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motosafe

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Safe Spring Riding

Making smart choices in all kinds of weather

With the grass greening and foliage budding, we often find ourselves in turbulent environmental conditions at the onset of the riding season. Mark Twain once observed. "Everyone talks about the weather, but no one does anything about it!" Let's at least talk about weather, and see if we can find some things to do about it.

PHOTO BY DAVID L. HOUGH

Rain

When the heavens open up while we are riding, we begin thinking about two major risk management issues: two-way visibility and traction. As an experienced rider, you know that other motorists often fail to see us at all, even on clear and sunny days. In the rain, our narrow vehicles can be even more difficult for others on the highway to see. Rainfall reduces visibility. Thunderclouds reduce ambient light-levels. Drivers in autos and trucks may be dealing with condensation on their windshields and rear-view mirrors, or aged windshield wiper blades. Spray from tires can suddenly reduce drivers' lines of vision. Your riding garments can help you increase your visibility on the road. Consider adding fluorescent colors to your garb, such as a bright rainsuit, a high-viz vest, or yellow, orange or red waterproof riding suit. Retro-reflective fabric and decals can increase the ability of others to see you, and lead them to think about your situation as a vulnerable human being, exposed to the elements. Then, assume these prescriptions do you no good at all; continue to think of yourself as invisible.

Two-way visibility in wet weather also refers to our ability, as motorcyclists, to see traffic and roadway conditions ahead of us and around our bikes. We should be thinking about continually adjusting our position and speed so as to maximize our sight lines, and to find places among other traffic that offer us the best available visibility. We keep away from trucks and buses with those big tires throwing spray up at us. We should work to create and maintain as much distance from other vehicles as possible, conditions permitting. We should signal our intentions to others well before making maneuvers. Remember to use those hand-signals, too!

Traction

Keep in mind that the period of time just after the onset of a rain shower is perhaps the riskiest to our traction management needs. Petroleum and antifreeze on the pavement combine with the rain water and rise to the top, making the highway excessively slippery for a time. Generally, a substantial rainfall will wash much of this gunk away after perhaps a half-hour. This might be your call for a coffee break.

Once cleaned of slimy substances by a rain shower, wet asphalt can provide a substantial amount of traction, compared to clean, dry pavement. Remember; in dry conditions, quality tires which are properly inflated and in roadworthy condition generally provide the rider with a level of predictable traction feedback. In wet conditions, much of this feedback disappears, and traction values can change suddenly from sticky to slippery without any warning. What causes this?

We ride on a variety of additional traction hazards in wet conditions, such as painted roadway markings and lines, steel manhole covers, train and trolley tracks, steel plates in construction zones, and steel or rubber diamond-plate at railroad crossings. Add leaves, pine needles and mud. How about those places where fluids drip from autos and trucks? Intersections, toll booths, and bumps and dips in the roadway can remain fouled

and slick during the hardest and longest rains.

Often overlooked by riders, we ride on overpasses and experience a bump or dip at the place where the asphalt gives way to the concrete bridge. Another abrupt dip happens where the asphalt begins again. Concrete sometimes has a lower coefficient of traction than asphalt, and the bump causes many autos and trucks to lose a drop or two of something slick on the road surface. After many vehicles pass, it accumulates. It isn't too much of an issue when we're traveling in a straight path, but we frequently encounter these

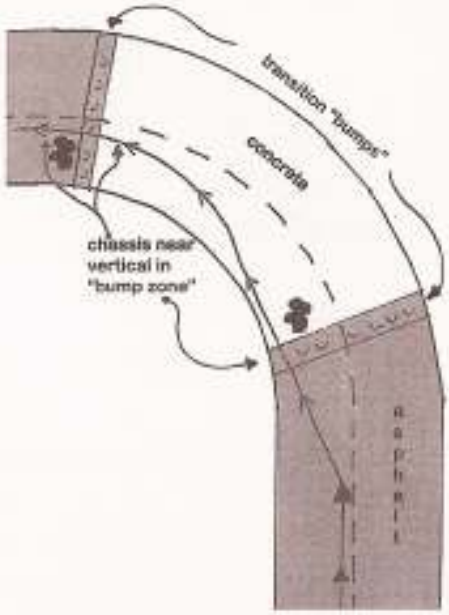

ILLUSTRATION BY MARK PILCHER

bumpy, slippery transitions on overpass bridges while leaned over in a turn. In lower traction conditions such as rain, a rider might chose a lane position near the inside of the curve as the bike approaches the transition bump. Just before the bump, he or she may straighten up slightly with a steady throttle to reduce traction demands while the motorcycle's suspension is cycling up and down in the turn as a result of the bump. This changes traction conditions for each tire abruptly. This path of travel can help avoid the slippery center of the lane. Of course, the rider will steer to remain within the travel lane. Wise use of our travel lane, all 12 feet of its width, can help us avoid sudden traction loss.

Proper braking technique in the rain is nearly identical to brake use in dry conditions. Both brakes are to be used simultaneously, but with somewhat less pressure on each than a rider might use in the dry. To enable us to use less braking pressure and still slow or stop as we intended, we

must tell ourselves to use less braking pressure for a long amount of time. In other words, begin braking sooner. Consider riding at speeds, both average and peak, somewhat slower than you might choose in clear, dry conditions. Remember David L. Hough's advice last month and get rid of speed you don't really need while it's easy to do.

Consider the effects on tire traction when riding on cold tires at the beginning of a ride, combined with cold pavement covered with moisture. Riding on a newly-installed tire in these conditions can be even more treacherous.

Tire condition, while always critical for a motorcycle, has increased importance when riding on wet pavement. Check tread depth and tire pressure; wet roadways are unforgiving to motorcycles sporting old, bald and soft tires. How about hydroplaning? This dangerous condition can be defined as riding on a film of water on a wet surface with a resulting decrease in braking and steering effectiveness. In effect, the tire is now waterskiing on a layer of standing water on the road surface. This is extremely bad news for our single-track family! When a motorcycle begins hydroplaning, the rider may experience vague or "mushy" steering feedback through the handlebars (front tires are more likely to hydroplane than rear ones, since their contact patch is usually smaller, and there may be a bit less weight on the front). To correct this condition, it is suggested that the rider immediately and smoothly roll off the throttle a bit (not all the way), and slide his or her foundation as far forward on the seat as is possible, leaning the torso over the tank. Be smooth as you move. For a given tire load, wider-profile tires are inclined to hydroplane more readily than a narrower tire carrying the same load. Proper tire condition, size, and pressure, go a long way in helping us avoid hydroplaning.

Our lane position should also be considered. When riding on flat plane road surfaces, we can reduce the amount of water, sleet or snow under the tires by riding in the tire tracks left by vehicles ahead. Beware, however, of roadways that have depressions in the road surface caused by high-volume heavy truck traffic. These collect water and can increase our risk of hydroplaning. Pick a tire position away from the deep blue sea. Standing water can hide other unhappy hazards, too, such as potholes, edge-traps and debris. If you can't actually see the pavement, try to ride somewhere else.

Extreme Conditions

Let's consider elements like hail, tornados, blinding storm fronts, lightning and suchlike that are common at this time of year. At highway speeds, hail HURTS! Depending on the ambient temperature and the size of the hailstones, traction may or may not be severely compromised. Each of us must use judgment. If ambient temperatures are near freezing, hailstones may remain intact on the road surface and accumulate. The larger the size of the hailstone, the greater the risk to traction and overall control. Tornados are clearly a severe threat to much more than our traction! We often encounter severe weather suddenly, as when the storm front is approaching us, regardless of our direction of travel. A sharp-edged storm front can change conditions from balmy and blue to dark and turbulent, accompanied by blinding rain in mere minutes. Tornados can form just as quickly. Lightning is a life-threatening risk for motorcyclists, rubber tires notwithstanding. Blinding rainfall reduces our forward sightlines so much that we strain to see the front fender of the bike. In the spring and fall, we can encounter not only sleet and snow, but also ice. Bridges collect ice before road surfaces. Fog can reduce visibility to near zero in mere seconds. Snowfall that begins to accumulate on pavement is your signal to call it a day.

Remember that we believe we're completely invisible during inclement conditions! Perhaps they will see us and our bike too late, or not at all.

Usually, the safest course of action is to seek shelter and wait for conditions to improve. That's not always as easy as taking the next freeway exit. It may be 50 miles ahead! Those scenic two-lane roads many of us love to explore may be just as bereft of shelter as any interstate highway in Texas or North Dakota. Think of the ubiquitous freeway underpass as your refuge of last resort. Riders who seek shelter under the bridge frequently trade one risk for others that may be even greater than the risk of staying on the highway. It's just not a very safe place for us. Other motorists and truckers are inclined to seek shelter there, too. Remember that we believe we're completely invisible during inclement conditions! Perhaps they will see us and our bike too late, or not at all. If you must seek shelter under a bridge, it is suggested that you get well away from both the motorcycle and the roadway itself. The wind blast from closely-passing traffic and the slopes of the road shoulder or the surface are not very friendly to your side stand. This increases the possibility you may watch the bike tip over, maybe right into the path of other traffic.

Try to eschew underpasses, and seek shelter elsewhere. Are you caught on the Great Plains in tornado weather or a lightning storm? A drainage ditch or culvert may be your safest option if nothing more substantial is nearby. Your personal safety, and that of other people, should be your principal concern. Security of the motorcycle itself is secondary.

Think about what you see in the heavens throughout your ride. Often, the signs of impending bad weather are there for all to see, but some riders blithely proceed without considering the risks apparent. Technology, in the form of wireless phones and GPS units that display current weather maps, give us some advantage. Use them if you have them.

This spring, ride safe, ride often, and think about reducing your risks as you ride.

Write to MotoSafe! Questions, concerns, disagreements ... we'd love to hear from you! Professional trainers, please think about what you can contribute to our riding family. Consider submitting a MotoSafe article!