

Four Wheeling Basics

Techniques While on the Trail

by Jim Davis ©

1. Don't do what you're not comfortable with!

Remember, you're on the trail for your own enjoyment and recreation. If there is an obstacle that you feel could be too dangerous or is likely to damage your vehicle, you should not attempt that obstacle. Each of us may want to challenge ourselves a little by tackling something out of the routine, but you must be the judge of what you will attempt. You should not let the prodding of others or your own "machismo" get the better of you and cloud your good judgement. If it would help you to see others tackle the obstacle before you, arrange to move aside and let someone pass. If you do this, watch them carefully and learn from their techniques. They may teach you "what to do" or "what not to do"! Options are to take an alternate route around the obstacle, stay there and wait for your group to return back the same route, or to turn back. None of these should be considered lesser alternatives to going ahead. You have your family, your health, and your vehicle to protect.

2. Never travel off-road alone!

You may be only ¼ mile or 50 miles from a highway when disaster strikes and you must have someone else in another capable vehicle to assist you or go for help. Even people traveling on well traveled highways have been known to have an accident and leave the highway. Surviving the accident, but injured and unable to help themselves, they have died several days later when no one knew where to look for them. This example is amplified 1000 times for back country travel. Having at least one other vehicle with you could be the difference between surviving a minor accident or vehicle failure or a disaster!

3. Keep in sight of the vehicle BEHIND you.

This concept may sound backwards at first, but is the only way you can be assured of keeping a group together. A group can only travel as fast as its slowest member. Every vehicle has a limited ability to catch up to a vehicle traveling ahead, however there is practically unlimited ability to allow the vehicle behind you to catch you. If you lose sight of the vehicle behind you, slow down a lot. If this is still not sufficient, STOP. If the people ahead of you are practicing this same method, they will also slow, then stop and wait for you. This will ripple through the convoy and before long the lead vehicle will be stopped. An exception, momentarily, may be if someone needs some trailside "privacy" and needs you to be out of sight for a bit. One vehicle must be designated as the "caboose" or "trailer" to travel at the end of the group. This vehicle will not allow any of the others to fall behind them.

4. Keep in communications with other vehicles in your group.

Communication with CB or FRS radios can make a trip much more convenient and friendly. Lively chatter between the vehicles can keep the mood of the passengers up and allow more of a "group" experience. However, when radios are needed for a serious topic, all "banter" must stop. In the least, the very first and last vehicles in the group should have radios to keep the group together.

5. Traversing a large rock or mound.

Large rocks or mounds are a common obstacle on 4x4 routes. Most can be traversed with relative ease. Use these techniques (in the order presented) to traverse a rock.

Option 1: Drive around the rock. If the rock is small enough and the terrain is wide enough, simply drive AROUND the rock.

Option 2: If you cannot drive around the rock, drive OVER it with your TIRES. Climbing over a rock by placing your front tire squarely over the rock will lift the vehicle and protect the undercarriage from damage. Remember to approach slowly and, if needed, get out to assess approach & departure angles. Once the front tire is on top of the rock, descend VERY SLOWLY. If you drop off the far edge of the rock too quickly, the vehicle will lunge downward, reducing your ground clearance and potentially damaging your vehicle. Once the front tire has passed, do the same for the rear.

Option 3: Straddle the rock. This should only be attempted if you cannot either drive around or over the rock. Since all the tires will be on ground lower than the rock, this option requires the most ground clearance to be successful. Drive carefully and slowly, and listen for that SCRAPPING sound from underneath your vehicle.

6. Traversing a rut or gully crossing your path

Ruts and gullies are also a common obstacle on 4x4 routes. It is important not to cross them at a 90 degree angle if at all possible. This requires the greatest approach & departure angles and also puts two wheels in the gully at the same time. Two wheels in the gully is a bad situation for traction and it may be difficult to climb out. If you can cross at about a 45 degree angle, only 1 wheel will be in the gully at once.

7. Traversing a rut or gully parallel to your path

This type of rut is also a common obstacle on 4x4 routes. Use these techniques (in the order presented) to traverse a rut running with (not across) the road.

Option 1: Drive around the rut on the uphill side. Typically the rut will eventually cross the road and “flow” off the downhill side. If you choose the downhill side to travel on, you will often be eventually “trapped” between the rut and the downhill edge of the road. Take the uphill side if at all possible.

Option 2: If you cannot drive around the rut, find a place to cross it. See the information in item 5 above.

Option 3: If neither option 1 or 2 can be accomplished, then straddle the rut. This will often lead to the same fate as following the downhill side of the rut, eventually trapping you between the rut and the downhill side of the road. Only here since you’re straddling the rut, you’ll have a slim chance at crossing it at a 45 degree angle.

8. Traversing a “Side Hill”

First, this situation should be carefully avoided, therefore preventing you from needing any skill traversing it! Roll over accidents are commonly associated with these “side hill” conditions. If you MUST negotiate a side hill, do so VERY CAREFULLY! You may wish to lighten your load or move and SECURE some of your load to the uphill side of the vehicle. Drive very slowly, with the front wheels turned slightly uphill where possible. Everything you do on a side hill must be done very smoothly. A bounce over a rock could provide just the momentum required for a roll over. A side hill traverse over smooth terrain without any bouncing can be done at a seemingly significant side hill angle. Add in an abrupt stop or bounce and the angle that your vehicle will stay upright is greatly reduced! Even a load shifting from the uphill to downhill side of the vehicle can cause a disaster.