

DRIVING ON SNOW AND ICE – PART II

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Well . . . last week we started talking about driving on snow and ice. Little did we know that we would have our first ground-covering snow the following Monday. And since the snow started, it seems that a lot of folks have found out the hard way that it can be dangerous on slick roadways. Let's review what some professionals say are the best tips for driving on snow and ice.

1. Make sure your vehicle is properly prepared. That means proper winter tires or, in extreme conditions, tire chains. A good tow strap, jumper cables and winter survival gear is also highly recommended.
2. Slow down! Driving too fast is the No. 1 winter driving mistake. Make sure your speed is appropriate for road conditions. On a slippery surface, everything happens faster and more radically. Remember that anti-lock brakes or stability control systems will not help you if you are already sliding. Very simply, if you drive too fast, you will go off the road or you will slide into something hard and no system can change that.
3. Look ahead. Keep track of road conditions and traffic. Double the distance between you and the vehicle in front of you. The best rule of thumb is four car lengths for every 10 miles per hour. That means that, at 40 mph, you should have 16 car lengths between you and the car in front of you. You may have more impatient and less careful drivers honk at you once in awhile. Just let them bend their cars. Good drivers look ahead and anticipate problems. Poor drivers don't watch the road and are forced to react to problems – usually more abruptly than is safe.
4. Brake before you get to a corner. Entering a corner too fast and then braking can easily cause your tires to lose grip. Once they lose grip and you begin to slide, you will more than likely lose total control of your vehicle. So, lightly apply your brakes before you enter the corner and, once you are through the turn, accelerate back to a safe speed for the straightaway.
5. Practice smooth and effective use of the steering wheel and brakes. A good place to practice is in an empty parking lot. Don't practice on the roadway. But, don't get carried away in someone's parking lot and start looking like a crazy joy rider. Folks seem to have the most trouble with their steering wheel by overreacting and putting the vehicle out of balance. Steer into the skid. That means that, if the rear end is coming around on the right side, you need to turn your steering wheel to the right.

Another good reason to practice is that the configuration of your vehicle will affect its response on slippery roads. For example, a pickup has more weight on the front tires than on the rear. That means that rear wheels lose traction quicker and the back end can slip out more quickly than would a SUV or an all-wheel drive car. On rear wheel drive muscle cars, like the Ford Mustang GT with its high horsepower to weight ratio and short wheelbase, a light foot is required to keep the rear end from losing traction. On front wheel drive cars, abrupt deceleration shifts weight to the front tires and can cause the rear end to spin out. Practice in your own vehicle pays off.

6. Refer to points No. 2 and 3 above and buckle up everyone in your vehicle.

Remember, you can only master snow and ice driving techniques by learning proper techniques and practicing the skills you need. Find someone experienced who will spend a little time driving with you. In time, with patience and practice, you can master winter roads in Interior Alaska.

Good luck and safe driving.