

Without a doubt, the winter of 2023 – 2024 has been very mild thus far. As of the time of writing this, we have made it into the new year without seeing a major snowstorm that made travel difficult or impossible. Having lived a long time in Minnesota, I’m willing to bet that sooner or later, our luck will run out and old man winter will return to reclaim the north with wind and snow. Today, I’d like to offer up some safety tips for when these difficult driving conditions return.

First, a reminder of the stuff that everyone who has spent more than 10 minutes in a Minnesota winter knows about winter driving. Slow down and increase your following distances when it snows. Less traction means your vehicle needs more time to do vehicle things, especially turning and braking. Modern vehicles are technological wonders and their all-wheel drive systems are very good at getting us moving. Sometimes too good. A false sense of security can fall upon the driver as the vehicle takes full advantage of the available traction under acceleration, with all four tires sharing the work. Once in motion, turning or braking become problematic for vehicles moving too fast during slick road conditions. While turning and braking, the front tires must do all or most of the work. Two tires aren’t going to be able to slow or steer a vehicle that was accelerated to the edge of the available traction using all four tires. Slow down to avoid crashes or unscheduled stops in the ditch.

If you should find yourself in a crash or in the ditch, make your personal safety a priority. Every crash is different, but in almost every case, you are safest inside the passenger compartment of your vehicle both during and after a crash. In a crash with extensive vehicle damage and serious injuries, calling 911 and staying put is likely your only option until emergency responders arrive. For those less serious incidents, keep in mind you are on a roadway that, presumably, is hazardous for travel. Exiting your vehicle could put you at risk of being struck by another vehicle encountering the same driving hazard that caused you to crash. Vehicle crashes can be very upsetting, and it might feel natural to get out of the vehicle and examine your situation. Waiting to conduct this assessment until after emergency responders arrive and make the crash scene safer will keep you from further injury.

Advancements in vehicle technology and communication technology have made the prospect of getting stranded in your vehicle much less likely today than they were a decade or two ago. These technology systems have their limitations and Minnesota winters are known for pushing technology to the breaking point. A winter survival kit is a great addition to any Minnesota vehicle. The Minnesota Department of Public Safety has some good suggestions for winter driving preparedness in the brochure found at this link: <https://dps.mn.gov/divisions/ots/educational-materials/Documents/Winter-Survival-Brochure.pdf>. The best advice I can give anyone who finds themselves stranded in a vehicle is to stay with the vehicle. Your vehicle, even if the engine or heating systems stop working, is still your best shelter in winter weather. Your vehicle is also much easier for rescuers to locate than a person outside the vehicle. The wind, snow, and cold of a winter storm can quickly overwhelm even the most fit person turning

what appeared to be an achievable walk into a tragic misjudgment. Stay in your vehicle and call 911.

We've been fortunate thus far this winter driving season, but winter is coming. Prepare your vehicle and practice these tips to stay safe this through this winter driving season. For more crime prevention information and safety information visit the Benton County Sheriff's Office website at: <https://www.co.benton.mn.us/211/Crime-Prevention>. You can also like and follow us on Facebook and Twitter at @BentonMNSheriff for regular updates and crime prevention messages.