



ToolBox: Riding Skills

Identifying And Negotiating Blind Spots



Hide And Seek

BY ROBERT LAFORD

Traffic is at a standstill. A car is crossways in the road, skid marks noting the driver's panicked stop. A motorcycle and its rider lay in the road, each spilling fluids onto the roadway. A crowd of uneasy bystanders watches as paramedics tend to the downed rider. The driver of the car tells a police officer "I never saw him!"

This scenario is repeated over and over again each riding season, and as riders, we cringe every time we hear it. Statistics say that in two-vehicle motorcycle crashes, the car violates the rider's right of way more often than not. Was it the driver's inattention that led to the collision? Was he drinking coffee, reading the newspaper, talking on the cell, looking at the GPS? Or were physical obstacles present that hid the motorcycle from view? For that very valuable fraction of a second, did traffic patterns, the construction of the car, or obstacles inside or outside the vehicle make it difficult for the driver to see the bike, thus contributing to the crash?

What, as riders, can we do to improve this situation? There are areas around every vehicle that the operator cannot see, even if the driver is using his mirrors and windows properly: blind spots. Generally, the larger the vehicle, the larger the blind spots. In this article, we'll identify the four main types of blind spots, what causes them, and how to avoid them.

There are four types of blind spots:

- ◆ **Fixed Blind Spots** are areas around a vehicle that the driver cannot see in his mirrors.
- ◆ **Stationary Blind Spots** are objects like bus stop shelters or phone booths that hide things from view.
- ◆ **Rolling Blind Spots** are moving vehicles that block the line of sight in the driving environment.
- ◆ **Interior Blind Spots** are things inside a vehicle that obstruct the driver's view.

Fixed Blind Spots

These areas of limited vision are fixed to the vehicle and usually located behind the driver on either side. Fixed blind spots stay in place as the car moves. If you are following a vehicle, can you see the driver's face in his side-view mirror(s)? If not, then that driver can't see you. You're in his fixed blind spot.

In a standard passenger vehicle, a head check can assist a driver in seeing what's in the blind spot. Drivers of larger vehicles, however, like buses and trucks with limited windows or of great length may not get any benefit from a head check. That's why most of these large vehicles sport small convex, or blind spot, mirrors. They certainly help, but it's important to remember that a motorcycle or scooter may appear to be nothing more than a speck to the driver of a bus or semi.

Stationary Blind Spots

Stationary blind spots are objects like bus stop shelters, parked cars, or phone booths that may be blocking something from your vision, or preventing an approaching driver from seeing you. These usually exist near intersections. The larger the object, the more it can hide other objects (cars, bicyclists, pedestrians, etc.) from view. And if you can't see them, chances are they can't see you.

On a bike, anything that blocks your view of potential hazards can affect your decision-making ability. By constantly scanning ahead as you approach intersections and identifying potential obstructions, you can see objects before they create a stationary blind spot.

Rolling Blind Spots

A rolling blind spot is one that moves through your field of view. It's created by other traffic, whether your vehicle is stopped or moving. A truck in front of you can block your view of oncoming traffic, or an approaching SUV can easily hide a motorcycle behind it. Riders should use lane positioning and movement to allow other drivers the best chance to see them.

Vehicles that following oncoming traffic too closely might not be seen until the last minute — especially motorcycles. If we follow a vehicle too closely, we may be in a rolling blind spot, and invisible to approaching traffic. For example, say an oncoming driver is waiting to make a left-hand turn, and you're tailgating. That driver may turn right into you as the vehicle directly in front of us passes him, simply because you were not in position to be seen beyond that vehicle. Make yourself more visible by staying back and continuously adjusting your lane position.

Interior Blind Spots

Objects inside a vehicle can block the driver's view as well; these are interior blind spots that people create in their vehicles. It may be that a parking pass hanging on the rear view mirror, a coffee cup or GPS on the dashboard, or even pets or passengers in the back seat. Decals, stickers, and excessive dirt and grime on the windows can also act as blind spots and diminish a driver's ability to see properly. Even the posts that support the vehicle's roof structure can create significant blind spots.

So don't just pay attention to the road and traffic patterns. Be aware of the state of the vehicles around your bike. Chances are, that man with the carload of boxes or that soccer mom driving an SUV full of hysterical preteens doesn't see you at all.

Surviving The Wild

So how can we as riders survive around all these other vehicles? Drivers are lazy, so we can't be. How can you ensure that other drivers know you're there?

First and foremost, never take for granted that you are visible to another driver. Even if you think you've made eye contact (heck, even if you feel as if you've shaken hands and introduced yourself), you must assume he has not seen you, and take proactive measures to make your presence known. For example, wear a light-colored helmet with reflective materials; bright, contrasting gear helps, too. If you choose darker clothing, wear a fluorescent vest. Use

lane positioning to be seen and for protecting your riding space. Position your bike so that approaching vehicles can see you — especially around the vehicles ahead of you — and avoid staying in one spot for too long. And don't hang out in the fixed blind spot! Rather, pull even with the car in the next lane or stay well behind. Never tailgate.

You should always ride with your headlight on, even if your state doesn't require it. This won't apply to newer bikes, as most headlights come on with the engine these days. But if you do ride an older bike, keep it in mind. Some folks swear by headlight modulators (March '09).

Also, clearly communicate your intentions by signaling appropriately to let other drivers know what you intend to do. Use hand signals in traffic, if it's safe.

And did we say never to assume that other drivers see you?

As riders, knowing what other drivers can or cannot see works to our advantage. What kind of visibility does that bus driver have of the lanes around him or her? What does that tractor-trailer operator see? Many truck drivers are also motorcycle riders. Do you ride with someone who drives a big rig, panel van, or bus? Perhaps you and some of your riding buddies can get a visual briefing with that vehicle; park some bikes around it and take turns in the driver's seat. Where are the blind spots? How well do the mirrors work? Getting familiar with other drivers' limitations will make you more cognizant of the challenges they are facing and help you become a safer rider.

It's Not Child's Play

You may have been the champ at hide-and-seek when you were a kid, but while you're on your bike, those are not the skills that you want to practice. Instead, practice being seen and keeping out from the blind spots of other vehicles. As riders, we must constantly keep vigilant and aware of what's going on around us. Our lane positioning, speed, approach, and riding apparel all play a role in keeping the motorcycle and ourselves seen and safe. **RB**

Robert Laford has been a rider and EMT/firefighter for more than 25 years. He is president of Red Knights Motorcycle Club, Massachusetts Chapter 2, and is currently deputy fire chief with the Petersham Fire Department and safety services manager with the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

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