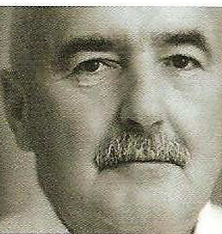


Driving at night brings its own dangers and rules, writes Gerry Buckley

DANGERS OF THE DARK



GERRY BUCKLEY



Driving at night can be easier than driving during the hours of daylight; there is often less traffic and approaching headlights can usually be seen from a considerable distance. The most dangerous time for driving is during twilight or dusk, between the daylight and onset of darkness, or just before the dawn when the dark is making way.

But darkness has its significant perils. There are significant dangers at night caused by poor visibility, such as unseen cyclists, pedestrians and animals. Therefore, you must remember one of the basic rules of good driving - the requirement to stop your vehicle within the distance you can see to be clear. The law states: "A driver shall not drive his vehicle at a speed exceeding that which will enable him/her to stop his vehicle within the distance he/she can see to be clear".

This means driving more slowly at night time especially where there is no street lighting or you are driving in the unlit country; you must be able to bring your vehicle to a halt within the distance illuminated by your lights. This can often be below the daytime speed limits. On dipped lights along a main road this will necessarily mean that your speed has to be lower at night than driving during the day. With local knowledge you might know the road; but the dark

brings hidden dangers. When dropping from main to dipped lights reduce your speed to a level appropriate to your shorter range of vision.

You can maximise your vision and reduce dazzle by keeping your windows and mirrors clean. Always make sure your lights, reflectors and indicators are clean. See and be seen. Replace wiper blades frequently. In wet weather a worn wiper blade leaves streaks on windscreens and reduces your vision during the hours of darkness. Check frequently that all your car's lights are working properly and legally adjusted.

Fog lights should only be used in heavy fog and switched off when the fog has lifted. It is the norm for the vast majority of Irish drivers to use fog lights all the time. It is an offence to use them when not required.

It can be annoying driving behind a vehicle with its high intensity lights on when they are no longer required. Drivers should think and concentrate when driving; showing consideration to other road users and avoid being selfish.

If you are dazzled by approaching lights, slow down and look away from the source of danger. It takes time for your eyes to get used to the lower light levels when leaving brightly lit locations. Before you commence a journey it is a good idea to allow a couple of minutes for your eyes to adjust to darkness. The human eye reflex muscle will contract faster than it will allow the aperture to open; if you are dazzled it can quickly contract the pupil to shut out unwanted light, it takes much longer to dilate afterwards. For several seconds after the vehicle has passed, you may be driving with severely restricted vision.

Dazzle from a following vehicle can be as blinding. Most cars have dipped interior mirrors to reduce this problem. Always remember to return the mirror to its normal position when a dazzle recedes since driving on a dipped mirror can make a following vehicle look much further away than it is in reality.

Motorway driving can be very monotonous, especially at night. Be very wary of broken down vehicles parked unlit on the hard shoulder, stay alert and allow fresh cool air into your car.

Cat's eyes are one of our safest and oldest inventions used to make driving safer. Also, when driving on country roads you will see green and white poles to outline junctions. Be alert, on long journeys the cat's eyes or road markings can have a mesmerising or hypnotic effect that can detract from concentration, sending the driver into a 'trance-like' state. Regularly check mirrors and reset your vision.

Engineers have made roads safer, while car manufacturers have made our vehicles more comfortable and safer to drive with modern technology. It is now up to the drivers to reduce the carnage by slowing down and using our vehicles skillfully and with thought.

When travelling at night always equip yourself with the basic survival kit - a good torch, a high viz vest for each car occupant, a safety triangle and a fully charged mobile phone.

At night time, be safe - be seen - slow down. ■

Gerry Buckley is the chief driving instructor at Drive 2 Arrive, a Tipperary based company which specialises in offering advanced driver tuition to both individuals and companies alike. For further information log onto to www.drive2arrive.com.