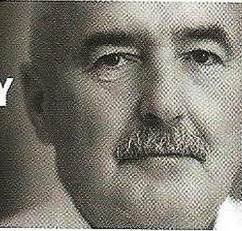


GERRY BUCKLEY



Winter conditions can exasperate dangers on the road, Gerry Buckley advises preparation, consideration and maintenance to ease the way

WINTER BLUES

As clocks have gone back to winter time producing darker evenings closing in, our road carnage shows no signs of abating. Driving is demanding on concentration, and while many drivers approach it as second nature, every journey is a new event to which we don't know the outcome. Long journeys, no matter how straightforward, are tiring. Driving when visibility is reduced becomes more energy sapping and stressful; and one lapse in concentration or simply not seeing a danger can prove devastating. It can be made more comfortable by proper, simple preparation.

With the deep winter approaching drivers should prepare for completely different conditions and ready their vehicles accordingly so they don't add to the ever increasing statistics of road fatalities. Three key elements to winter driving are staying alert, slowing down, keeping in control; always driving according to the condition of the road, weather and traffic conditions.

Keeping a safe distance between you and the vehicle in front of you should be the unexpected arise – practically achieved using the two-second rule - and double it in poor weather conditions.

Pick a marker on the road ahead, such as a road sign or telephone pole. When the vehicle ahead passes the marker, count "one thousand and one, one thousand and two". When your vehicle reaches the marker, stop counting. If you reach the marker before you count "one thousand and two," you are following too closely. In winter, and especially during poor weather conditions, double the two-second rule.

Remember a driver should not drive his vehicle at a speed exceeding that which will enable him to stop it in the distance he can see to be clear. Adjust your driving to the constantly changing conditions. Always drive within your own – and your car's – limits.

Every vehicle should be winter ready with a full service and maintenance check-up to make sure it is 100% roadworthy. A battery that might seem perfect during the summer months will suddenly fail at the first bad frost. Check all belts, hoses, and coolant and oil levels, brake fluid and power steering fluids. Making sure you have sufficient windscreen washer fluid in the reservoir with proper cleaning additive

A safety kit in your vehicle should include:

- Torch
- Mobile phone
- First aid kit
- Fire extinguisher
- Fluorescent bibs for each passenger
- Blanket or sleeping bag
- Additional warm clothing



could make the difference between driving comfortably compared with the high-anxiety of suddenly being caught in poor conditions with improper visibility.

All lights and lenses should be properly adjusted and cleaned for night driving. Checking brake pads for signs of wear is essential.

Overtired

Have your tyres checked or replaced before winter begins and check tyre pressures regularly as they decrease in very cold weather. Worn or damaged tyres can hamper the ability to drive safely. The list goes on, but making sure that every component is fit for purpose can make the difference between life and death when travelling.

Wiper blades need to be changed regularly. Like tyres they also wear and nothing is worse than driving on a wet and windy evening in heavy traffic with poor visibility because wipers are not up to performance. Oncoming lights on a streaking window are both dangerous and extremely tiring. Wiper blades are cheap. Make sure all windows are completely clean.

Always have more fuel than needed to complete your journey, especially if the traffic is heavy.

On a winter's morning make sure your car is completely heated up before commencing your journey and that all windows and mirrors are completely thawed.

Never leave a car unattended with the engine running – even just to warm up. If it is stolen with the keys left in the ignition the insurer may not cover the claim.

Early in the morning the road surface is at its most dangerous, having had the whole night to freeze up. Bridges are particularly disposed to black ice, because the road can freeze both from above and below.

As a rule of thumb, always drive on dipped headlights. Only use fog lights in poor conditions such as heavy rain or fog and switch them off immediately when conditions improve. (It is an offence to use them otherwise)

Wear comfortable clothing that doesn't restrict your movement while at the wheel. Keep warm and waterproof clothing for getting out of your vehicle. Always carry a fluorescent bib for each passenger that you carry. Have this bib within the passenger area of the car and leave them there in case of an emergency. You'll be glad you did.

If you are travelling a long distance, plan your route ahead of time. Let someone know of your destination and expected time of arrival. Check weather and travel conditions before heading out.

Don't take chances if the weather is bad. Allow yourself extra time for travel or wait until conditions improve. In our modern world with our technological advances we have come to expect unrestricted travel; this myth can be shattered in an instant. ■

Gerry Buckley is a retired Garda Driving Instructor from the Garda College, Templemore and qualified as a Class 1 Police Driving Instructor at the Scottish Police College.