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Every drop of gas counts when 'hypermilers' drive

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By Kim Janssen Staff writer

The last time Browning Mitchell bought gas, there was still ice on the roads.

By the time he fills up again, it could cost \$4 a gallon.

Mitchell, of Chicago's Mount Greenwood community, doesn't hide his car in the garage. He drives it at least 38 miles a day to and from his city hall job as an engineer with the Chicago Fire Department.

He eats Cheerios for breakfast, not muesli, and displays no outward sign of meanness.

But getting the industry-leading 60 miles per gallon in the city from his 2004 Toyota Prius just isn't good enough for him and a small but growing band of "hypermilers" -- motorists committed to squeezing the maximum use out of every drop of gas.

"There's three types of people who buy hybrid vehicles," Mitchell says.

"Stingy people, people concerned about the environment and geeks who are into the technology."

Mitchell, who travels across the country in his spare time meeting other Prius owners and helping them modify their cars, is in the last group, although many of his techniques can be adopted by drivers of traditionally engined cars.

He's stuffed foam in his car's grill to keep the engine hot and added a meter to his dashboard that measures how far he's pressed the gas pedal. He keeps his tires inflated high enough above the recommended maximum that he's too embarrassed to admit just how high, and he and plugs an engine block heater into the electrical system at his home every night so his car performs efficiently from start up in the morning.

He drives with the windows shut and the air conditioning turned off for months after most of us have it cranked on full, keeps his coat on and the heater off in winter and has made an art of driving without even the electric part of the Prius's hybrid motor.

He even has a used Prius battery in his basement, "just for fun."

And since his last trip to the gas station, he's averaging 73 mpg -- his best ever.

By the stern standards of hypermilers, though, Mitchell is unextreme, and he in fact prefers the term "eco driving."

His car still has a rear seat, and he's added a subwoofer and amp so that he can listen to loud 70s rock music, a weight addition that would make stricter hypermiling devotees blush.

He once took a longer, slower route across Indiana, to boost his mileage, he admits, but insists, "the real reason was to avoid the tolls."

By contrast, Wayne Gerdes, a pal of Mitchell's who lives in the northern suburbs, won this year's Hybridfest mileage challenge in Wisconsin by averaging 181 mpg in a Honda Insight, gets 59 mpg from a stock Honda Accord, using tricks including turning off the engine and coasting without power-assisted steering or brakes.

Then there's the "different" guy who "fitted a fifth wheel to his Insight" to boost mileage, Mitchell says, adding, "There's some guys who wear ice vests keep the AC off all summer."

A quick ride around the block with Mitchell -- actually, not *that* quick -- reveals useful tips any motorist could use.

By predicting when lights will change and coasting up to stop signs, Mitchell may occasionally enrage "a soccer mom in an SUV" behind him, but he usually doesn't arrive any later than anyone else.

For a Chicago motorist, he's preternaturally calm, too, although figuring whether his aversion to road rage is a consequence of hypermiling or a prerequisite may be an unanswerable chicken-and-egg question.

Mitchell is realistic enough to acknowledge that while high gas prices may make fuel efficient vehicles and make gas-saving techniques more popular, the American public is likely to stop short of measures that will cost it time or comfort.

"Most Prius owners could care less about the technology, and that's fine," he said.

"They just want a cheap car to run, but we're trying to teach those that want to know how they can get a little more out of them."

To that end, Mitchell and a group of his friends have formed the Chicago Prius Group, which meets officially for the first time on May 20.

"We do all the normal things car guys do -- pop the hoods, talk about modifications and learn more about the vehicles," he said.

"We're normal car guys."

Except, of course, that normal car guys can't drive to Atlanta without stopping for gas.

*Kim Janssen may be reached at
kjanssen@dailysouthtown.com
or (708) 633-5998.*

Chicago Prius Group meets Sunday May 20th, 1 p.m., Grossinger Toyota/Scion 7225 N. Cicero Ave.
Lincolnwood, IL 60712

For more information on the group, visit their Web site at www.chicagopriusgroup.com

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