

Safe and Dry: Winter Cruising on the BC Coast

IF YOU'RE WORKING IN THE WOODS ON THE COAST BETWEEN NOVEMBER and February, count on rain and you won't be disappointed. A coastal town like Port Hardy can get over 200 millimetres of rain in a typical winter month, occasionally within a two day period. That's about 10 times the combined monthly precipitation in Kamloops. Spend a 10 day shift in the aptly named *very wet hypermaritime* Biogeoclimatic Unit during the winter, and you'll understand the meaning of wet.

Identification and mitigation of safety hazards are at the core of an effective safety program and it's mandatory for BC Forest Safety Council SAFE Certification. The bottom line of any field operation is getting people home safely at the end of each day. We can't control forces of nature, but we can anticipate and prepare for them. Preparation can keep a bad day from becoming a tragic one.

The risk of hypothermia is highest under wet and windy conditions. The physical demands of timber cruising generates plenty of body heat, so there's little risk of hypothermia during normal activities. When normal activities stop, due to injury or other unplanned events, it takes very little time for the cold to cut through wet clothing. Cruisers dress in layers of breathable clothing to allow for heat to escape when physically active, but the layers provide enough insulation to keep warm when standing still. The Stanfield wool sweater is breathable and provides excellent insulation, even when wet.

A bit of snow isn't unheard of on the coast, particularly at higher elevations. Coastal timber cruisers, in our rubber raingear, aren't particularly well-suited to this environment. Stable footing and a good grip is a must to avoid becoming a human toboggan. Crossing snow chutes and steep creeks in snow should be avoided altogether.

The choice of footwear and outer shell is challenging when higher elevations in a block have 30 centimetres of snow and the lower elevations are snow-free. In most cases, winter Gortex jackets can't withstand the punishment of wet and brushy conditions. Winter boots provide more traction and comfort in snow, but don't provide enough traction on steep slopes or woody debris. A rubber rain suit and rubber caulk boots are the common denominator in mixed conditions. It's better to have cold toes in the snow than be cold and wet all over.

The fewer daylight hours in winter and the dim light on cloudy days are an obvious hazard. Nobody thinks that working in the woods in the dark at night is a good idea and it's no different when it's dark at 8:30 am. Tripping and falling are the most common hazards in reduced light. Working safely requires that you adapt your work according to the conditions. That might mean a later start time or a slower pace in the woods. But one less cruise plot per day is better than a lost-time injury—or worse.



Photo: iStockPhoto

Getting a stick in the eye from the now leafless brush is almost a wintertime tradition for field people. A flip-down brush screen is most effective prevention for this hazard and it's more likely to be used by field staff than safety glasses stored along with debris in a cruise vest pocket.

Driving is almost always the number one hazard in timber cruising. Heavy industrial traffic, tourist traffic and variable road surfaces are enough to contend with at any time of year. During the winter months, reduced visibility and deteriorating road conditions from rain are additional hazards. Most land managers have environmental management systems in place to monitor rainfall and restrict activities when surface water flow and soil saturation create a hazard. There's no substitute for defensive driving though. The culvert you drove over yesterday may be an open chasm today.

Winter storms can come up quickly and unexpectedly. Field staff must be aware of their surroundings at all times and supervisors must be able to assess the risk and decide when to leave the woods. A hard hat provides little protection from a 10 centimetre Douglas-fir branch flying through the air, let alone a collapsing snag. High winds may also block road access home with fallen trees.

Above everything else, there is simply no replacement for check-in procedures and emergency communications. A relatively minor injury can turn into a major injury if shock develops, and this can be fatal over

time without medical treatment. The ability to get help in an emergency and to immediately implement a rescue requires pre-planning.

Emergency planning requires the development of detailed and site-specific written procedures to deal with any emergency, especially how to get an injured worker out of the woods and to medical treatment. Communication is the key, and each worker must know who to call and how. The plan should include emergency contacts, the closest hospital and methods of evacuation. A complete list of emergency procedures and contacts should be carried by each worker.

A good emergency plan always has a 'plan B' for communications and transportation. For example, if the radio doesn't work, use the satellite phone, or if the helicopter can't fly, evacuate by boat. The extraction of workers from the woods with even minor injuries can take hours to complete, so it's critical to get the process started as soon as possible.

Working on the coast during the winter isn't all bad. There are the odd sunny days when you blow the dust off your sunglasses and take in the awesome effect of all that rain on our coastal forests. Then, go skiing or golfing, as weather permits. 🌊

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