

Winter driving: easy does it



remember--just having four-wheel-drive won't make you stop faster



There are some common sense winter weather driving tips that all drivers should consider....the first being, if you don't have to go out, don't. Stay at home. You'll be one less potential accident.

However, if you must drive in these conditions...

- consider putting snow tires, studded tires or chains on your car.
- make sure you have the usual emergency stuff in your car (ice scraper, first aid kit, mobile phone, tow strap, jumper cables, shovel, flares, blanket, flashlight, a bag of kitty litter for traction, non perishable food and water).
- that you've checked all the usual things (battery, antifreeze, at least half a tank of fuel, lower viscosity oil, hoses, belts, windshield wipers, deicing fluid, lights, blinkers and flashers).

• that you clear and keep clear all windows and mirrors AND the exhaust and radiator grill (yes, a radiator

clogged with snow cannot cool your engine, no matter how cold it is outside).

- allow plenty of extra travel time...like double.

As far as driving is concerned, easy does it. Having a manual transmission is an advantage because you can downshift and use the engine to help with braking. Even if you have an automatic transmission, you can do the same by starting out and staying in a lower gear.

Remember, bridges and overpasses freeze first because they don't have the relatively warm earth to insulate them. And be mindful of where North is. North-facing roads, particularly on hills or in shade, receive little to no direct sunlight in winter. They take a long time to melt.

Do everything GENTLY. Accelerate gently. Apply the brake gently. Transfer as little torque to the wheels as possible. Don't spin your tires; you're just digging a hole for yourself. If you get stuck, try gently rocking your car back and forth. If that doesn't work, you may have to get the shovel and kitty litter out. And above all, remember that just having four-wheel-drive won't make you stop faster!

Skidding: A car wants to go straight. If you skid, it's because you tried to change its direction too quickly. Straighten the skid out by steering with it, not away from it. For example, if you're going left, and the back end starts to lose it to the right, hauling the steering wheel to the left will only make matters worse. Straighten the car. It is counter-intuitive, but steer with the skid, not against it. Also, get all your braking done before you turn. And above all, SLOW DOWN. That's why you skidded in the first place; you were going too fast.

And one more thing. Before the storm hits, if winter weather is inevitable, pray that it falls as snow, not ice.

the "Keep Back 100 Feet" sign on the truck. "That sign means a lot," he emphasizes. "We're running 25-30 miles an hour and they (other drivers) get right up against you trying to pass and you trying to get snow off the road...it makes it bad."

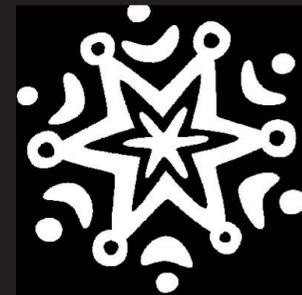
VDOT spokesman, Lou Hatter, echoes that sentiment. "Drivers in general, it's best not to pass a snowplow, unless absolutely necessary." He points out that a snowplow driver is a busy man. He is operating a huge motor vehicle in bad weather and visibility conditions, spreading salt and abrasives and plowing all at the same time. He's also trying to avoid hitting mailboxes, parked or abandoned cars, and oncoming traffic. Don't give him one more thing to worry about.

"Ice is the most dangerous scenario for everybody, including our crews," emphasizes Hatter. "Sleet and freezing rain are particularly dangerous."

So, when you come up behind that snowplow, obey the sign: stay back 100 feet. Don't pass him. Instead, pause and consider the fact that that guy has been out all night just to clear this road for you.



When snowflakes fly



"I'd rather see a foot of snow than that ice," says Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) area Superintendent, Michael Clatterback. "If it had been a degree or two cooler that day we would have been hurting."

He's still reeling from the effects of an ice storm that happened way back in the middle of December. Some north-facing, shaded gravel roads still had treacherous ice spots on them by the week after Christmas.

Clatterback is in charge of one of Orange County's two VDOT area headquarters. When snowflakes fly, Clatterback's goal is to have every state road in Orange County from Nasons to Eheart clear of snow and ice within 48 hours. That is a whopping 405 lane miles of primary and

secondary road.

His counterpart at the Rhoadesville area HQ, Willie Dodson, has the same goal for roads from Nasons to Flat Run. It is a monumental task, requiring the stockpiling of abrasives, the checking and double-checking of equipment, and the driving of practice runs dating back to late summer.

Although we've experienced unseasonably mild temperatures over the past several weeks, we would be fools to think

what is it about bread and milk anyway?

that winter is over. Storms will come. And when low pressure forms in, say, Texas or Missouri and tracks up the west side of the Blue Ridge and Alleghenies, a collective groan will echo at these VDOT headquarters if the air close to the ground is below freezing.

Storms rotate counterclockwise. If they track west of us, the circulation is pulling in warm, moist air from the south. Because heat rises, this moisture overrides the thin layer of cold air at the surface and falls as rain...rain that freezes on contact...downing power lines, snapping tree branches and turning our roads into skating rinks.

But when low pressure forms off the east coast and tracks north along the coast, and if Canada sends us an arctic blast, batten down the hatches. The counterclockwise rotation pulls a thick layer of cold air in from the north and Atlantic moisture from the east. It will fall as snow, lots of snow sometimes, but still preferable to ice.

Before those first flakes fly, VDOT is making last minute preparations, attaching plows, lowering the V-shaped sander/spreaders into

truck beds, loading salt and sand.

The "employee" room at the Gordonsville Area Headquarters features a massive table heaped with dog-eared copies of hunting and fishing magazines. A commendation from Governor Gilmore hangs on the wall, praising their efforts during the January 2000 bliz-



zard. The wall also features photographs of drivers posing in front of snowplows following their annual dry runs in August.

Before the storm hits, one can imagine the road-clearing crews hanging out around this huge table, warily watching Doppler radar on TV, draining and refilling the coffee pot in the corner. Some men were sent home early...to

rest before going on their 8 p.m. to 8 a.m. shift. The 12-hour shifts will continue round the clock until it's all gone...except maybe for those pesky North-facing shady spots.

These men and women have some weapons at their disposal...in Gordonsville's case, six trucks fitted with plows and spreaders, a motor-grader, and a huge front-end loader that does everything from load chemicals and abrasives to clearing drift-choked roads and removing ice-laden fallen trees.

After the first inch or so of snow accumulates they'll roll out, spreading salt or sand or a combination. Gravel and sand do nothing to melt snow, but provide traction. Salt mixes with snow to form brine, turning the snow to slush, which can then be easily pushed to the side of the road. But if it's cold, in the low 20s or less, the salt becomes ineffective. All they can do is mix in expensive liquid calcium chloride and hope.

Ask a snowplow operator what's the one thing the general driving public could do to make his job easier, he will immediately say, "Use caution and STAY BACK." James Berry is a veteran snowplow driver. He points to



VDOT's Gordonsville Area Headquarters crews are ready when snowflakes fly. Here Superintendent, Michael Clatterbuck (right) stands next to a plow/spreader truck with drivers James Berry (center) and Kevin Hahn (left).

Photo by Phil Audibert



When is the snowplow coming?

Are schools closed?

Visitors and settlers from northern climes are often bemused by what they consider a general state of panic that sets in around here when a couple of inches of snow fall. Where they come from, if schools closed every time snowflakes flew, no one would get an education. And what is it about bread and milk anyway?

But they need to realize that snow-clearing resources are limited here. With a 20.1-inch average annual snowfall, it's hard for VDOT to justify buying extra equipment that will just sit idle nine months of the year.

VDOT spokesman, Lou Hatter explains that when snowflakes fly, road clearing crews follow a priority, namely interstates and primary roads first... any road with a number less than 600...in Orange County, Routes 3, 20, 522, 15, 33, and 231.

Then they move to the secondaries, numbered 600 and above. Other than that, there

is no favoritism as to which roads are cleared first. However, if you have a life-threatening emergency, call 911 and word will be passed on to VDOT to try to open your road for emergency vehicles.

The decision to close schools lies solely with the Superintendent of Schools, not VDOT. Dr. William Crawford says school employees are out monitoring road conditions by 3:30 in the morning. The decision to close or stay open is made by 5:30 a.m. Constantly monitoring real-time radar and satellite feeds on weather.com, Crawford admits it can be a tough call.

For example, back in December, he lucked out by not closing schools the day of a looming storm because he could see that it was not traveling as fast as originally predicted. Surrounding counties closed, but Orange stayed open and everyone made it home safely. That's one less day that Orange will

have to make up.

Then again, parents will sometimes call, complaining that schools were closed even though their roads were clear. "We have responsibility for the WHOLE system," explains Crawford, adding that the county is 28 miles long with "vastly different conditions," from one end to the other.

If the decision is made to close, a telephone tree gears up. School employees call all area TV and radio stations with a special school closing code (sorry, kids, there's no point in calling a radio station and mimicking Doctor Crawford's voice; it won't work).

"Under development," in Orange County is a snow route system where buses will travel down historically consistently cleared roads and pick up children at predetermined intersections. It will be up to the parents to deliver the kids to those pick-up points. No word yet on when that goes into effect.

VDOT crews are responsible for clearing all state roads, but not town streets; that's up to the towns of Gordonsville and Orange. Naturally towns do not have the same resources that VDOT has. So be patient. And if at all possible, if you live in town or a subdivision with state-maintained roads, the night before the storm hits, park your car off the street.

As snowplows go by, there is the unfortunate side effect of driveways being blocked by mounds of pushed snow. This is inevitable. The best thing to do is to clear your own entrance by shoveling snow to the right as you face the state road. That way when the plow goes by again, it won't push the snow you just shoveled right back into your driveway.

So, in answer to the question, 'when is the snowplow coming?' the answer is, 'just as soon as he can.'