

How are the roads?

Trent Ernst

It is a daily, sometimes hourly question on Facebook: How are the roads? Sometimes the question is about Highway 52 to Dawson Creek, but more often the question is: how is the Hourglass Road?

The question gets asked so often that there's even a new group dedicated to it; just search Facebook for Tumbler Ridge and Area Road Report.

For those of you unfamiliar with the Hourglass (aka Boot Lake; Foot Lake, Noel, Kelly Lake) route, or the Redwillow (aka Hiding Creek, Boundary Road, Heritage Highway) route, these are backroads between Tumbler Ridge and Grande Prairie that can save travelers time and distance travelled between the two destinations.

Via Dawson Creek, it is 249 km from here to Grande Prairie via highways 53, 97 and 43. Via the Heritage Highway/Redwillow route, it is 190 km; basically 60 km shorter.

However, a large portion of this route is via unpaved industrial roads. About 60 km of the Redwillow route is on gravel road, of which about 40 km is via industrial roads. (The remaining 20 km is part of Highway 52E, which is not paved past Rat Lake. This section of Highway is a Class C highway, which means that up to 10 cm of snow is allowed to accumulate before it gets plowed, which is 4 cm more than the sections closer to town.)

According to the BC Forest Safety Council, resource roads fall into several broad categories: Forest Service Roads (known as FSRs), Petroleum Development Roads (known as PDRs), private roads, non-status roads, wilderness roads, spur roads, and permit roads. Most of the roads on the two main alternate routes to Grande Prairie are classified as PVRs. Other roads in the area are classified as Forest Service Roads (FSRs). Once crossing into Alberta, the roads are part of the Alberta Range Road/Township Road system. All these roads are open to travel by the public.

SHOULD I OR SHOULDN'T I?

But just because you can travel on them, doesn't mean you should. The roads are maintained by industry, and are not

maintained to the same level as the highways. Their very name should give a sense of what sort of vehicles the roads are maintained for: industrial. Think big trucks. The roads are unsigned and can be hard to follow. (I will admit the first time I tried returning to Tumbler Ridge along the Hourglass, I wound up at One Island Lake.)

Still, many people, including yours truly, insist on travelling the backroads in the winter, trying to shave a few minutes, or kilometres, off the drive to Grande Prairie. Or in some cases, preferring the lightly travelled Hiding Creek route to the highways, where poor weather and other drivers can present a greater danger than just the poor weather.

People taking one of the shortcuts to Grande Prairie, or maybe heading out onto a different backroad around Tumbler Ridge, need to be prepared. It is not unusual for people to get stuck for hours at a time, due to fresh snow, icy sections or strong winds creating drifts.

PDRs have prescribed construction and maintenance standards, which reads as thus: "remove snow from all or part of the travelled portion of the road." That's it. No rules around amount collected, or having to clean it within a certain time, just "remove the snow." Other resource roads don't even have this. Most have no maintenance requirements or standards for winter cleaning whatsoever. There are over 400,000 kms of resource roads in BC, and maintaining them all, especially in winter, is impossible.

The company that holds a road permit is responsible for maintaining that road to an industrial standard, which is usually a lot lower than folks just popping into Grande Prairie to do some shopping might wish for.

"The best thing people can do is a bit of planning ahead before the journey," says Dustin Meierhofer, director of transportation for the BC Forest Safety Council. "Be aware of the status of the road you're using in terms of what type of road is it and whether it is being maintained and who is using it."

While most of the PDRs see daily traffic, other roads are more variable. A logging road may sit unplowed until the company



The editor would like to point out that, yes, this is his vehicle stuck in a snow drift, but only for editorial purposes. Honestly. Lynsey Kitching photo.

starts actively hauling, then the road will be maintained, but traffic will be heavy.

What determines "good" conditions or "bad" conditions is subjective, so even if someone tells you the roads are in good shape, you have to factor in your experience and your vehicle. If someone who works in the oil patch says the road is in good shape, you need to know that they may be speaking from 20 year's experience driving backroads and are driving a Ford F-150. Your first off-pavement experience driving the Hourglass in your Ford Fiesta might be a little different.

IT'S EASY TO SAY

"It's easy to say be prepared, but be prepared," says Meierhofer. "These are resource roads. Most people who have travelled on them have seen conditions vary from great to terrible. You have to use what you think is practical. Be prepared may mean vehicle choice. In some circumstances a 2wd car might be fine, at other times you might need an SUV or a 4X4."

Even if you're not planning on driving the backroads, you should always have safety and emergency equipment in your car. A basic car kit should contain the following:

- Food that won't spoil, such as energy bars
- Water—plastic bottles that won't break if the water freezes (replace them every six months)
- Blanket
- Extra clothing and shoes or boots
- First aid kit with seatbelt cutter
- Small shovel, scraper and snowbrush
- Candle in a deep can and matches
- Wind-up flashlight
- Whistle—in case you need to attract attention
- Roadmaps
- Copy of your emergency plan
- Sand, salt or cat litter (non-clumping)
- Antifreeze and windshield washer fluid
- Tow rope
- Jumper cables
- Fire extinguisher
- Warning light or road flares

This is a basic kit for driving on any road in the winter. In addition, folks travelling on resource roads should have a two-way radio. You can keep track of traffic, and cell phone coverage is non-existent at places along these routes.

However, says Meierhofer, "There is no legal requirement for non-industrial users to have a two-way radio. For most people it's not practical to buy one just for, say going the backroads to go Christmas Shopping."

Handheld radios start at \$350, though they have limited range compared to a vehicle mounted version with antenna.

However the benefit of a handheld is it can be shared between different vehicles.

If you don't drive the backroads enough to justify buying a radio, you could consider renting one. Southpaw Rentals has a pair of radios that can be rented.

Meierhofer recommends that, if your vehicle is not outfitted with a radio, to wait at the start of a resource road until a vehicle that does have a radio starts down the road, and then follow them. "You can then follow their lead in terms of oncoming traffic," he says. "They'll be pulling over when there's other people oncoming."

WHOOOPS

Despite your best planning, you can still get stuck in the snow. It happens. Perhaps the snow drifted into a wall; perhaps you got run into the ditch by someone without a two-way radio who didn't know you were coming.

Your mission, if you can't manage to get out yourself, is to remain safe and calm until someone else comes by to help.

If you do get stuck in the snow:

- Try to stay calm and don't go out in the cold. Stay in your car: you will avoid getting lost and your car is a safe shelter.
- Don't tire yourself out. Shovelling in the intense cold can be deadly.
- Let in fresh air by opening a window on the side sheltered from the wind.
- Keep the engine off as much as possible. Be aware of carbon monoxide poisoning and make sure the exhaust pipe is not obstructed by snow.
- If possible, use a candle placed inside a deep can instead of the car heater to warm up.
- Turn on warning lights or set up road flares to make your car visible.
- Turn on the ceiling light; leaving your headlights or hazard lights on for too long will drain the battery.
- Move your hands, feet and arms to maintain circulation. Stay awake.
- Keep an eye out for other cars and emergency responders. Try to keep clothing dry since wet clothing can lead to a dangerous loss of body heat.
- Don't forget to bring along your emergency car kit

So, there you go. Is the risk of driving these roads worth it? Many people think so; I am of the opinion that highways are far more dangerous than the backroads, but that's just me. If you do head out, make sure you know what you're doing and that you're prepared. Check the Facebook road report page and drive cautiously. Because the most important factor in you getting to Grande Prairie and back safely via the backroads is YOU.

'Voices On The Ridge'

wish to thank the following organisations & people for their contributions to our recent concert *'Christmas Through The Ages'*.

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We appreciate your support, time and effort!