

Driving on rural roads can be dangerous for unfamiliar drivers

Written by Holyoke Enterprise

Lions and tigers and bears ... oh my! It's probably a safe bet that a driver navigating North America's rural roads will not experience lions and tigers, but bears, deer, livestock and other animals certainly are a possibility.

Individuals who live in rural areas become accustomed to the subtleties of driving rural roads. However, those who are visiting the countryside on vacations or road trips may be less tuned-in to keep an eye for any animals with whom they might be sharing the road.

According to research, there are twice as many accidents on rural roads as there are in urban areas.

To be safe, keep these tips in mind:

—Expect blind curves. In many cases, rural roads are built to be of minimal disturbance to the surrounding landscape. This could mean that roads bend and dip every which way. Pay attention to posted speed limits—they're very accurate for the road conditions.

—Be on animal watch. In suburban and urban areas, the focus of driving leans toward watching for other drivers and pedestrians. However, in rural areas, focus should be placed on watching out for animals. Certain times of the day, such as dawn and dusk, tend to be prime times for animals to be on the move, whether finding a new place to bed down or scout for food.

A deer can total a car if hit, and even low-flying birds can cause damage. When passing farms, be on the lookout for livestock crossing the road and farmers driving equipment, such as tractors. Around lakes, one may come across geese or ducks.

—The road may not be paved. Some drivers take paved roads for granted. In rural areas, the roads may be made of gravel or dirt. This calls for slower driving speeds to maintain traction and safety.

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—Expect minimal lighting. Driving at night in rural areas can be nerve-wracking for the inexperienced. Street lights are rare and may only appear at particularly dangerous curves or intersections. It will likely be necessary to use high beams while driving to maintain proper visibility. Extra caution to avoid animals should be exercised at night.

—Keep a map in the car. GPS systems have become the standard for most drivers—many of which rely on them solely for navigation. However, in rural areas, mountains or trees may obscure the satellite signal that powers these systems. It's easy to become lost when the GPS fails. Having a paper map on hand can give drivers peace of mind. Also, that same impaired satellite service could affect mobile phone signals. This makes knowing where a driver is going even more important.

—Be careful of soft and unmarked shoulders. Rural roads may be built on the side of mountains or ravines. Dirt on the side of the roads could be unstable. These roads also tend to be more narrow. Use caution when pulling to the shoulder or passing other cars.