

3PointTurn – Episode 7: Strange Situations

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On this episode, the FLHSMV team converses about a few of the stranger scenarios a driver may encounter including night driving, weather and animals.

Derek Perez:

Welcome to 3PointTurn. I'm your host, Derek Perez. I'm joined by Master Corporal Patricia Jefferson-Shaw, who is a 29-year veteran of the Florida Highway Patrol and the Public Affairs Officer for Troop H based in Tallahassee. How are you Corporal Shaw? I hear you have some wonderful news in your life.

Master Corporal Patricia Jefferson-Shaw:

Absolutely wonderful, Derek. I recently became a grandmother. Oh, it's an exciting adventure. A new addition to our life.

Derek Perez:

Well, that is terrific news. Now, if you didn't already have a vested interest in these safety topics, I'm sure you do now. It's important to help make the world a better place for future generations.

Master Corporal Patricia Jefferson-Shaw:

I completely agree.

Derek Perez:

On that note, our last episode together was quite intense. So we're going to make this one a little lighter and just talk about some of the more strange situations a driver may encounter: Night driving, weather and animals. Sound good?

Master Corporal Patricia Jefferson-Shaw:

Sounds good to me, Derek.

Derek Perez:

Now, driving at night, isn't necessarily unusual or strange, but it's not an ideal driving scenario, which is why we want to talk about it. The two other topics we want to cover in this episode, weather and animals you may encounter while driving at night. So really they're all interconnected. Corporal Shaw, what is going to be our focal point regarding night driving?

Master Corporal Patricia Jefferson-Shaw:

Well, when you're dealing with night driving, it makes it a little harder than the day because now it's all pitch black. And depending on where you are, whether you have streetlights or no street lights, you have to have a better visual of the roadway. You have to focus on animals that may be out there. You have to focus on pedestrians that are walking the road with dark clothing. So you have to look more at

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everything in your surroundings. Biggest thing here in the rural areas, we have deer. So you have the deer that run out in the road. So you have to focus harder than you would during the day.

Derek Perez:

I really appreciate that word, focus. The nighttime makes it harder to see a total view of what's going on around you. And normally your eyes would be able to take in a much larger landscape, but when it's dark out, your headlights only illuminate what's in front of you. So keeping that focus around you and in front of you at all times is crucial. 450 feet – that's about how far high beams extend when in use. That's not very far and standard headlight lamps have an even shorter range. And of course, staring straight ahead, focusing on darker smaller targets, tires out your eyes. Staring at oncoming lights or brake lights can also do the same. Remember if you wear glasses, your eyes will probably get even more strained. Eyes need rest. Listening to the radio is one thing, but using your phone at night is a sure way to get into trouble. After staring at a bright screen, your eyes need to readjust to the lighting outside and it can make it impossible to perceive and react to dangerous situations. Corporal, what's your experience with new drivers and their screens, especially at night.

Master Corporal Patricia Jefferson-Shaw:

Well, driving at night, those screens are so much of a glare. And when they're focused on those screens and they get fixated on the screens, it makes it a hazardous distraction for them. The best thing to do is when you're driving at night, you need to be focused on the road, because the adjustment of going from your screen to looking at the road, now your eyes are trying to get balanced. So having the focus on just driving, putting the screen down so the adjustment is not needed, the screens on your phones. It's a deterioration of your eyesight. You need to focus.

Derek Perez:

Yes. Thank you for that thorough answer, Master Corporal Shaw. Now, have you had any experience with sleepy drivers, Corporal?

Master Corporal Patricia Jefferson-Shaw:

Yes, I have. You have a lot of people that want to take the challenge to get to their destination, knowing that it is several hours involved. Sleepy driving is just like driving under the influence. So it makes it even more dangerous at that point.

Derek Perez:

At some point, your body has to maintain its normal sleep cycle. You definitely shouldn't keep going when your eyes are heavy. Pull off at a rest stop and get a hotel and get some real sleep. The driving can wait. As you mentioned, making those long trips, they can be somewhat difficult. I once had to drive from California back to Florida and the first leg of the trip required a 10-hour drive to Albuquerque, New Mexico. And the sun was setting in my rearview mirror as I saw the outskirts of a city. It seemed so close, but my eyes kept getting heavier and heavier. I rolled down the window, turned up the music, but nothing seemed to help me. Somehow, I arrived safely at my hotel. In retrospect, I know that this was dangerous. I could have easily fallen asleep at the wheel and killed myself, my passenger or anyone else on the road. It really isn't worth it to try to will yourself to keep going. Your body will shut down when it needs rest and it could happen at an inopportune time.

Well, I think it's time to put that topic to bed. When we return after a short break, Corporal Shaw and I will hit on two more strange scenarios drivers could expect to encounter.

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If you knew someone was high and chose to drive, would you get in their car? Would you let loved one get in that car knowing the driver was impaired? Then why would you ever consider driving when you're impaired? Law enforcement is working hard to keep the roads safe and we all need to do our part. If you're under the influence of marijuana, don't get behind the wheel. Drive baked, get busted. This message brought to you by the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles.

Derek Perez:

Welcome back to 3PointTurn. Corporal Shaw, do you have any pets?

Master Corporal Patricia Jefferson-Shaw:

No, Derek, I don't have any pets, but when my daughter lived with me, we had a little chihuahua named Joy. She was a joy to be in the house.

Derek Perez:

She sounds cute. I'm the proud owner of a beautiful Siamese cat named Luna. Yes, I'm a cat person, ladies and gentlemen. As you listen to this, you have probably figured out we're discussing animals now because Florida has some interesting animals that can pop out of the woods in front of your vehicle. What are the most common animals a driver may encounter, Corporal Shaw?

Master Corporal Patricia Jefferson-Shaw:

Well Derek, the biggest thing at night, you have the major encounter of, is you have your deer. They're one of the popular ones here in the rural areas of Florida. Otherwise you have your possums, your armadillos. Those are ones that I see quite a bit here in North Florida.

Derek Perez:

In addition to the deer, some common animals you might encounter on the roads are squirrels, possums, raccoons, Armadillo, deer as mentioned, smaller snakes and of course turtles, but here in Florida, we also have some more uncommon wildlife that you just might see on a rural road. Bears, Panthers, alligators are not unheard of. Bobcats and larger snakes like pythons and of course, farm animals away from their fields. Now of less concern but still on the list are birds, which are largely going to move out of your way, even the buzzards that hang out along highways to eat roadkill. However, Canadian geese are prone to walk across busy roads. How do you handle this annoying delay or avoid a crash from a vehicle without hitting the Canadian geese in the road?

Master Corporal Patricia Jefferson-Shaw:

Well, your biggest thing to avoid those geese in the road is to make sure you focus ahead, not just right in front of you. You need to look ahead of you to see what is happening. The geese do have laws. They are able to cross the roadway. If you see them from a distance, being able to stop ahead of time and everyone behind you seeing what is going on, that's the best situation to handle on those annoying, if most people think they're annoying, I think they're kind of cute when they're walking across the roadway, but that's the way to handle it.

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Derek Perez:

Some good advice. Now we did start this conversation with pets and under Florida law and I know that this can be quite a tragic situation for those involved, but under Florida law, if you hit a pet, you must stop and contact either local law enforcement or an animal control service. How do you determine if an animal is a pet, especially if it could be out at night when you hit it, is it a hit-and-run scenario if you leave the scene of a crash with an animal?

Master Corporal Patricia Jefferson-Shaw:

Yes, it's still a hit-and-run. Hit-and-run versus an animal. The biggest thing with hitting an animal, most of your animals that you're hitting at night, well, you know for sure, a deer probably doesn't belong to anyone.

Derek Perez:

That's fair.

Master Corporal Patricia Jefferson-Shaw:

But if you hit a dog, some people have dogs tagged. Like our little Chihuahua that live with me, she actually has something embedded in her. You have one big animal and we have that a lot in the rural areas, you get a lot of the cows to get from behind the fences and they're hit. Most of your cows though, they're tagged. So by stopping, notifying, the parties that's involved, notifying the owner, takes care of a lot of that.

Derek Perez:

Well, what should we do when we encounter these animals? A number of things come to mind, but not the least of which are being aware of your surroundings. Maybe the most predictable, large animal, as you mentioned, is the deer here on Florida roads. And often you see them between October and December, but they can be out any time. Honestly, this is where our first point mingles with our second, be careful at night because it's harder to see animals and it can be harder to avoid them. And you'll have longer stopping times because of your reactions. If you do hit one, what should you do?

Master Corporal Patricia Jefferson-Shaw:

Well, if you hit an animal, you should pull over. If not knowing what type of animal it is, you may get at your vehicle just to check, to see if the animal is still alive. In certain cases, based on what has happened to the animal, it's having to put the animal down. Otherwise you just want to pull over, make sure you call law enforcement, have law enforcement come out there. Based on the type of animals you hit, it could cause significant damage that you can't go anywhere. You're going to have to call law enforcement to take care of things.

Derek Perez:

Now, some advice we can certainly count on is, if given the choice, hitting an animal is unfortunately largely better than hitting another vehicle. Don't swerve into traffic. If an animal jumps out in front of your car, it might startle you, but don't compound a potential crash by making it worse. Swerving into another lane or head on traffic across a solid double yellow line is not advised. If you're on a multi-lane highway, it could catch drivers around you off guard and increase the likelihood of a crash with their vehicle. Or it could cause you to lose control of your own vehicle and wind up in a bad crash off the

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road. As horrible as it might seem, sometimes your best and safest recourse is to simply brake and hope the animal gets out of the way.

Well, I guess to summarize all of this, animals cross roads when least expected, so drivers should always focus on the road in front of them and be alert that something could happen. If a crash with an animal does occur, presuming it's something larger than your basic roadkill, such as a squirrel or possum, stay where you are and be prepared to make a phone call to an appropriate authority. All right, Corporal Shaw, let's take one more quick break and come back to wrap things up.

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Derek Perez:

Welcome back. Corporal Shaw as you and I talk right now, it's hurricane season. In fact, for six months out of the year in Florida, it's hurricane season. That means at some point a driver is probably going to experience inclement weather, whether it's from a tropical system or otherwise. In Florida, thunderstorms can appear out of nowhere. An afternoon downpour is basically an inevitability and as much as we all like to talk about driving in perfect conditions, more often than not you'll experience conditions that are less than perfect. Corporal Shaw, how can you prepare for the unknown?

Master Corporal Patricia Jefferson-Shaw:

Well, Derek, unfortunately you cannot prepare for the unknown. You have to make sure you're just ready for the unknown. Thunderstorms, rainfalls, downpours, in Florida, especially in this area, we've been getting a lot of downpours, which has caused a lot of traffic crashes, but you got to make sure that your vehicle is properly equipped to handle the roadways. As everyone knows, oil falls on the road, you got to be prepared for that. Making sure that you have proper tires, making sure your tires are properly inflated, making sure your windshield wipers are working properly. Just making sure that everything on your vehicle is up to proper standards.

Derek Perez:

I must agree. Now, as we said, you can never know what's happening, but some preparations you can take to always be ready for the unknown are to check the weather forecast before you head out. Is it going to rain? Will it be windy or is there a larger weather event on the horizon? And I agree, Corporal Shaw your wiper blades can get worn down over time. You have to make sure they're in proper working condition so they can wipe away rain as it hits your windshield. And as you said, your tires on the slippery roads can be the most crucial aspect to safe driving. If tires are under or overinflated, it can decrease control of the vehicle in poor weather conditions. Tire treads can also get worn, which puts you at greater risk of sliding on the road when driving or braking. Don't forget headlights and brake lights should also be functional and bright. Corporal Shaw, what else can you do to just be prepared for whatever you might encounter on the road?

Master Corporal Patricia Jefferson-Shaw:

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Well, as a driver, whether you're inexperienced or experienced, to make sure you're focused on everything that is occurring in front of you and behind you. When there's poor weather, you're going to have a lot of different things: standing water, so you have to make sure you focus on the standing water. 18 wheelers that pass you, they're going to give you a heavier downpour on your windshield, which makes it even harder for you to see. So you just have to focus on each point that is around you, especially when it's heavier vehicles and lighter vehicles.

Derek Perez:

Would you mind expanding on how to deal with standing water in your vehicle?

Master Corporal Patricia Jefferson-Shaw:

Well, when you come across standing water, you have to make sure you slow down, because if water gets into your braking system, it's going to make it harder for you to stop. It may also cause your steering to go out of control. Not being able to stop will make everything even more dangerous on a wet roadway.

Derek Perez:

And it's important to leave room in front. If you're driving right behind someone, you're asking for a crash with them. As you mentioned, breaking is harder in wet conditions, especially breaking fast. Giving yourself extra distance between another vehicle and yourself just in case you need it, could prevent a possible crash. Now I mentioned headlights and brake lights. Can you talk about the use of them, especially during inclement weather?

Master Corporal Patricia Jefferson-Shaw:

Florida law states if it's raining, you need to have on your headlights. If you have on your headlights, your brake lights should be working also if you hit your brakes, and that's a big thing that our Florida drivers and other drivers fail to do, to make sure on a regular basis to go out and make sure every equipment on your vehicle is working: headlights, tail lights, brake lights. In the State of Florida, it's recommended even if you have that third light in the rear, two of your lights have to be working at all times. So making sure that your equipment is working properly is a better safe feature for you in the long run, especially when it's raining.

Derek Perez:

Now we've spent a lot of time focusing on what to do in heavy downpours and when there's water on the roadways, but sometimes I encounter some unusual weather. Some mornings on my way to the studio, it's very misty, foggy and gray outside. How should a new driver handle heavy fog and low visibility?

Master Corporal Patricia Jefferson-Shaw:

Heavy fog, and low visibility, a lot of people think they need to turn on their high beams. That is the wrong thing. When you turn on your high beams, all it does is give a glare back to you, which makes it now even harder to see. When you have heavy fog, best thing to do is have on your low beams. Most vehicles now are equipped with fog lights. Fog lights do help, but you have to make sure that you drive with your low beams not high beams.

Derek Perez:

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Now some of our newest drivers may encounter weather so extreme that they don't feel safe on the roadway. What's some advice you can offer them and what choices can they make to help and fellow motorists be safe?

Master Corporal Patricia Jefferson-Shaw:

The biggest thing, if you can't see, pull over. Get out of the way of other motoring public that can see a little better than you. It's best to pull over, wait to everything dies down before entering the roadway.

Derek Perez:

Just remember to apply the not-so-common common sense. If there's inclement weather, drive slowly. Other drivers will be slowing in the rain. You should too. There's no need to drive fast when visibility decreases and dangers can pop up in the form of standing water or other inclement weather. And don't forget the first rule: Buckle up. It should go without saying, but the first thing you do when you get in the vehicle is buckle your safety belt. Since the risk of a crash is greater in poor weather, that means there's an increased chance you'll need a seat belt to keep you safe.

Well, that was one of the more fun and unusual safety lessons we could provide to our listeners. Corporal Shaw, you and I have one more episode together to discuss another safety topic. Can't wait to see you there. Until next time, drive safe, Florida.

FLHSMV:

On the next episode of 3PointTurn, the FLHSMV team takes a look at safe holiday travel and how to avoid trouble while taking long trips.

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