

Winters in the Northwest are Tricky

By Mark Caldwell

Winters here in the Northwest can be very tricky for motorcyclists, so let's all be extra careful to make sure we make it through safely. Most of us are pretty good about layering up in the winter months, and we know that if we get wet that it amplifies the effects of the cold, so we need to be even more careful. We have had articles in the past about the effects of hypothermia and how dangerous it can be, especially to the motorcyclist because one of the effects is to slow your reaction time and dull your senses. On a motorcycle, we need all the reaction time and sharpness of senses that we can get. And one of the tricks of Northwest Winters is to shine the sun making it appear to be warm, possibly even feeling warm while you're standing still, only to discover that it's much colder when you're moving.

Remember that just because you feel warm does not mean that the ground is warm or that your tires are warm. When you begin your ride, your tires will be cold and won't grip the road nearly as well as they do when they are warm. So be sure to account for this decrease in traction when you're making your turns.

Temperatures vary dramatically from place to place or even just from sunshine to shade. You may think that because the news says that the temperature is 40 degrees, it means that you won't face ice, but that's not necessarily true. First of all, you should ask yourself where that temperature reading was taken. The local Seattle news stations' broadcasts reach up into Canada, down to Portland, out to the ocean and up into the mountains. So just where was that temperature reading taken, and where will you be riding? As long as we're on that subject, have you noticed that the "current temperature" reading varies by several degrees, even among cities that are side-by-side?

Next, ask yourself whether all of the roads you will be riding on have been receiving direct sunlight all day. Will there be patches of shade where ice or frost could be hiding? What about minor hills and valleys? Ever been riding north up I-5 just past Everett on a cool autumn evening and felt that sudden chill as you pass through the cold zone? What happens if you do that when the temperature is hovering within a few degrees of freezing? And what about that bridge you have to cross that is exposed all around, and more likely to have ice or frost than the regular pavement on either side?

And another of my favorites is how fast the temperature changes when the sun goes down. Do you know what time sunset is and how that relates to your trip? You may be warm enough during the day, but will you be warm enough at night? Do you have one part of you that always seems to feel the cold regardless of what else you are wearing? It's time to address that and get the gear you need. Cold fingers will really hinder your ability to stop or swerve in an emergency, and that could be your undoing. Other cold parts are a distraction at the least, and possibly more dangerous than that.

By now, you may think I'm completely against riding in the winter months. I'm not. I especially enjoy a ride on a sunny clear-blue-sky day after weeks of rain or gray blah. I just want you to think through the things that you don't have to even consider in the summer time. You see, I want you to keep coming back and sharing the adventure with all of us. Ride Safe so you can ride longer!