

Backwoods Driving; Tips on Getting Back Home

By Dan Groebner

We're lucky here in the White Mountains to have a fairly well-developed road system providing access to hiking trails, fishing holes and quality hunting habitat. However, even an interstate can become a challenge to navigate in bad weather and none of our local roads come close to interstate class. Wet, muddy and snowy roads pose the most obvious challenge but there's as many ways to get sideways in the woods as there are birds singing on an April pre-dawn. The following suggestions shouldn't be considered any guarantee you can get back home every time but these ideas, and a lot of common sense, will go a long way to help.

The first rule of every adventure is to let someone know where you are going and when you will be back. That's a great safety net which relieves tons of pressure in decision making if you get in a pickle. You will always know that someone will eventually come looking for you and find you if you make it easy for them. The second rule should be to buddy up with another vehicle that can turn into a shuttle to civilization and provide more hands-on-deck if there are some digging chores involved.

There's no amount of driving experience, no tires big enough nor no lift kit high enough to prevent serious damage to some softer roads and trails when they get too wet. You might make it back into town with a new "mud-coat" to show off but you might also have an expensive ticket in your pocket for the resource damage done to public property. You could also be the reason that some roads get shut down since Navajo and Apache Counties, as well as the Forest Service, only have limited budgets to fix and maintain roads. So, stick to the rocky roads in wet weather or wait a few weeks until things dry out a little.

But sometimes we get caught in a torrential monsoon downpour that can re-arrange car-sized boulders and create washed out ravines before we know it. How can we deal with those situations? Knowing some basic techniques and having simple tools and equipment could save you a triple-digit towing bill for sure.

Driving on sketchy roads is usually safest going right down the tracks and through puddles unless they get so deep you risk getting high-centered. This happens when dirt, mud, rocks or snow have packed in under the frame or transmission or the pumpkin-looking trans-axle between the rear tires. Your vehicle gets suspended so the tires have no traction. Sometimes it's easier to just dig everything out from under the frame with a short handled pointed shovel so you can see all the way under the vehicle if you're only hung up in one small area. If the entire frame of the vehicle appears to be hung up, jacking the vehicle so you can place rocks and/or logs under all the tires and then dropping the vehicle back down usually works. That obviously requires a jack but the scissors types that come with most vehicles limit your jack points to specific spots on the frame which might not be accessible. Piston and hi-lift type jacks are more versatile but can be more dangerous if you're not familiar with their use.

Knowing your vehicle's limitations is the best way to stay out of trouble. What kind of tread on the tires? How much clearance underneath to get through rutted roads? Do you have chains for the front tires at least? Have a shovel and winch on board? Tow strap? Come-along? Four-wheel-drive?

Locking hubs? How many spare tires? Air compressor and basic tool kit? Cell phone coverage in your area?

You can't compensate for equipment short-comings by standing on the gas pedal and using your engine's power. That's usually the best way to get buried deeper and experienced drivers rarely let their tires spin. Stop before you have to spin the tires and plan your extraction technique. It could be as simple as getting a tug from your partner's vehicle, using a rope or webbed tow strap. Be careful with your hitch points as many new cars can be damaged severely if you hook up to the wrong spot. The next least-laborious method is the rocking technique going forward in low gear and then in reverse to gradually work your way out of a predicament. Don't rev the engine or spin the tires and be careful with changing gears or running over any friends helping push from the front and/or back!

Trying not to spin your tires is just one example where techniques for driving on back-country roads sometimes goes against your instincts. Some conditions, especially going uphill, call for increasing or maintaining your speed to maintain control and traction. Modern four-wheel drive vehicles can be smart enough to steer better when the wheels have power going to them. This can be overdone so use just enough power to maintain control. Crossing flooded washes is best done after stopping and getting out of your vehicle to scout the depth and ferocity of the stream. Hitting that wall of water too quickly will not only hydroplane you and your vehicle to a location probably where you don't want to be, it could also push your grill into your fan and radiator causing trip-ending damage.

Some folks like to drive gravel roads without seat belts but you can get thrown and squished by your own vehicle just as easily on a back road as on an interstate. Unfortunately, the White Mountains have seen too many of these fatal accidents already. Narrow, vegetation-lined routes will hide fingers of the solid bedrock that can catch a tire and turn you 90 degrees before you have a chance to get out the first of your expletives. When weather permits, it's always refreshing to drive with windows down but beware on roads with narrow side clearances. Branches can whack your rear-view mirror, pivoting it in towards the driver or front passenger, sometimes hard enough to shatter the mirror and send shards across the front seat (it can happen – twice!).

Driving the many forest roads in the White Mountains could be considered one of our self-service amusement rides here locally, revealing trophy bull elk, flocks of turkey, herds of deer and maybe even a bighorn sheep. No extra charge for the eagles and osprey but you don't even want to know how much it costs for a tow truck to get you out of a bad spot. But with a lot of common sense considering your limitations, attention to the road conditions and the proper equipment, you will feel more confident exploring the back country of the White Mountains.

Side Bar? Don't forget to buy your annual OHV Decal if you're exploring the White Mountains using a vehicle designed primarily for off-highway use and weighing less than 1,800 pounds (atvs, side-by-sides, dirt bikes, etc). Funds from the decals help better manage OHV use in Arizona, protect our natural resources and promote sustainable OHV opportunities well into the future. And remember that anyone under 18 must wear a U.S. DOT approved helmet and eye protection to avoid getting a citation.