

Texas Road Hazards

It is important to your safety to be aware of the road hazards that you may encounter while riding and this handout will help you recognize these hazards and give you some insight on how to handle them. As you ride you should make mental notes for yourself of hazards you encounter so you will be better prepared for the next time you ride that route.

Always ride within your ability and if you are riding a road for the first time use extra care. As you ride think about what your escape routes are and question WHAT IF you are presented with a hazard what options you have. If possible look at a map or GOOGLE Earth of the roads you intend to ride so you will be aware of sharp turns or water crossings.

Motorcycle handling skills are often the key to safely navigating a road hazard, or surviving a skid, wobble, or dicey situation caused by a hazard. Get training on how to safely handle your bike. As with mastering any skill you must be constantly learning and taking an advanced rider course is a good step. Learn about ways to navigate gravel and ridges in the road and what to do if your tires skid on ice or slick surfaces. There are many websites devoted to motorcyclist that provide practical advice on how to handle hazardous riding situations.

Side Roads and Intersections

Side roads everywhere, and vehicles are turning out from them and in front of us constantly. Always look ahead to side roads, where you may see a vehicle waiting to enter the road in front of you. Expect that vehicles will not always see you, and plan your reaction. For example, you might think, "If that car pulls out, can I move to the left lane? Should I slow down in case they do?" Swerving is sometimes unavoidable and can be a hazard if not done correctly. Treat driveways and exits from business as a side street that cars can come out of without warning.

Intersections are arguably the most dangerous hazard for motorcyclists. . In an intersection, you need to be on the lookout for vehicles changing lanes around you (even though they're not supposed to), while also watching for debris, gravel, and oil in the roadway. You should be conscious of uneven surfaces, but you also need to watch for vehicles turning left in front of you and turning right into your path of travel.

Changing traffic lights also necessitate that you be aware of vehicles stopping quickly or not stopping soon enough. Riders should always stop at intersection and be prepared for changing lights. If you are riding in a group do not run a light to keep up with the group. The group should slow down to allow the other riders to catch up. If the light is a long one or the lead group gets too far ahead, the lead group should pull over on the shoulder only if it is an improved shoulder (paved) and turn on your hazard flashers to warn other drivers. Never stop in the center turn lane to allow the rest of the group to catch up, this only places all the riders in the lead group in danger from cars coming in both directions. Your other option is to proceed to follow the route till it is safe to stop in a parking lot or an improved shoulder is available.

Keep an eye on cars in turn lanes, drivers many times use poor judgment and pull out in front of oncoming traffic. Some drivers have a problem judging the speed of motorcycles or just don't pay attention to them.

Gravel Parking Lots

Gravel parking lots create a hazardous situation when entering, exiting, and parking. We encounter these regularly at many of the establishments we go to such as Opie's, Alamo Springs Café, Lukenbach, Roadhouse Café, and Bent Rim Café. When trikes are present, due to their increased stability, should allow two wheel motorcycles to park in the least hazardous parking spots.

Never make any quick or sudden turns or stops in gravel, slow and steady is the key. It's better to "walk" your bike (feet down and crawl speed) in heavy gravel. When you put your feet down remember that you will be stepping on a very slick surface. When you put your feet down remember that you will be stepping on a very slick surface. Stay as upright as possible. Never use the front brake when the front wheel is turned this will almost always cause the motorcycle to lay over on its side. Any braking during a lean (in gravel) is hazardous and generally not recoverable. Avoid riding over large stones on gravel because they will cause you to lose control and drop your bike. Look for an area that may have a little grass or dirt as these will be safer areas to park.

Heavy Traffic and Tractor Trailers

When possible, travel when traffic is light. That way, if you encounter a road hazard, you will have more room and time to maneuver. If highway traffic is very heavy or stop and go on the highway, or there is construction, opt to use the access roads or side routes to reduce the stress and added danger of traffic. Always keep a generous distance between you and the vehicles (especially rigs/large trailers) ahead of you but be aware that this additional space may tempt a car to pull in front of you. Using the first or last third of the lane will help give you an escape route if needed.

Special attention should be used when riding around and passing tractor trailers. They have large blind spots, cannot stop quickly, and can create flying debris hazards from tires blowing out.

When passing always move to a single file formation in the third of the lane farthest from the truck. Increase your speed to quickly pass and clear the truck to give enough room for other riders to also clear the truck. As you clear the truck move back to a staggered formation and keep up the slightly increased to give more room for other riders. Remember the most dangerous time while passing the truck is when you are beside it because you are passing through their blind spot and you are in danger for being hit by tire debris in the case of a blowout. In many cases these will be larger pieces that can seriously injure you and cause you to lose control.

Uneven Parking Surfaces

Slight inclines can be deceptive when parking or stopping. These conditions can be exaggerated when the height of the motorcycle and the rider are not properly matched. Your motorcycle should be at a height that at a stop you should be able to place your feet flat on the

ground and preferably with your knees slightly bent. This arrangement will allow the rider some forgiveness on uneven surfaces. If carrying a passenger a lot of times it is best to have the passenger mount and dismount on a level surface before parking. Extra care and proper footwear is important when stopping on an incline and gravel or a slick surface is present.

Some unpaved parking lots will have ruts or pot holes in them and you should use care to avoid these. At times these ruts or pot holes will have water in them and be deceptive as to how deep they are.

If the motorcycle starts to fall over and you cannot stop it use care not to get your leg or foot trapped under the motorcycle or the foot boards. If you have a passenger they should keep their arms tucked in and pull their feet up to reduce the chance of injury. Always seek assistance when it is available to pick the motorcycle up, but if alone use your legs and proper lifting techniques to prevent injuries.

Twisty Roads

Some of our favorite places to ride have beautiful twisting roads through the hill country, while these are a lot of fun they hold many hazards that we should be aware of. Many of these areas have spotty cell phone reception which can be a serious factor in an emergency. Remember ride your own ride that is within your skill level and at a pace that you are comfortable with. Do not try to keep up with the rider ahead of you or be pushed by the rider behind you if you are not 100% comfortable with doing so, ride your own ride within your skill level and comfort zone. Let the Road Captain's know if you do not have a lot of experience riding in a group or on twisty roads, they can place you in a good position around experienced riders. A good place to get comfortable riding is in front of the Sweep Road Captain or in front of a Trike as they will be in the position to give you more room.

In most cases these roads should be ridden in a single file formation as this will give riders more room to negotiate turns and hazards. Be sure to leave enough space between you and the rider in front of you so you will be able to see hazards and have time to stop if necessary. It is very important to pass hand signals back to riders behind you as soon as possible, even if you have already past it, this will allow other riders who looking ahead to be aware of the hazard as soon as possible.

These hazards include sharp turns with inclines and declines where the rider must control his or her speed and lane position. Remember to slow down before the turn and not in the turn as this will make the motorcycle harder to control. Many times these roads are cut through the side of hills and mountains and do not have a shoulder to pull off on and may have guard rails meant to keep but can cause serious injuries if you hit them. These areas are known for rocks have fallen on the road that can cause the loss of control if they are hit.

While riding these roads you will encounter other bikes and cars coming from the opposite direction in curves, many times they will cross over into your lane. If you are going too fast and not looking as far through these curves you can collide with them. Remember not fixate on the opposing traffic as you could steer right into them. It may not be your fault it's still going to hurt.

Do not focus on the area immediately in front of you as it will be too late to react to any road hazards, sudden braking by the rider ahead of you, oncoming traffic, sharp curves, etc. Instead, like with all riding, look “wide” and well in front of you and through the turns far enough to anticipate the speed, lean, braking, and reaction time required to react to hazards.

Slick Road Surfaces

The list of objects and surfaces that are, or can become, slippery is long. Slippery surfaces are much more dangerous for motorcycles than for cars. The unstable nature of a two-wheeled bike and the smaller, lighter size mean that sliding on the road can easily result in a crash. Slick surfaces are even more dangerous when the biker is turning. Leaves, dirt, gravel, antifreeze and oil spots, fuel leaks, painted concrete, lane marking paint, and water all can create problems for riders.

Painted road surfaces (white and yellow lines, directional arrows, and crosswalk markings) are significantly more slick in dry conditions and even more in wet conditions and should be avoided if possible (especially when cornering). This is a hazard I personally hate. If possible, cross wet painted surfaces as upright as possible and as straight as possible. Remember that if you swerve to miss a hazard never use your front brake while your front wheel is turned especially on a slick surface, if you do you could go into a slide with bad results. If you do encounter a slide when cornering on a slick surface try to get the bike as upright as possible, do not brake or freeze, and try to aim for a safe exit path. Try not to over react as this will make things only worse. A lot of times just slowing down in bad conditions will give you enough time to safely react to hazards.

When stopping at red lights or gas stations check the area where you plan to stop Make sure there are no water, oil, or fuel where your feet or tire could slip out from you. Do not change speed or direction quickly as it will have the tendency to slip out from under you.

When encountering slick surfaces try to stop in a straight line as much as possible. Bikes equipped with ABS brake systems have a huge advantage when you must sudden or hard brake in an emergency. These systems can save you if you overreact in an emergency stop. If you do not have ABS brakes, anticipate stopping distance and gradually brake by tapping the rear brake well before you need to stop. Unless you are fairly proficient with and know how to apply the front brake in these conditions, it’s recommended that you only use your rear brake. Never use your front brake while your wheel is turned, the rear brake when applied will help keep your bike upright. Remember that if you lock up your front tire while braking you will lose the ability to steer. Use caution when putting your feet down as they may slide out from under you or get caught by the rear foot rest and cause serious injury.

A first rain on a dry road is difficult to drive on and the first half hour of a rainstorm is the most dangerous time to ride on the road, even for cars. The mud and oil on the road combine with the water to form a slippery film. When at all possible opt to wait till the rain stops.

Railroad Crossings and Cattle Guards

Motorcycle tires can get caught in railway tracks and cattle guards causing a crash. Some railway crossing areas have metal or wood between the tracks, which become extremely slick when wet. When crossing these hazards it is best to enter at a 90 degree angle and as upright as possible to reduce the chance of your front tire sliding on the track. Many times there will be

a dip on each side of a cattle guard that can create a hazard especially if you cross them at an angle. Always be careful when crossing unsecured railroad tracks as trains are moving faster than they appear and cannot stop if you have a problem on the tracks.

Unimproved Shoulders

Drifting off or riding off a shoulder is potentially hazardous depending on the conditions. Many times you can encounter ditches, water, loose gravel, hidden rocks, and drops at the road edge, pot holes, and debris. If you find yourself having to go off a shoulder, remain as upright as possible, and maintain a firm grasp of the steering. Do not try to immediately swing back on the road as it is very possible that your front tire will slide to the side and cause you to lose control. Depending on space, guide the bike to a controlled stop away from the shoulder only braking when you have sufficient control. Remember, control first then brake.

Only attempt to re-enter the roadway when you are still at speed when the conditions are nominal, you are in full control of the motorcycle, have a wide view of the roadway and obstructions, and doing so is well within your skill and comfort level. It's almost always safer for you and those around you to come to a complete stop and regroup yourself in you are in this situation.

When riding in areas with unimproved shoulders riders should ride in a single file formation. If it is necessary to pull off the road onto an unimproved shoulder you should be aware of the potential drop off from the pavement and the possibility of gravel and rocks on the shoulder and attempt to ride off at as close to a 90 degree angle as possible.

If riding in a group that becomes separated, opt to slow down and allow others to catch up rather than pulling off the road on an unimproved shoulder or stopping in the road. Always use your hazard flashers when stopping on the side of the road. Why did I repeat this you ask? Because it is for your safety.

Rough Roads and Road Construction

Road construction is a pain, but we all get stuck riding in it. Rough roads can be cause by poor road design, roads being used by large trucks, road construction, poor road maintenance, resurfacing efforts, and the use of recycled materials which will leave marble sized gravel at the edges of the roads and in intersections. Slick materials that interfere with traction are applied to road surfaces with increasing frequency. A motorcycle's traction can be seriously compromised by bituminous rubberized asphalt sealer used for crack repair and plasticized adhesive pavement-marking tape. In most cases a single file riding formation is best when riding in construction areas.

Edge brakes occur when two traffic lanes are different heights. This is not a big deal if you are driving a car, but can be problematic for unsuspecting motorcyclists, especially when traveling on the freeway at high speeds. Current highway standards permit pavement ridges of up to 1.5 inches without tapering, which pose a significant hazard to motorcycles. Divots in the road caused by gouges in the road surface can cause riders to lose control when their front tire catches in the gouge.

Expansion joints connect two sections of a road together, or a section of a road to a bridge. They allow the road to expand or contract without cracking. The uneven surface can cause motorcycle riders to crash and can become slick in wet weather.

Many roadside barriers designed to retain cars and reduce injuries to automobile occupants are deadly to motorcyclists who collide with them. Wire-rope barriers are one example, but a motorcycle or the body of a fallen motorcyclist can also strike portions of other barrier designs in ways that an automobile cannot, causing severe injuries. Other roadside fixtures, such as signage, which may yield when struck by a car, can injure a motorcyclist who hits them. Even curbs can be deadly to a fallen rider who slides into them.

One may ask themselves why the Department of Transportation (DOT) not do more to make roads safer for motorcyclist. Because the DOT does not recognize or consider motorcycles when designing roads. The American Motorcycle Association and Motorcycle Safety Foundation are working hard to change this.

Gravel or Debris on the Road

Riding on two wheels is all about stability, and it doesn't take much to lose that precious stability when riding on sand, gravel, oil, and other debris. Always use a steady inputs on the brakes and throttle when riding on wet roads, dirt, loose gravel, and other slick surfaces to help maintain control of the motorcycle. If you're not careful when riding through these materials, you can easily lose traction, causing the bike to slide. Whenever possible, stop and evaluate the surface. If it looks unsafe, find another way around. If you must ride through the hazard, do so carefully and at a slow, safe speed. Most importantly, never use only the front brake. I use mainly the rear brake when I ride through hazards like these, and I'm careful to brake slowly and smoothly.

Gravel is one of the trickiest hazards for riders to navigate. It is particularly troublesome if encountered during cornering. Unfortunately, gravel on pavement tends to be more common on winding roads, which are popular with motorcyclist and which require lots of cornering. Accidents caused by gravel go hand in hand with motorcyclists who are going too fast and rider that do not have the requisite skills to ride a bike in such conditions. Gravel and mud on the road is common at intersections, in curves of roads, in areas where road construction is being done, at entrances and exits of gravel or cement plants, and after rains.

Debris or objects in the road, such as parts of tire treads, things fallen from trucks (furniture, tools, boxes), branches, or rocks, are more hazardous to motorcycles than cars. Not only can they cause a crash, but the object itself can hit and seriously harm the rider.

Once again it's important to look well ahead of your immediate space to see and recognize hazards in enough time to safely react to them. Using and passing of hand signals is extremely important for this and any hazard you encounter.

Animals

Animals commonly cross roads in and are often hit and killed. While hitting a small animal on a motorcycle may not cause a rider to go down, hitting a larger animal, such as a deer or wild hog, can cause serious injury or death. Rider should slow down in areas where animals may be present and care should be used when trying to swerve to miss animals in the road especially on curves. Remember that it is not the animal you see crossing the road, it is the others that are following the one in the road that create the most hazard. Many times the

animal will double back and turn right into you. Most animal movement will be at dawn and dusk. Always honk your horn to as you approach vultures and buzzards in the road or on the edge of the road feeding on road kill.

A growing problem in Texas is the explosion of the wild hog population. With this increase in population comes the growing possibility of encountering hogs crossing the road. Extreme caution must be used to avoid collisions with hogs because they are low to the ground, unpredictable, and run in packs. They are so solid they can even cause even cars and trucks to roll.

If hitting an animal is completely unavoidable, stay as upright as possible, maintain a firm grip on the handle bars, brake straight and as steady as possible without locking the brakes, and impact as straight and slow as possible.

Rain and Water Crossings

Riding in the rain is a fact of life. The better prepared for it the better off you are. Nothing beats a good rain suit that is put on before you get wet. Some of our members swear by the BMW rain suit, it is both heated and air conditioned, though it is a bit pricy. Always wear boots with nonslip soles for better traction.

Never try to cross any low water crossing unless it is less than two inches and is moving very slowly, if there is any ripples it is best not to cross and find an alternative route. Running water may cause a motorcycle to be swept off the roadway and cause serious injury. Enter low water crossings at a very slow steady speed, avoid the center line and follow the tire tracks where cars have passed through, These tracks usually have more traction and less algae and slick residue. As you pass through stay as upright as possible and avoid braking (if you must brake tap the rear brake only). If you are uncomfortable put your feet down and carefully “walk” the bike if it feels more stable to you. Do not accelerate when entering, riding through, or exiting the hazard. Instead, use a gentle throttle riding through and until your rear tire makes several revolutions out of the water. Continue to apply a gentle throttle to avoid fishtailing. Try not to coast thru the crossing as this often results in an over throttle or unnecessary braking when applied, if you are coasting thru a crossing you are going too fast.

If possible, wait until the rain has stopped before you ride a motorcycle. If you must travel in the rain, try to wait until it has been raining for at least one half hour before you hit the road. Care should be used anytime there is standing or running water on the road as this may hide deep pot holes or slick road surfaces. Remember with rain comes the possibility of low water crossings flooding, **TURN AROUND DON'T DROWN.**

Metal road surface components, either temporary or permanent, offer almost no traction, and when wet, can also be the most difficult to see. These may be present in construction areas.

Ice and Snow

While we do not see much snow and ice in Texas, it is more hazardous for motorcycles than for cars. There are very few legitimate reasons you should ride in snow, sleet, or icy

conditions and should only be attempted by the most experienced rider. If you must ride in these conditions wear a good helmet, heavy leather pants or chaps, heavy leather jacket, boots with nonslip soles, and good gloves. The more protection you have the better because you will most likely fall. The best option is to wait out the conditions or transport the motorcycle by trailer.

Blind Curves

When riding in the hill country we will encounter blind curves, especially along the Three Sisters. It is best to use a single file formation when riding these roads. Slow down when approaching these areas because not only they limit how far ahead you can see but they limit how far opposing traffic can see. They also hide dangers such as gravel or rocks in the road, cars swinging wide into your lane, and many times they have no shoulder to pull off on.

Many of the Texas backroads we have do not have a painted center stripe and the entire road becomes someone's "lane", especially with cars around switchbacks and blind corners, going too fast to negotiate the curve. Try to avoid the center line on blind corners and switchbacks, avoid hugging the shoulder but keep in the right 1/3 of the lane when taking curves. This path is counter to what you would normally do (outside to inside to outside path) but will provide a safer path of travel away from drifting traffic.

Remember to enter the curve at the speed in which you intend on going thru the curve avoiding or limiting using the brakes. If you do need to brake on a curve focus on tapping on the rear brake.

Fog

Fog is common when riding in Texas and riders should pay extra attention when it is encountered. The visual loss of the horizon can cause misjudgment of the motorcycles lean angle and a greater chance of low siding the motorcycle. Use the white line on the right hand side of the road as your reference and maintain a distance from it so if someone tries to overtake you from behind or the road curves you have sufficient time and space for you to react. Monitor your mirrors for cars coming up behind you and tap your brakes occasionally to draw attention from drivers behind you. Following the tail lights of a vehicle at a safe speed and stopping distance will help navigating the fog. Remember not to fixate on the headlights of oncoming traffic because the light may blind you and you may actually ride straight at the car.

Rider should slow down and use the low beam and fog lights if your bike is equipped with them. Always clean your headlights so they project a good wide beam. Clean your helmet visors and windshield with an anti-fog solution to help prevent accumulation of water droplets that will impede your vision.

Make yourself as visible as possible with the use of reflective and bright colored clothing. The use of reflectors and reflective tape will help increase your visibility to other riders. Remember some motorcycle colors are harder to see than others in fog.

If you breakdown or have to stop move off the road a safe distance as soon as possible to reduce the chance of cars hitting you.