

## **DRIVING ON SNOW AND ICE**

**By: Ralph Seekins**

**Question: This is my first winter in Alaska and I've never driven on snow or icy roads. Any tips?**

My first suggestion may sound strange at first. It's to keep your windshields clear at all times. Use your ice scraper, defrosters and windshield wipers. Never, never, never drive if your vision is impaired in any direction. With a clear field of view, you won't be surprised by competing traffic or other obstacles and you'll be less likely to over-react by jamming on your brakes or turning violently. More accidents are caused by poor visibility than most folks would ever imagine or admit.

Another absolute is to never use cruise control when driving on ice or snow. If you start to slide, you want to ease off the accelerator to reduce power and regain control. Cruise control won't let you do that. Save this handy feature for dry roads.

Then, try to always be "light footed" and "light handed." Accelerate, brake, change speeds or directions slowly and gently. A four wheel drive vehicle will accelerate quicker and maneuver better on ice and snow than a front wheel drive and a front wheel drive will accelerate easier and maneuver better on ice and snow than a rear wheel drive. However, they will all lose traction from a "heavy" footed driver. And the closer to freezing (32F or warmer) the easier a tire loses its grip on the road. Practice accelerating like there was a raw egg between your foot and the accelerator and practice steering with a light two fingers and a thumb grip on the steering wheel.

**IMPORTANT . . . FOUR WHEEL DRIVE OR TWO WHEEL DRIVE MAKES NO DIFFERENCE WHEN TRYING TO STOP!** Many folks start believing that just because four wheel drive allows them to accelerate quicker they can stop quicker as well. You can recognize them by the smashed in front fenders and hoods on their vehicles.

If your vehicle is a 1994 or newer model, it probably has anti-lock brakes. If you do (check to make sure), it's good to practice using them somewhere where there is no traffic. I've used an empty parking lot to demonstrate how anti-lock brakes work. Basically, as their name indicates, they don't allow the brakes to lock up. Rolling traction is a lot better than sliding traction and a rolling tire can be steered thereby helping you maintain or regain control. Never manually pump anti-lock brakes. They will do it for you much more efficiently than you ever could yourself. You'll hear a grinding noise and feel a rapid vibration in your brake foot when the system is working properly. That is normal and is caused by the system rapidly pumping the brakes for you. More modern anti-lock braking systems have individual sensors at all four wheels and apply maximum braking force to each individual wheel without locking it up. These systems provide greater vehicle stability and control in severe braking situations. Today, many manufacturers (i.e., Ford) have anti-lock braking systems on all their North American vehicles.

Tires can make a difference. I suggest you invest in good winter tires like Bridgestone's Blizzak Studless Ice and Snow Tires or other quality siped winter tires. As an alternative, you may want to consider studded snow tires. They are legal on the roads up here (north of Anchorage as a rule) between September 16<sup>th</sup> and April 30<sup>th</sup>. However, with the current advancement in winter tire technology, my own preference is to go studless.

Next week, we'll talk a little more about safe driving on snow and ice. Meanwhile remember that slower, steady driving, keeping a little more distance between you and the car in front of you, signaling sooner and longer when you intend to turn or stop, keeping your windows clear of ice and snow, knowing how your brakes respond in severe braking situations, and having the right winter tires will all help you be a safe driver on snow and ice.