

# Roadcrafty

## Stayin alive!

### Some thoughts on night riding

In common with just about every motorcycle training organisation and motorcycle club WHAM doesn't do any training or organised rides at night and so I'm guessing most of our riding is in daylight hours. The stalwarts who bring their bikes to "Natter" throughout the year, the motorcycle commuters, the "Freewheeler" riders and maybe a few others will all do some night-time riding so how is it different?



The first and most obvious thing is we cannot see as well. To start with most motorcycle lights tend more towards the glow-worm than the arc-lamp and on top of that as soon as we lean a bike in a corner we are shown less of where we want to go and treated to views of the hedge we could end up in! OK, if anyone's ridden the K1600GT in the dark it is a huge leap forward but even it won't nullify all the risks of night riding.

Despite the fact that most motorcyclists tend to stay off their bike when it's dark the accident statistics show that the incident rate increases and resulting injuries become more severe. So what are the principal risks and, if we either choose to, or have to, ride at night what should we be doing to control those risks?

There are some benefits of night riding, for example there are fewer vehicles on the road so it is likely you will suffer less queuing at junctions and not have so much urban filtering to face. Similarly where there is little street lighting you will have early warning of approaching traffic thanks to its lights. However it is not all to your advantage, here are some of the challenges and pointers:

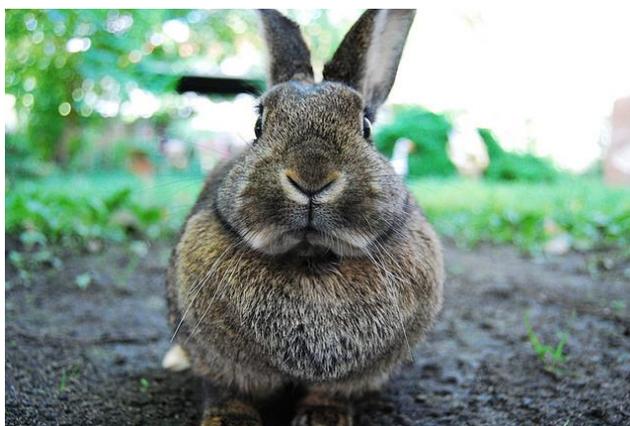
- Our vision is the primary sense for riding or driving but all humans are poorly adapted to night vision – that's why we use lights on vehicles. Your bike will always be well-maintained and fully functional so no need for me to labour the importance of lights, mirrors and reflectors at night!
- In the animal kingdom our night vision is rubbish (ever seen a Badger with a torch?). If you have perfect sight you're blessed, not many of us do. Night riding (or driving) will find any un-corrected weakness in your sight. Do you find night riding or driving tiring? Do you find yourself squinting or screwing up your eyes to see rather better? Perhaps get a headache? If any of this sounds like you see a good optician, you need the best vision you can get for night riding.
- If your spectacles, lenses, visor or goggles are scratched you will suffer secondary glare from oncoming vehicle lights and any road lighting. This is at its worst in an urban situation when there are lots of light sources and it is raining. In extreme cases it can temporarily blind the rider. All optical surfaces should be in good condition, keep them clean and scratch-free as far as possible. Visor polish is excellent in shedding rainwater but as soon as you start

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wiping your visor its effect is diminished. Old-fashioned bees wax fills the polishing micro-scratches very effectively and sheds water just as efficiently as modern silicone-based visor polishes.

- Do I need to say anything about sunglasses or dark visors? No, I thought not: Darwin does sum it up quite neatly!
- At night contrast is generally low, as your sight deteriorates you will struggle more and more to resolve the detail on the road in front of you. When your sight is best adapted to the low-light of the night is just the moment Mr Xenon-discharge Range-Rover (don't they always have double-barreled names?) appears to etch his headlamp pattern into your retina. Unfortunately for WHAM's age profile it is the older riders who will take longest to recover from the brilliant Mr Range-Rover. Time to remember one of our golden rules: look where you want to go – not at the headlights like the proverbial rabbit! If you do look where you want to go Mr Range-Rover's lights assist by providing a little back-light contrast around any road debris between you both.
- Speaking of rabbits, they and the rest of the local wildlife become much more active at night and most of them have colours which melt into the background in daylight! At night you won't see them until they're very close! Every morning we see the night-time's toll of road-kill, clearly not everyone can avoid them so expect such obstacles at night. Wildlife and road-surface defects are much more difficult to see early enough to plan a smooth avoidance manoeuvre if your speed is appropriate to day-time lighting – so adjust your speed to keep your margins.
- It gets colder at night! Even in summer it gets colder at night. Make sure you have appropriate clothing to keep you warm and dry. Any discomfort is a distraction, the more you ride with it, the more distracting it becomes. Appropriate, well-fitting kit, makes its contribution to keeping you safe. Heated clothing and/or hand-grips might be useful.
- High-viz and/or reflective clothing is more important at night: generally it makes you more conspicuous but it is particularly helpful in moving traffic where our single, generally lower-power head and tail lamps may get lost amongst all the twin lights of 4-wheeled vehicles.
- Recognise that we humans are "hunter-gatherers" so we're meant to be out gathering food during the day and sleeping at night. Whilst we can amend that pattern with some success we are still not physiologically suited to the small hours. If you choose to, or have to, ride well into the night be aware your concentration will be prejudiced. Short breaks to get some movement and perhaps a caffeine shot or two will help but only in the short term; don't rely on it too often.
- A large meal before any ride is not a great idea as it predisposes us to "sleep it off". If you need to eat light snacks are preferred. More important is hydration – the first effects of dehydration are reduced concentration and fatigue! Water is best; I know you won't be drinking alcohol but it and caffeine products dehydrate us. Don't be tempted to skip the drink to avoid the toilet break.



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- Signals work don't they? A qualified yes: you'll see trafficators, you'll hear any audible warnings, but, for example, the subtle cues you might pick up in daylight hours from a drivers head movement will not be available at night. Likewise if you were to use arm-signals at night don't count on other traffic correctly interpreting your intention. Unofficial road signs are rarely illuminated (mud-on-road, that sort of thing!).
- In queues maintain your longitudinal space for an escape route. Keep an eye on following traffic in case they don't see you. Don't be afraid to show your brake-light when you see following traffic come into view.
- We position on the strict priority of Safety, Stability, View (SSV) but mostly we talk of positioning for view. At night think before adopting the default position for view – can you get an advantage in view given that it's dark? Also, how does "position 3" near the centre-line affect your safety at night? If you're the only traffic it's probably OK but if you find yourself in a stream of traffic your single headlight is just where a four-wheeler's offside headlamp would be – don't melt into that other traffic too much! In particular avoid leaving an inviting, just-big-enough, gap in front if you are in position 3 and "cloaked" by four-wheeler lights: for impatient joining traffic it is just too good a recipe for a SMIDSY!
- Review the Highway Code and/or the Know Your Road Signs booklet to make sure you know all the carriageway markings which can warn you of hazards, slip road entry/exit points or simply mark out which way the road goes!

