

Winter Riding

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I don't profess to be an expert on riding in the winter, but just wanted to share some of my experiences over the years.

Clothing – Just a couple words right off... synthetics and wool. One of the worst things to wear in the winter is anything cotton. Backpackers and hikers like to refer to cotton as a “dead mans fabric” as once it is wet, it becomes useless as a form of keeping you warm. And while most of us are usually not engaged in survival type bike riding in the winter, we all do like to at least stay warm.

Synthetic, or wool, bicycle clothing has the distinct advantage of still managing to keep you warm, even as you sweat, as it tends to wick sweat away from your body. These fabrics also have the ability to dry themselves fairly quickly. Most bike shops have dedicated synthetic bicycle winter gear, although you can also find some good deals at the clothing section of department stores (just read the label and look for synthetic blends).

The Fingers – Over the course of the winter, I tend to alternate between three sets of gloves. For mild temperatures (i.e. above 40-45 degrees) I use some thin, synthetic gloves. Colder than 40 degrees, I use some dedicated, thick cycling gloves. And when it starts getting even colder, out come the “lobster mitts”. The “mitts are sort of like mittens, but have three areas for your fingers and keep your hands really warm. For a photo of a typical pair of lobster cycling gloves (available at your local bike shop) visit <http://tinyurl.com/nxdg3sy>.

The Head

For years I have used a thin, fleece under-helmet cycling cap that has pretty much always kept my head warm. The only downside is that when you wear this, you may have to adjust your helmet. An example of one thin under-helmet cap (available at you local bike shop) can be seen here - <http://preview.tinyurl.com/l6ot9ah>.

Cold Toes – To me, the worst thing about riding in the winter is when my toes start to get really cold. In the winter, I routinely wear a thin wool sock, and also some type of shoe cover. Still, with the socks and covers, my toes would still go to the chill zone while the rest of me was fine. For the past few years I have been a huge fan of toe-warmer chemical packs that you can find in the sporting goods section of many stores. A pretty common brand of chemical warmers is Grabber (<http://www.grabberworld.com/products/grabber-warmers/toe-warmers.html>) and these usually sell for around a \$1 a pair, although they are also sold in larger “value packs”.

The toe-warmer chemical packs consist of two small paper-based packets, with adhesive backs that stick to the tip of the shoe's removable insole. Once the toe warmer packet is opened and exposed to air, the toe-warmers will produce heat for 3-4 hours. When you are done riding, just peel them off the insole. I have found that when I use these toe-warmers, I never have cold toes, ever.

Going back to shoe covers, they do help provide another insulating layer on your cycling shoes, as well as help keep your shoes a little dryer. The disadvantage of shoes covers is that for me, they tend to get chewed up on the bottom from walking around with them on, but still will last a number of years. A photo of a typical cycling toe warmer (available at your local bike shop) is at <http://tinyurl.com/mklpajv> and a typical winter shoe cover at <http://tinyurl.com/kx6nlgu>. Of course another option for insulation, and quite a bit cheaper, is placing plastic bags in your shoes between your sock and the shoe.

Fenders – Fenders can be a blessing and curse in the winter, but overall they have more benefits than problems. The biggest advantage is they keep slush and water off you and your bike. The biggest disadvantage is that sometimes snow jams between the fenders and wheels.

For actual fenders, I have had good success with the Planet Bike brand, who even have economical, dedicated recumbent fender sizes (16” and 20”). Another nice thing about Planet Bike is that you can order individual replacement parts if needed. These fenders, available at your local bike shop, can be seen at <http://ecom1.planetbike.com/fenders.html>.

Keeping Your Bike Clean - Probably the biggest enemy of your bike in the winter is salt, which can corrode many parts of your bike. Even if you ride on dry pavement in the winter, there can still be loads of salt residue on the road that will be attracted to your bike.

The best bet then is to gently rinse down you bike after a ride where salt contamination is suspected. If you have a heated garage, this might not be too hard of a task. But if you don't have heated bike storage, one trick is to keep 2-3 filled bicycle water bottles inside and after your ride, take them outside and spray down

your bike (especially the derailleur, brakes and hubs), squeezing the bottles to give some pressure to the spray. Afterwards, pick up the bike a few inches and drop it down (to shake water off), wipe it down, and then apply some lubricant to critical parts, especially the chain. On the lubricant, some people will simply spray some silicon spray on the front and rear derailleur, but be sure to use dedicated chain lube on the chain.

One other train of thought, however, is to mostly keep your bike “cold” all winter. This means keeping it in an unheated space all winter long so what stays frozen on the bikes, keeps frozen (i.e. surface snow, snow-encrusted salt, etc.).

Tires – While standard bike tires will work fine over the winter, there is always the question of “what happens if I hit a patch of ice?” After debating the matter for a couple of years, last year I finally took the plunge and bought a pair of studded bicycle tires and was pleasantly surprised how well they worked. The studs really do provide quite a bit more traction and allow you to stay upright in conditions that normal tires would have you skidding out. At the same time, even with studded tires you can’t start acting stupid and thinking you can handle anything or be immune to the laws of physics.

The two biggest disadvantages of studded tires to me would be that by their nature, they slow you down and they make “the noise”. Going down dry pavement with studded tires sounds just like you have a deep fryer going, with a constant “shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh....”. There is a saying that studded tires slow you down by 20% while at the same time make you work 20% harder.

Bike snow tires are more expensive than regular tires, but then you are not going to keep them on all year either so they can last for years and years. In looking around, I also saw some manufacturers that said they included “extra” studs, as it was normal for their brand to shed studs during normal use, which to me hits at quality control problems.

There are some people who have made their own studded tires too. They take a tire with a deeper thread of rubber and on the inside of the tire screw in wood screws then cover the inside of the tire with duct tape. The stories I have heard about these homemade studded tires is that it isn’t very long before the screw come out, tear up the tire, or cause repeated flats (not fun in the winter).

In the end, I settled on Schwalbe Marathons for my “winter” bike, a tried and true Ryan Vanguard recumbent. They are more expensive than other studded tires, but the tires are well made and I have not lost a stud yet. They come on when the first snow hits and come off in the early spring. When I take them off, I wipe them down with Armour-All and then store them in a cool, dark, not-too-dry, place for the warmer months.

<http://www.schwalbetires.com/node/1788>

Still, for most dry pavement winter riding, the tires you have on your bike right now should work. But for cheaper alternatives to studded tires, consider some bike tires with deeper thread, or at least decrease your tire pressure to the lowest recommended value (look on the side of the tire for the inflation range) so that the tire has more of footprint area with the pavement.

Drinking – Hydration in the winter is just as, if not more important, than riding in warm weather. Many winter riders mention that a big problem is actually sweating too much, meaning all that water you are taking in is going out of your system. Also, winter outside humidity tends to be very, very low, meaning you might sweat more, but never notice it so much due to the rapid evaporation.

When it starts going well below 32 degrees, water bottles may start freezing up rapidly. Some hints are to fill your water bottle with hot water or keep a water bladder on your back or inside your jacket. Another hint is to buy an insulated water bottle. Most people buy the insulated bottles for summer riding to keep drinks cool, but they also do a great job at keeping liquids from freezing in the winter.

This article gives a short overview of winter bicycling, but for even more information, visit www.icebike.org and <http://bikewinter.org/howto>.