

Extend Your Riding Season: Cold Weather Strategies

Old man winter lets loose a final blast to knock that last orange leaf to the ground. For some, it's time to roll the two-wheeled companion into a corner of the garage, throw the battery on a trickle charger, and hope for an early spring. For others, there is no end to the riding season, just a change in riding gear.

No, we're not talking about those who live in perpetual sunshine and warmth, but rather, folks who don't let cold weather deprive them of their favorite form of transportation. With a little knowledge and a few cold weather tricks, your riding season can be extended.

Here are some strategies for dealing with the worst winter has to offer:

Ice

Black ice — really just an ominous name for hard-to-see frozen water on the road — can occur any time the temperature has been near the freezing point, or where frost can form. Some touring bikes have an air-temperature thermometer, but adding one to any bike is a cheap fix.

Bridges are susceptible to icing because they are disconnected from the warmth of the Earth and cool faster when air temperatures drop. Watch for spots on the road that are shaded from the sun. Well-traveled roads are often better, because passing traffic melts and dries the moisture.

If you do feel like you're on an icy patch, don't make any sudden moves, and don't touch the brakes. Pull in the clutch and let the bike coast until you're clear.

Hypothermia

That cold shiver up your spine isn't just uncomfortable. It could also be a warning.

Hypothermia occurs when your core body temperature drops significantly, and it can be deadly.

Temperatures don't need to be below freezing to induce hypothermia. Wind chill gets worse as wind speeds increase, and the longer you're out, the worse it gets.

One early sign of potential hypothermia occurs when you start feeling cold and you can't decide if you should pull over or not. The answer is always yes, but your judgment may be clouded. Long before this point occurs, you should have pulled into that nice warm cafe and had some hot chocolate or soup.

Uncontrolled shivering and chattering teeth are signs of real danger. You may start to feel dizzy, or even drunk, as your muscles begin to stiffen. Continued exposure may cause the shivering to slow down or even stop, but by then you're in serious trouble.

The well-dressed rider

How do you mitigate the dangers of cold weather? First of all, cover up.

It all boils down to insulating your body. To do that, you need to layer.

Synthetics work better for your inner layer than cotton, which holds moisture against your skin. On top of that, wear fleece, wool, or other layers that provide insulation. The idea is to let your body create a warm pocket of air between you and the environment.

Finally, you need to stop the environment from stealing your warm air. Your outer layer needs to block the wind. Leather works; denim, for example, doesn't. These days, we also have a broad array of choices in nylon gear made specifically for motorcycling that provides versatile weather protection with vents, removable liners, waterproof membranes, adjustable fit, etc. If you choose outerwear that isn't waterproof, such as a leather jacket, be sure to carry a rainsuit that fits over it. Getting wet robs you of your insulation.

Whichever outer layer you choose, remember that it should provide crash protection, too. Buy gear made for motorcycling, not the fashion show.

Hands can be particularly vulnerable to the cold. Gauntlet-style gloves will help you seal the gap between gloves and jacket. Gloves with a breathable, waterproof liner will keep rain out while allowing moisture from perspiration to escape.

It may be obvious, but a full-face helmet will keep you warmer than no helmet, or an open-face helmet. Sealing the area around your neck with a bandanna, or better yet a fleece or wind- and waterproof neck warmer, can make a dramatic difference. A balaclava (right) under the helmet provides a lot of additional comfort for minimal bulk.

What about the bike?

No matter how well you're dressed, cold air has a way of sneaking in and robbing heat. The longer you're on the road, the worse it gets. Your front line in the defense against cold is to block the wind.

A windshield or fairing is a good front-line defense. Mounting a small windshield on your handlebars, if your bike doesn't have one, can be enough to divert the wind off your chest and help keep your upper-body vital organs warm.

Going electric

No matter how well you dress, if you're on the road long enough, you'll lose more heat than your body can generate. Long riders resort to electrical assistance.

Heated clothing, which uses your bike's electrical system to power heating elements, makes a huge difference by not just insulating you, but adding heat to the whole equation.

Gloves start around \$100. Vests, depending on the style, can go from \$100 to \$200. Socks can range from simple D-cell powered items that sell for around \$25, to \$90 systems that hook into the rest of your electric riding gear.

Make sure your charging system can handle the load. Find out the output of your charging system, add up the draw from all your electrical gear, and make sure you're not draining your battery. Also, leave a margin of error, because your bike's output may be measured at cruising rpms and it may produce considerably less electrical power at idle.

For many riders, a vest alone is enough. If you keep your torso warm, your body will focus on pumping warm blood to your extremities. If your torso gets cold, your body will abandon the extremities to try to keep the vital organs warm, and that's when you can suffer from dangerously numb hands or, possibly, frostbitten toes.

Chemical options

Another option is a lightweight, disposable heat pack, which offers a different kind of protection.

Imagine you're out for a ride on a nice fall day. You're so consumed with the changing leaves that you don't notice how far you've ridden. It's getting dark and cold — fast. A bit of quick heat can make all the difference.

An outdoor gear store, or even one of the big-box retailers that sell recreational goods, will have chemical packs of the type hunters use. Be careful, because some can produce up to 150 degrees, so don't put them next to bare skin.

Keep hydrated

One last thing to think about — that you might not think about: Drink lots of liquids. Dehydration may be foremost in your mind in the hot months, but you still lose moisture in winter. Cold, dry winter air can suck moisture out of you and you may not notice that you're perspiring.