

Four-Wheel Drive on the Meadow

I've used a four-wheel drive pickup to get where I needed to go or to do work I needed to do, like hauling wood from the timber where a two-wheel drive won't go, but I never wanted to use a pickup to drive around for fun. Except that one time, and that time almost didn't turn out well.

I had invested in getting our recently-acquired four-wheel drive pickup into good mechanical shape, and a storm dropped almost two feet of snow on the ranch we took care of in northeastern Oregon's Blue Mountains. Gerrit, my brother, came out from Sumpter. I said, "We could cross the river and drive up the meadow. I'd like to see how this pickup will do in this much snow. I could haul more wood out and sell it, if the truck gets around okay."

I drove into the river and broke up the thin ice that covered the shallow ford where I'd been crossing to cut and haul firewood from dead lodgepole along the west boundary of the ranch. The river's current pushed ice under the thick ice below the ford.

I drove up the riverbank onto the meadow. The pickup left differential marks between deep wheel tracks in clean, new snow. I thought I knew where my road to bring out wood lay under the snow covering the meadow. I drove through the open gate in the division fence, angled left and drove up onto the bench ground above the river, pushing powdery snow with the front bumper. I drove past the first hay yard, then gently left again, heading for the timber beyond the meadow.

I said, "I'm probably the only one who could drive across the meadow like this, without seeing the road, because I know the meadow better than any living person...", WHAM. Both front wheels fell in a ditch obscured by snow, to remind me that I seldom know as much as I think I do. The pickup was stout enough to take rough use, and it had power and traction. I dropped it into lowest gear, eased on across the ditch, and drove through snow at the edge of the bench as it curved parallel to the river.

I said, "John told me a bunch of them came up here one spring when the river overran its banks and spread out across the meadow. They rode their horses through muddy water almost to their stirrups. The guy John had hired to take care of this ranch back then said, 'You'd better let me take the lead through here, cause I know this meadow and the way the river banks run through here, keep us out of trouble..., ' and immediately and unexpectedly rode his horse off the riverbank into deep water and swift

current. He washed about a half-mile downstream before he could guide his horse into shallow water and then up out of the water. John said the caretaker stayed real quiet the rest of the day and let whoever wanted to take the lead.”

I turned down the riverbank and faced the lower ford in the river, that hadn't been used all winter and was iced over. Willow bushes laden with snow reached out over the small river. I said, “I've been wondering if that ice is thick enough to support a pickup..What do you think?”

Gerrit said, “I don't know.”

“The water under the ice is less than a foot deep. I think I'll try it.”

I dropped the pickup into gear again and drove down the steep bank and slowly onto the river. CRUNCH, CRACK, THUD. We broke through the ice. The answer was definite. The ice wouldn't support a pickup. Nor would the pickup propel itself backward or forward, even in four-wheel drive in the lowest gear. Broken pieces of ice, four or five inches thick, jammed under the thick ice just downstream of the pickup. The water rose and ran over the top of the ice on the river. Gerrit and I looked at the frozen river around us and the water running close around the pickup. I said, “Sometimes four-wheel drive pickups get severely stuck because their drivers abandon caution to the belief that their machines will go anywhere.”

Gerrit said, “Yup. That does happen.”

I said, “Well, that's what the winch is for.”

I stepped from the pickup across cold running water onto intact ice. I pulled cable from the winch on the front of the pickup, waded through snow on ice, and crossed the river. I hooked my cable low around a grandfather willow bush, walked back, got into the pickup, operated the controls, and slowly winched the pickup across the river, breaking thick ice all the way, and up, free from the river's ice, onto the opposite bank.

I rewound the cable, and we four wheeled through two feet of snow to the county road and up the road home. Distance covered, about four miles. Elapsed time, more than two hours.

It wouldn't have taken much more ice piling up before the winch wouldn't have pulled me out. I could have been stuck in the river, wishing I'd never started down the bank. After that adventure, I used the four-wheel drive and the winch to get firewood from difficult areas.

Our pickup became good transportation for me and my wife and our daughters in country where packed snow often stays on the highways for months at a time. With four-wheel drive and with the winch, I helped many people get unstuck, but I had had my experience with four wheeling for pleasure, and I never again drove anywhere just to see if the four-wheel drive and the winch would power me through.