

Cold-Weather Motorcycle Riding Tips

During the last two months we have conducted several rides in cold weather. While these rides show off some of the beautiful hill country, it can be very cold especially if you are not prepared. Being prepared can be the difference between a safe and enjoyable ride and a ride that is a test of endurance. If you are on a ride and discover that you are too cold bring this to the attention of the Road Captain and other riders, in many cases extra layers are available.

Several conditions come into play for riding in cold weather. These include low temperatures, wind, rain and dew, leaves, gravel on roads, and wildlife. Sometimes these conditions change as we are riding. It may be nice when we leave and the weather and conditions can change as cold fronts moving in, riding in low lying areas that trap cold air, open roads with no wind protection, winding hill country roads that may be damp from dew and have leaves and gravel, and possible rain or sleet. Being aware of these factors is very important for your safety and comfort, as well as the safety of the other riders.

On our rides our Road Captains strive to be aware of our riding conditions, weather conditions, and our fellow riders. During our pre-ride briefings and at stops on the ride we talk to and observe the participants to ensure they are ready for the rides. As participants on the rides, you have a responsibility to arrive prepared for the ride and in condition to ride.

It is also a good idea to carry emergency information that you may need such as Emergency contact, Insurance, tow service number, and medical insurance information on any ride.

Over years of riding 12 months a year, here are some of the things I've learned:

1. Wear Correct Motorcycle Gear in a Layering Fashion

Riding comfortably in cold weather begins with correct gear choice, and it's all about layering. Base Layers (full leg, full sleeve), such as those offered by Alamo City Harley Davidson, are a must. Thermal Underwear or Long Johns are also a good choice as a base layer. Even while riding we sweat, and the base layers allow our skin to breathe, wicking away moisture. This helps sweat evaporate rather than turning to cold perspiration on the body. Also wearing socks and gloves that wick away moisture help dramatically. Simple layering keeps the core warm, and as long as that core is protected from direct wind, things remain comfortable.

For most cold weather conditions, I simply wear a zip-up fleece or leather riding jacket with a neck collar over my base layers, which helps create an insulating barrier. If things get cooler, I always have another mid-layer, such as a fleece sweater that I carry in my trunk (one of the advantages of a trike).

Next is your outer layer. The outer layer will depend on the temperature and if there is rain. A leather riding jacket will be sufficient in most cases. Leather riding jackets can come with protective armor that can be removed. For milder weather a ventilated or textile riding jacket will suffice. For rain I swear by Gore-Tex due to the waterproofing and breathability, Alamo City Harley Davidson sells a very good rain suit. In a rain suit you want it to be breathable to prevent you from getting wet with sweat. Leather chaps or leather riding pants provide protection from

cold as well as rocks and road debris. Remember it is better to be over dressed in layers that can be removed, as conditions change rather than being unprepared.

As for footwear boots are better than shoes. Boots can be steel toed or not. It is important to have nonslip soles to reduce the chances of your feet from sliding in oil or gravel. Boots that cover the ankles provide protection from wind and injuries. Wool or breathable socks will keep your feet warm and prevent wick moisture away from the skin.

The proper glove selection can make a big difference in your overall comfort and safety in the winter. A good pair of gauntlet style gloves will serve you well. Avoid wearing your summer gloves that are ventilated. For additional warmth you can insert Hot Hands, which is a disposable single use package available at sporting good departments all over. Be sure the gloves you select will allow you to properly operate all the switches and controls on you motorcycle.

Next is a neck warmer, head sock or face mask to protect your face and neck from cold wind. Most of these are either fleece or foam which creates a barrier from the wind. I strongly recommend a good properly fitting helmet as essential for protection from the weather and against head injuries. A fog-free face shield is recommended to prevent you face shield from fogging over from your breath.

Heated gear is the preferred choice of many experienced riders. Though the technology in much of today's electric-heated gear is top notch, there's always a possibility of failure. When using heated gear, always carry extra fuses and know where and which fuse controls these accessories. Never replace a fuse with a larger fuse. Heated riding wear is available at Alamo City Harley Davidson.

2. Proper Motorcycle Prep for Winter Riding

The basics needed for cold-weather riding arrives at element protections, such as a huge windscreen, heated grips, handguards, lower fairings and proper maintenance.

A windshield makes all the difference in the world. The size of the windshield makes a difference too, the larger the better. They not only deflect cold, wind, rain, bugs, and rocks but they also make the ride more comfortable by reducing wind turbulence.

Heated grips are standard on some models but can be added to most motorcycles. Talk to the Parts and Service Department if you are interested in adding these.

Lower fairing or engine guard covers will help deflect cold wind and rain from your legs. Some fairings have wind deflectors that can be adjusted to control air flow.

It is wise to perform a T-CLOCS inspection before going on any ride. By doing this you reduce the chances of a breakdown or problem on the road. A copy of the T-CLOCS inspection is located on the ALAMO HOG web site on the Download tab.

Also, if your bike is water-cooled, make sure the antifreeze is fresh (should be changed yearly anyway), and it is mixed properly. Also make sure all hoses are in great shape. Nothing can be more devastating than a busted radiator or hose when you are miles from home.

It's that simple – cold weather means colder tires. And as everyone should now know, cold tires equate to limited traction. Riding helps increase heat in the tires, but even the briefest stop can quickly cool the tires down, providing lack of traction.

While on this subject, let's also discuss how you get heat in your tires. Many riders sway back and fourth like a NASCAR driver, but simply put, this is a waste of time. To truly get heat in the tires, accelerate and decelerate quickly for a bit, obviously being aware of traction. Tires will warm naturally during the ride and this is the preferred method.

Also, make sure you have adequate tread on your tires for winter riding. Buying quality tires designed for the conditions and the type riding you will be doing, this is truer-than-ever in winter-motorcycling scenarios. It may snow, sleet or rain and you'll need to channel water/snow more than ever on wet roads that are cold.

And check your tire pressure. This is more than crucial during the winter months when optimal traction is needed and tire pressure can change with temperature changes. The use of nitrogen in your tires instead of compressed air will help stabilize your tire pressure.

3. Watch for Road Damage, Gravel, Leaves, Water and Animals

Salt is not only an enemy to metal, but also traction. Treat salt like ice; if you see crystalized appearances on the side of the road, stay away. If at all possible wait till conditions that require Salting, spraying of de-icing solutions, and spreading of sand improve. Black ice can be present when temperatures are below freezing. It is important to be extra careful when riding over bridges, low spots, and on curves in the road.

As weather changes and much needed rain comes we need to be aware of leaves, gravel, water on the road as these can cause loss of control. In areas such as the Three Sisters where roads have been cut along the sides of hills and mountains, watch for loose or falling rocks, wet roads.

Cold wet weather can cause new cracks and chuck holes, sometimes huge and able to chew up rims or cause loss of control. This is one reason to remember to pass hand signals to the riders behind you even if the rider in front of you did not pass you the signal, as they may not have seen it in time. Once again remember to run correct tire pressure; you don't want to bend a rim or pinch a tube.

While riding in Texas no matter where you are you will see deer, raccoons, wild hogs, squirrels, possums and other wild life. Pay extra attention when riding especially early in the morning, early evening and after dark because these animals will be moving around feeding and moving to areas to bed down. Remember deer can't read and may not cross in the designated deer crossings!

4. Increase Visibility and Following Distance

While riding in the winter, increase your visibility and space. Increasing visibility simply means looking further down the road, helping you recognize hazards before they occur. Increased visibility allows you to react to a potential threat well in advanced, and this is more than needed in winter when traction is limited from the cold roads. A rule of thumb is always looking 12 to 15 seconds ahead.

Reflective and bright colored clothing will help others see you while riding. Other things that can be done to increase visibility include adding LED driving and brake lights, reflective tape, and using your hazard flashers.

As for following distance, open it up. Maintain a few car lengths of space ahead. This will allow you to react to hazards, such as cars ahead stopping, or being able to see something on the road. As conditions deteriorate, following distances and single file riding is called for.

5. Have a Motorcycle-Specific Towing Service

Accidents and breakdowns happen and are more likely to happen in cold-weather riding due to lack of traction or mechanical issues. Make sure you have a towing service that is readily available and is equipped and experienced in towing motorcycles.

Check your motorcycle insurance to see if you have towing insurance, if you don't consider it because it usually is a minimal charge.

6. Don't be a Dummy; If Snow or Rain Starts Falling, Get Home

The title says it all. If it begins snowing or raining, get home. We ride for the joy of riding. In Texas foul weather for the most part can be avoided, sometimes it is just a matter of changing your route or destination. If the weather turns bad find a place to pull over and stay warm, dry and safe. Most rains are just showers and will pass. Keep an eye on the forecasts, and if there's even a threat of a major weather event, keep the bike home.

Riding in the winter can be challenging, but these tips will allow motorcyclists to garner more miles throughout colder months. So ride smart and ride safe.