

Flashing Lights

by Steve Price

Bottom Line

Just because it meets the eye doesn't mean that it penetrates to the brain. Visibility is not the same as noticeability. We want to be noticed. Flashing lights in daylight will get us noticed. Being noticed will help prevent collisions and injuries.

The Details

Our brains try to make our lives easier for us. Think of the first time you rode in a group. You were aware of every little thing happening close to you. Your muscles were tense. Your mind was tense. At the end of the ride, you might have had a headache and needed a nap. Now, you are much more relaxed. Your mind automatically selects what to be concerned about and what to ignore. Without even being aware of it, you let most of those little things go by almost unnoticed because experience has shown you (that is, your brain) that they do not signify a hazard. Instead, you notice the relatively few things that represent a real hazard. Driving is the same way but with a slight twist. Drivers unconsciously perform the same type of selectivity but do so with an eye toward other four wheeled vehicles. Two wheeled vehicles tend not to be perceived by automobile drivers. They might be seen, but they don't register.

They are just background. So, how to register in the mind of an automobile driver? Studies have shown that flashing lights can be quite effective in this regard. One study concluded that use of flashing lights can reduce accidents with personal injury to cyclists by 19%. Flashing lights help cyclists stand out from the background. There is still some discussion among researchers

about how much light and how focused the beam of light should be for maximum protection.

However, there is a clear consensus that flashing lights are better than steady beam lights, and irregular flashing patterns are better than regular patterns. Also, because cyclists are particularly vulnerable to being hit from the side - particularly by cars pulling out of side streets - side visibility is helpful. You don't want that beam to be too narrow. One final thought. Remember the first time you saw a road worker in one of those orange safety vests? He or she really jumped out at you, right? Now, you see so many of those safety vests that they don't jump out at you quite so much anymore. Expect the same for flashing bike lights. We may need to adjust in the future. However, for now, please use visible, irregular-pattern flashing lights during the day on all your rides.



(This article is the result of reviewing several sources. However, most of the information can be found in an article by James Huang that appeared in Cycling Tips. It can be found on-line at <https://cyclingtips.com/2017/02/see-seen-every-cyclist-needs-know-daytimerunning-lights/>)