or at least use a hands free device while driving. Don't send or read texts. Limit conversation. Calls and texts can wait and be returned when you stop driving. Don't let a second or two of distraction end up in a fender bender or worse.

More next week. Meanwhile, may all your miles be traveled safely.

Ralph Seekins has more than 42 years' experience in the automotive industry. He started as a mechanic, worked in sales, and for the past 35 years, has been the owner of Seekins Ford Lincoln.