

# MOTORCYCLING IN THE RAIN

Riding in the rain safely is a matter of dressing properly, understanding traction, making sure you can see, and making that you are seen. Information from the April 1998 issue of Motorcycle Cruiser magazine. By Art Friedman



**Seeing and being seen are bigger concerns than traction.**

The key element in being able to enjoy a day riding in the rain is good rain gear. These days virtually all rain suits from reputable motorcycle-accessory firms will keep you dry in a torrent. The factors that set some apart are ease of entry, conspicuous colors, and comfort. Waterproof boots and any one of several styles of waterproof gloves complete the job. You can ride all day in the rain in complete comfort and arrive at least as dry as if it had been sunny.

One tip here: The inside of gloves seem to stay dry longer if you put the gauntlets under the cuffs of your rain suit or jacket. This keeps water from running down into the cuffs, but not all cuff-glove combinations permit it.

There is nothing like a hard, biting rainstorm to convince someone of the advantage of a full-coverage helmet. Rain drops can hurt at 65 mph, so you want your face covered. You may also not want the dark lenses of your sun glasses. A full-coverage face shield on an open-face helmet will block the rain drops, but lets more water get onto your face and drip down the inside of the shield of a full-face helmet.

Staying comfortable is important. Soggy socks or water running down your crotch distract you from the task at hand. Furthermore, if you get wet and cold, fatigue erodes that mental edge you need to stay ahead of the traffic around you.

Once you have dressed for the rain, you have only two issues to confront: **traction and vision.** Traction seems to be the primary concern for most riders, usually because they aren't sure how much grip they have available. While some surfaces--metal fixtures such as manhole covers and bridge gratings, painted areas, and places where built-up oil and grease have not washed off--become much slipperier when wet, you can actually call on a surprising amount of traction on clean asphalt or concrete.

How much? The easiest way to test traction is to feel for it with your rear brake. Assuming you know how much deceleration you can develop on dry pavement before the rear tire breaks loose, you have a gauge of what's available if you repeat the test when the road is wet. This also assumes that you have a reasonable amount (say 3/16 of an inch) of tread depth. If you do this at moderate speeds on a flat, straight road, it won't become a thrill ride. Avoid locking up the rear wheel on a steeply crowned road, where it will tend to slide downhill and out of line.

You also can do a couple of things to improve traction. Premium aftermarket tires are virtually certain to give better wet-road grip than original-equipment tires. With its new CruiseMax tire, [Dunlop](#) says that most cruisers will run out of ground clearance long before they come up short on cornering traction on a clean but wet road surface. Other good tires will provide similar performance. A slight increase in tire pressure also improves the wet-weather traction of any tire. Increasing your tire pressure by five p.s.i. or less helps to cut through the film of water and prevent hydroplaning. Just don't take that to mean you can venture out on bald tires with a bit more air in them.

Some situations should be confronted with extreme caution. Railroad tracks can bite you hard when they are wet. The standard advice is to try to cross railroad or other metal tracks at a right angle, even in the dry. When they are wet, this is imperative. Otherwise, you risk having the tire slip into the groove alongside the track, which will immediately ruin your whole day. Other large metal road surfaces or metal sections running parallel to your direction of travel -- some expansion joints, for example -- are equally hazardous and should be approached cautiously and upright. A thin strip of metal can usually be crossed while leaned over mildly; tires slip then catch again after crossing. However, a large metal surface such as a bridge grate, a manhole cover or a cattle guard, may permit the tire to slip too much to recover traction. Painted surfaces can be almost as slippery as metal.

Places where the oil doesn't get washed away by rain falling on it can be thrilling. Watch out for surfaces where water gets carried in but doesn't fall on the road with the force or in the quantity to remove the oil. Toll booths and parking garages offer a chance to experience this sort of low-traction excitement.

**Make Only Smooth Moves:** Turning a motorcycle on such a slick surface demands an ultra-smooth approach. Getting on the brakes abruptly or making a sudden steering input could put you in the guardrail. So you want to be slowed down before you go in there and keep the throttle neutral all the way through --and be ready for cars that might get unstuck and block the whole mess. That smooth approach to speed and direction changes will serve you well on all wet roads. Initiate your turns a bit more gradually. Downshift smoothly, engaging the clutch a bit slower than usual, and avoid abrupt throttle changes. Get on the throttle progressively. Use a taller gear to reduce the forces reaching the rear tire. Apply the brakes in such a way that the tires are not loaded abruptly. Allow more space to stop or slow down so that you need less. And also make sure that drivers around you have time to react to your moves.

## Vision

The ability of other drivers to see us could be the single biggest issue a motorcyclist must confront in the rain. With low light, windows obscured, and a streaked and possibly fogged windshield, the driver of a car may have a very difficult time seeing the world ahead. If you are wearing black, or even worse, a neutral color like gray or olive drab, you blend into that gray world. A bright yellow rain suit is probably the best choice for conspicuity and the single simplest way to make your wet-weather rides safer, though white is also an excellent choice and even better than yellow at night. Fluorescent colors also help during the day and retro-reflective striping or panels on your rain suit, helmet or a pack also help at night. A visible helmet color also makes a difference at night.

You can confirm this when you are out in rainy weather. Notice how early you pick up a motorcyclist, bicyclist or pedestrian who is dressed for conspicuity. Compare how close a dull-colored person gets before you see him. Also pay attention to how difficult it is to see out of a car in the rain. You may think you are easy to see, but the reality from inside a car can be quite different.

How about your own ability to see? Even with a face shield that's wet on both sides, you probably have a better view of the situation around you than the average car operator does in the rain. The drops on a face shield (or goggles) are inside your focal point and are just vague blurs when you focus on the road ahead. However, your view can be impaired by face shield fogging or a windshield that rises into your line of sight. Unlike a face shield, a windshield is well out in your focal range, and the water on both sides makes it hard to see through. [Rain-X](#) does help disperse water on both face- and, more importantly, windshields.

Anti-fogging solutions and the Fog City Fog Shield effectively stop fogging, although the Fog Shield is not recommended for use at night because it creates some ghost images. Even if you don't have a commercial anti-fog solution, a thin layer of hand or dish soap will stop fog. You can wipe it on wet or dry, then polish it off.

## Rainy Night

For many motorcyclists, the demons come out on a rainy night. Each of those raindrops on your face shield or goggles picks up a pinpoint of light from every light around you. Riding behind a windshield that is too tall to see over is extremely difficult, which is why we caution against that configuration. Oncoming cars can completely obscure your vision. A timely wipe of your face shield can help, but you may be unable to see the road at all for a moment. Puddles may be completely undetectable.

On the other hand, lights that aren't so bright -- such as taillights -- reflected in the road surface ahead can show you features of the road surface that your headlight doesn't illuminate. A preferred strategy is to follow (at a distance that keeps me out of its spray) a vehicle with lots of taillights, watching the point where they are reflected to pick out potholes, seams, or objects lying in the road. Watching the vehicle will also warn you of large puddles, which could cause hydroplaning if you hit them fast enough.

Even at night a motorcyclist has a few aces to play. One advantage of a motorcycle is your high view point compared a person in a car. At night, this allows you a better view of the road surface because you have a steeper angle of view. As a result, it's easier to see striping, and other shallow features. You can also use the reflective qualities of wet surfaces to your advantage. Wet utility wires or tree branches can warn you of a car approaching over a hill or around a corner. Brake lights reflected under a truck can alert you of an impending stop.

## Rain Riding

Most riders get used to riding in the rain by accident. They takeoff on an all day ride when the sun is shining and by afternoon they realize they're going to get their first taste of wet asphalt, like it or not. Those who accept it soon find themselves venturing back into the rain, sometimes at their own will.

Many never ride in the rain the first year they're up on two wheels. They're timid about it the second year, feeling more confident by the third and by the fourth year they're asking the question - "What Rain?" So suppose you're thinking about getting on a wet road for the first time, or perhaps you've done it a few times, or perhaps you do it so much you're not thinking about what the hazards are.

Here's a list of critical rain hazards to watch for and look for:

**Painted Lines** - Crosswalks can be unsafe for motorcyclists, particularly if you're turning right or left and crossing the lines at an angle. Slow down more than usual and make the turn straight up, rather than in a lean.

Ditto for diamonds in the HOV lanes. Very nasty when you lean into one, especially on the freeway. The diamond is shaped so you just slide across it and continue to slide along it. Any painted line is a hazard.

**Surface Textures** - Many commercial and residential parking areas are paved with very slick concrete surfaces. Your wet entry into the local mall or condo complex can put you on the ground in a second. Again, ride slow and straight up and don't let the concrete bite you.

**Rubber** - If you thought you might save some money by buying long lasting tires, think again. Such tires are typically not as tacky and have less traction when the rain comes out. Next time you change tires look for the tackiest one that will take care of you better during your northwest riding adventures.

How about that rubber they use around railroad tracks to decrease the sound as cars drive over them? Forget those little circles on the surface, these provide zero traction to you as you cross. Slow and straight up.

**Steel** - Manhole covers are enemy number one and railroad tracks rank a close second. Making a turn over the surface of them sets you up for trouble. Avoid such, or keep the bike straight up and cross over it slowly.

Railroad tracks have a way of popping up on you just after a turn and you may still be into a lean when you reach them. Look for the crossing signs ahead of time, slow down and stay straight up when crossing.

Grated bridge crossings and metal plates are a nasty encounter in the rain. Look at where you want to ride, take it slow and don't try any fancy dancing, particularly a lane change.

**Water** - Puddles/Pot Holes - It only takes once to know how this one feels. You cruise through a puddle and after it's too late you realize you just went into a pot hole that wants to suck you into the underworld more painfully than Satan himself beating you down with a stick. Avoid puddles if you can. Use caution and predict the possibility ahead of time. Recovery from this rude awakening is not always easy. Pull over and take a few minutes of rest if you need to gather your wits.

**Oil** - It's everywhere and very illusive. Those little red and blue rainbows on the ground mean danger. Ride slow and straight up. If you're caught in the first rain following a few dry days remember the roads are covered with lots of oil and dirt that will be lifted from the surface in the first 30-60 minutes of a new rain. Take a coffee break if you can.