

Winter Riding Tips

THE BIKE

- A mountain bike, hybrid bike or single speed works well for winter commuting.
- Full suspension is generally not a good choice for winter riding. Grit, grime and sand can wreak havoc with the gearing and suspension.
- **Snow Bikes.** The primary advantage a snow bike offers is wider tires. These wider tires give you better floatation over the snow, which not only makes it easier for you to ride, but also has less impact on the trail (this is very important if you are using the multi-purpose ski trails). Snow bikes are generally fairly expensive, and many claim to get by with a hybrid mountain/urban city bike, even one with narrow tires (as long as they'll carry a studded tire).
- **Tire Pressure.** Decrease the amount of air pressure in tires for riding on snow. You will get better floatation, and leave less of an impact on the trail. I actually update my air pressure for the conditions: if the snow gets softer, I let less air out. If it firms up, I add some back in.

MAINTENANCE

- **Keep the bike dry.** If you ride in fresh snow and get snow built up on the frame, clean it off with a cloth when you get home, making sure to dry off the chain too. Be sure to keep the chain lubed.
- **Road salt.** Road salt can be bad for both the bike and your clothing. Generally speaking the best way to avoid road salt is simple: don't ride in the sluff thrown off from the plows. More information on this under **CONDITIONS**.

GEAR

- **Lights.** Lights are a must. They serve two purposes: to help you see the path, and to help others see you.
 - At a minimum, have a white blinking light facing forward and red blinking light facing backward. This ensures you can at least be seen from ahead and behind by drivers.
 - Blinking lights do not help you see the road. You will need another light for this purpose if you travel along roads or paths that are not lighted.
 - Mount your lights at a height where drivers can see you from a far distance away.

- A light mounted to your helmet serves two purposes. It lights up whatever you look at, and it easily catches the attention of drivers. When you look at their car, the head lamp lights up the inside of their vehicle. It's a powerful combination to have both a head lamp and the strobe.
 - Lighted and reflective arm and leg bands will help you be seen from the sides.
 - Reflective tape placed on your bike frame can also help drivers see you from all directions.
 - A red blinking light attached to the back of your helmet will add an additional light for drivers to see you.
 - Blinking red lights for the ends of your handlebars will further increase your visibility.
- **Studs.** Studded tires are highly recommended for safe cycling in winter conditions. Without studs, one ice patch in an intersection can cause a serious accident, while with studs, you can maintain great control. The more studs on a tire, the better. Carbide tip have a much longer life, as opposed to steel studs, and will give you great performance for roughly three to upwards of six years. Peter White Cycles also has a great description of which studded tires work best under different conditions (www.peterwhitecycles.com). If cost limits you from investing in studded tires, you can stud your own tires.
 - **Fenders.** If your commute is predominantly on snow covered paths, it may be better to ride without fenders, as snow can build up under them and increase your riding resistance. However, BCA recommends combining fenders with studded tires if your commute is a mix of road riding and snow-covered paths. Additionally, fenders are recommended once the spring thaw comes around. In those conditions the fenders protect you from melt water, and the studs help you with the remaining ice.
 - **Helmets.** Some winter commuters like using ski helmets, as they provide extra warmth.
 - **Cell phone.** It's always a good idea to carry a cell phone in case you have troubles with your bike or fall and get hurt.

CONDITIONS

- **Snow plows.** Some areas are plowed by the state, some by the Muni. The general rule is that if the bike trail / sidewalk is along the side of the road where the big plows can reach them, it's an area the State takes care of. The bike trails / sidewalks offset from the road are taken care of by the Muni. If there is an area of your commute that needs to be plowed, and you have already waited 48 hours, you can contact them using the resources listed below. I have had very positive results from both agencies, sometimes receiving a call back from them within the hour.
 - Muni - <http://webapps1.muni.org/pdpw/streetmaint/feedback/>
 - State: 338-1466
 - If you are not sure who to contact check out our website, www.bicycleanchorage.org.

- **When NOT to ride**
 - Too soon after a heavy snow. What's a heavy snow? In my opinion, anything beyond 3 inches of wet snow, or 5 inches of light snow. I recommend waiting 24 – 48 hours after a good snowfall, to give the Muni and State plows time to clear the bike trails, sidewalks, and roads.
 - Never ride on the multipurpose ski trails just after they have been plowed, and before they have had time to set. Not only will you have a hard time, as your bike will sink down like you are riding through mashed potatoes, but you endanger skiers by rutting out the trail. They can catch the tips of their skis in the ruts you create.
- **Sluff.** The fresh sluff thrown off from plows is a real problem. It is like riding in quick sand. It is even worse than riding through deep wet snow. It also contains road salt, which is hard on both your bike and your clothing. If an area of your commute still contains sluff two days after the plows are done with the roads, call the appropriate agency and request they plow the area.
- **Plan B.** You need to be prepared in case unpredictable conditions like sluff or moose make a leg of your commute impassible. You may need to push your bike for a while to get around, or through, an obstacle. It's great exercise, and if you are riding in what are normally good riding conditions, it is rare. Consider taking bus fare with you, if your commute is near the bus system. Also consider alternate routes, as your normal route may not always be the most favorable one.

SAFETY

- **Motorists.** Generally speaking motorists don't expect cyclists to be out on sidewalks or roads in wintertime. In order to be safe, you must be visible.
 - Remember that motorists often have limited visibility in winter: low-lying sun in their eyes, ice, frost, or snow may obscure their view.
 - Whenever possible, make eye contact with drivers, and never proceed unless you are certain they have seen you (this one, by the way, applies in the summer too).
 - Your outer layers should be bright and reflective.
 - Please see the section on **LIGHTS**. They are as necessary as a bike helmet.

RIDING TIPS

- Bikes rarely slip when they are going in a straight direction. Take care on corners.
- Slow down when you are approaching an area you suspect may be icy. Be prepared to take your foot off if the bike starts to tilt.
- Be prepared for bumps and transitions, as they can cause you to loose traction.

- When approaching a stopping point that is potentially slick, for example an intersection, take care when putting your foot down. Sometimes while riding it is easy to forget the underlying surface can be slippery.
- Keep in mind it's possible for ice to build up on your breaks, if conditions are wet or slushy. So give yourself plenty of time to stop.
- Snow that has been gouged out by pedestrians, cars, or other cyclists can be dangerous. You can get your wheel caught in a rut or awkward hole.

CLOTHES

- Believe it or not, over dressing is as much (or more) of a problem than under dressing. Keep in mind you are going to be exercising, and creating your own heat. If you are nice and toasty warm when you first start, you are going to be too hot ten minutes later.
- **The Core.** Keep your core warm. Dressing in layers is the key to keeping warm and safe in the winter. You want the layers against your body to wick your sweat to the outside layers. A mid-layer of light fleece or other insulating layer may be a good idea, and an outer layer that is windproof is always nice.
- **The extremities.** Your feet, hands, and ears will need extra attention.
 - **Feet.** If you want to go clipless in the winter, I recommend Lake boots, as they are insulated. I also recommend booties over the boots. You can also use large wool socks as booties. It's warmer to use platform pedals and go with winter or hiking boots. Cleats can also be a problem if you get snow packed in them. Socks do make a difference. I recommend smart wool socks.
 - **Hands.** Lobster gloves are great. I also recommend windproof over-mittens, which can be worn over the lobster gloves for really cold weather, or over mid or light weight gloves. If you are concerned about keeping your hands warm, try Pogies (Pogies are the big mittens built into the handle bars). They will definitely keep you warm!
 - **Ears.** There are a lot of options for keeping ears warm. Ear bands, Skull caps, thin ear muffs skiers use...any of these work well.
- Make sure your outer layer is reflective, or at the very least, has very bright colors!
- You don't have to buy bike specific winter clothing if you don't want to. Ski clothing often works very nice as well. Clothing is a personal choice: what works for some people won't work for everyone. You may need to experiment to see what works the best for you and adjust your layers as the temperatures drop.
- You may want to split up your clothing choices into different categories: one group of clothing for temperatures above freezing, mid-weight clothing for below freezing down to roughly 15 above, and the heavier weight clothes for the colder weather.
- If your commute is largely up hill one way, and largely down hill the other way, you may need slightly different layers for each direction.
- Some people like to warm up their clothes (or some of their clothes), near a heater or other heat source ahead of time, so that they are still warm a few minutes after going outside.
- If you do find your hands or ears getting cold, stop and warm them up by putting them near your core for a few minutes to warm them back up.

MINDSET

- You don't have to ride every day to consider yourself a bike commuter! Even one day a week is an improvement.
- You can work up to it: Don't make your first ride on a day where the snow is fresh and heavy, or when it is exceptionally cold. Go out when you can ride recreationally and get a feel for how the bike handles in the snow, and how your layers feel. Maybe try sliding the bike a bit on purpose to get an idea of how it feels.
- It's OK to "wimp out" on really cold days, or when you are unsure of the conditions. Just remember, 80% of commuting is above the shoulders. It's not always easy getting in the mindset that you are going to take the bike instead of the car. It's so easy to make up dozens of excuses as to why you can't ride in the winter. Just try not to get stuck in the habit of always driving, and perhaps set a goal of trying winter bike at least once a week.
- You may be surprised how easy it is, and how much fun you have. One of my personal favorites, are the mornings when there is a lot of frost on the trees, and the trails are nicely fast. Or after work when both the moon and sun are up at the same time, and there is a low fog over the fields.
- It's very rewarding on the first day of spring, when all the other cyclists are getting out for the first time, and you can fly right by them since you have been riding all winter and are in great shape!