How to Winterize Your Vehicle

By Stephen Gorman

Make sure your car is ready to face the harsh weather conditions of winter before setting off on your adventures into the woods.

On a minus-20-degree evening I once saw a group of weary, happy campers get back to the trailhead at the end of a great trip only to discover that the cold had been playing havoc with their car while they were out playing in the snow. Their battery was stone dead, and it was an hour's drive to the nearest town. Before you go, make sure that your car is in shape for the trip, too.

Be sure to read the section on winter driving in your owner's manual, and give your car a basic tune-up before driving in the cold and snow. Check the following carefully.

· **Spark plugs.** These should be in good shape. Replace them if necessary. Plugs are among the first parts to go in cold temperatures. And remember: If your car is fuel injected, you don't need to pump the gas pedal before you start it. If you do, you risk flooding the engine and fouling the plugs.

· **Battery.** You'll want your battery at full power, so test it before you leave. Starting a cold battery at the end of a trip draws a lot of power

all at once. If your battery is not in good shape, it may die at the trailhead, and you'll not be happy.

• **Antifreeze.** Be sure antifreeze is at full strength. People from the south should replace water with antifreeze before they head north.

• **Belts.** Check the condition and tension of the belts. Bring spares if you're heading to a remote area.

• **Oil.** Multiweight oils, such as 10W-40, are best because they are less viscous at low temperatures, making it easier for your engine to turn over in the cold. At superlow temperatures, even multiweight oil may be too sluggish for your car to start. In this case, you may have to warm your oil pan. You can use your camp stove to do this in an emergency.

• **Gasoline.** Cold temperatures can cause condensed water vapor to freeze inside your vehicle's fuel lines. There are two steps you can take to avoid this problem. First, leave your gas tank half full or more when you set out on the trail. If the trailhead is a long drive from the last gas pump, bring along a full plastic gasoline jug and empty it into your vehicle's tank before you head out on the trail. Second, use dry gas. The alcohol solution in dry gas mixes with the water in your tank and keeps the gas line from freezing. Small bottles of dry gas are available at almost every service station north of the Mason-Dixon line.

• **Washer fluid.** Slush and salty spray thrown by other cars and trucks can make your ride to the trailhead hazardous. Be sure to top off your reservoir, and bring along an extra jug of washer fluid for the return trip.

• **Windshield wiper blades.** Winter blades are much better than standard blades for driving in snowy conditions and are available at service stations throughout snow country.

· **Snow tires.** These are a must where heavy snow conditions prevail. The deep tread of true snow tires bites into the snow and hangs on tightly. If you put them on all four wheels, you'll feel much more control. In recent years, all-season radials have replaced snow tires in all but the snowiest parts of the United States and Canada. These are not adequate for driving in snow country.
· **Four-wheel drive.** If you live in snow country or often drive on unplowed logging roads to get to a winter trailhead, consider using a four-wheel-drive vehicle. Four-wheel drive is now available on many road cars as well as trucks and jeeps. Having all four wheels churning is a big help when you face a long drive through heavy snow, and it makes driving in winter conditions much safer. As with any vehicle, adding snow tires greatly increases your traction.
In addition to winterizing your vehicle, be sure to have the following items in your car.

· **Car shovel.** You'll be bringing a shovel or two on your trip, and they're very handy to have along for the drive. If you end up in a snow bank, they'll make getting out much easier.
· **Ice scraper.**
· **Sack of sand or gravel.** If you hit glaze or glare ice, you'll have no traction. A small sack of sand can provide you with just enough grip to allow your vehicle across these treacherous sections.
· **Tube sandbags.** Placing several heavy (70-pound) tubular bags of sand in the bed of your pickup truck or the cargo area of your SUV greatly adds to the vehicle's stability in slick road conditions.

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