

COMMONSENSE ROADRUNNER

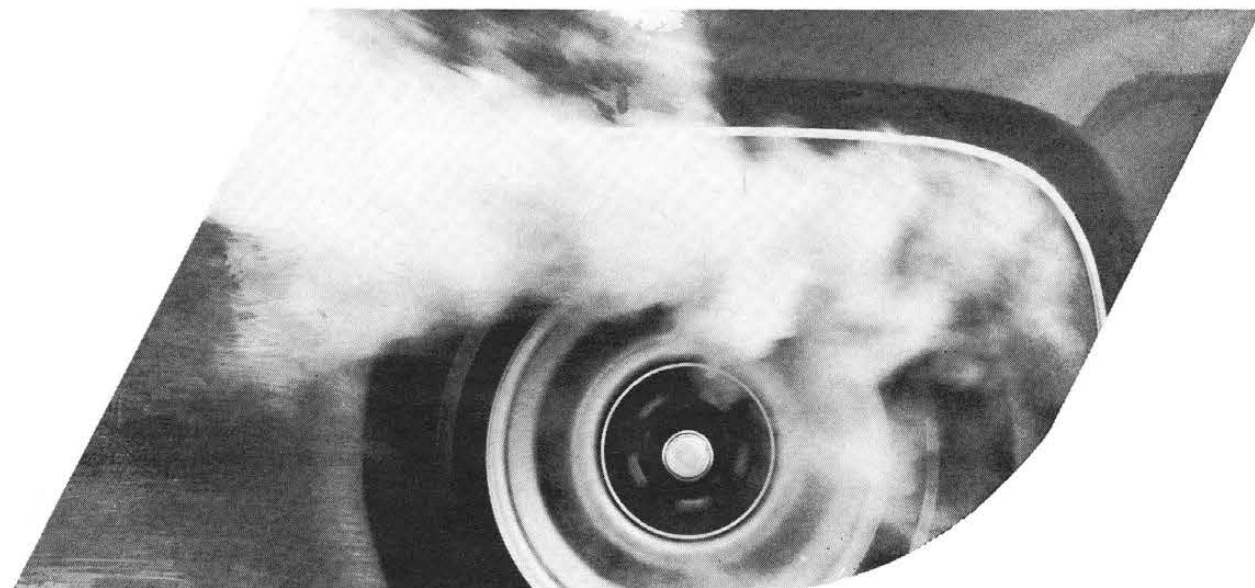
The 383 comes off better than the 440 in terms of practical performance and does it with insurability.

By Jim Brokaw

Softer, rounded lines of restyled Roadrunner fit new "civilized" image.



Above: Bird retains full control on hard corner up to adhesion limit. Below: 440 has smoking power.



Armed with stone tablets and the jaw-bone of an ass, the insurance industry has relentlessly sought out would-be automotive aggressors and smote mightily all who dare aspire to power. To be more precise, any sign of horsepower in excess of that required to operate the windshield wipers in a heavy rainstorm has fallen victim to a surcharge. One of the more noteworthy casualties of this righteous crusade is the Roadrunner.

Sales of the road bird through model year '71 were 4,236, constituting a drop of some 64 percent over the previous year's figure of 11,831 for the same two month period. That's not just an annual adjustment in the market, it is more of a terminal illness. While some of the sales loss should be written off to changing tastes in the youthful buyer as well as the youthful thinking buyer, the bulk of the loss will have to be laid directly to the high cost of insurance.

This can be termed either a crushing defeat for individualism and the right to buy what you want in a free market, or a reprieve from self induced automotive genocide, depending on which side of the tailpipe your viewpoint lies. With a judicious application of restraint on the part of the oddsmakers in Hartford, and an eye to keeping the financial penalties somewhere on this side of chaos, it is very likely that the net result of this fiscal shock treatment will be to put the automotive enthusiast right where he belongs — in a VW.

But we're here to save you from that. If you will recall, the original Roadrunner, which burst upon the scene in 1968, was an answer to the enthusiasts' prayers — a cheap hot car.

The original came in two sizes, 383 4V and 426 hemi. In 1970, the 440 six-pak was added.

Prior to the advent of the Roadrunner, most of the power optioned pavement gobblers came with plush interiors and all sorts of fancy gew-gaws which do painful things to the numbers at the bottom of the window stickers. The 'Bird was a plain-jane, functional beast with no frills, like the 350 hp Chevy II of 1965-66. Since the folks at Chrysler had more than a passing acquaintance with the requirements of keeping lots of horses on their assigned patch of asphalt, the Runner was well suspended, just about ideally stiff. In fact, the basic Roadrunner was such a good driving car that it was the straight-on choice for Car of the Year in 1969.

Unfortunately, just as the irreverent "beep-beep" Roadrunner horn began to fill the breathing air, so did the insurance escalation-chorus, demanding higher premiums and surcharges for performance cars. Never mind that no underwriter could tell you categorically with reliable data that a 383 Roadrunner was a far greater risk than an almost identically powered 383 Belvedere two door; into the high rate column it went, along with other hotties like 429 Ford Galaxies and 485 Buick Electras. The most common surcharge criterion is a weight to horsepower ratio, 10.5:1 and 12.0:1 for the under 4,000-lb. cars. Some companies go up to 13.0:1, but they are the exception, not the rule. You must pay at least a 30-percent surcharge for anything under 10.5:1 and at least 15 percent for the machines in the 10.5-12.0:1 category, regardless of driving record. The big question, of course, is where do the Roadrunners fall and how much is it going to cost. The secondary question is how much am I going to get for my money.

Before we answer either question, let's look beyond the drag

strip and get back to just what a performance or enthusiast's car really is. Without going into spring rates, torsion bar diameters, degrees of timing and flow meter readings, all of which are related to the size and weight of the vehicle which is to perform, ideally a performance car will get around any corner without plowing or leaning excessively; pass 55-ft. 'semis on a two lane road without white-knuckling the driver; get onto a short freeway ramp and into traffic without strain; and come to swift and sure stops under circumstances requiring them.

All of the Detroit manufacturers have in their inventories performance cars with stout, road-holding suspensions, reliable brakes, and engines powerful enough to accommodate all traffic requirements. They also have a few models which are overpowered, too stoutly suspended, overgeared and overpriced. The two Roadrunners we tested represented both categories.

We operated a 383-4V Roadrunner with an automatic transmission and a 3.91 rear end against a 440-6V auto trans with a 4.10 rear. The difference in price was \$313.90 and the difference in unmodified performance wasn't worth it. Not only did we fail to substantially better the quarter-mile times of the 383 with the costlier 440, but the 383 is considerably more insurable than its hungrier brother.

The comparative performance figures on the accompanying spec sheet are really a bit misleading, as the only area of superiority it shows for the 440 is in the trap speed of 96, compared to 94.5 mph. For those whose hearts beat in time with the air-sucking, fuel-gulping triple carbureted 440 and don't believe our times, we must concede that the big engined Runner was in less than peak condition. In fact it was with great reluctance that the Plymouth P.R. man even let us have it without further medical attention. To be fair, I checked our times on a Charger 440 which had the same rear end ratio and was driven by A.B. Shuman, our resident drag racer. His quarter-mile times were better, 14.74-97.3 mph, but the intermediate times were very close to the ones we set and again slower than the 383. The 440 comes on at the top end quite strong, not where it is needed, tending to make it even less desirable in the eyes of the insurers. A lot more can be done with the 440 to tweak out more performance. It has a much greater potential than the 383, but in stock configuration there just isn't that much difference.

Driving around town, where the car will spend most of its time, the 383 was much more responsive to throttle input. Small speed changes were accomplished with minimal applications of power. The 440 was less responsive and required more power input to achieve the same speed change. With the 4.10 rear axle ratio, the 440 should have been quicker, but it wasn't.

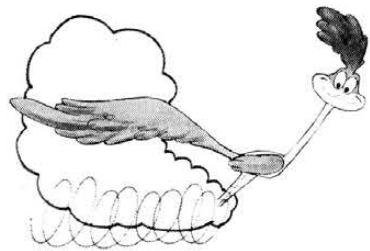
The 440 operates on only two of its six barrels under normal circumstances. The other four are for acceleration. They do not operate on demand of the driver, but are actuated by manifold vacuum. On occasion, the four additional fuel nozzles will start pouring at the most inopportune times. The setting on our test machine was in good range, though. In four days of normal driving, which included freeways, city streets and suburbs, the four big ones never did cut in. Of course, I really didn't find it necessary to "peel the hides" coming down the Hollywood Boulevard on-ramp in order to get into the freeway traffic flow, nor did I find it mandatory to "shower down" coming off the S-turn transition road from the Santa Ana freeway to the Garden Grove freeway. Both were satisfactorily negotiated with two-barrel power.

(As a note of qualification, I drive an average of 90 miles a day commuting from my home to the office. The trip covers suburban four-laners, one of the newest freeways — with wide lanes and engineered curves, trafficked city streets, and one of the oldest freeways — with narrow lanes and take-it-at-your-own-risk curves.)

Of the two cars, the 383 is more comfortable, has equal or better road holding ability at the speeds attainable, allows much finer speed control in fluctuating traffic conditions, and eats less fuel for the same type terrain.

Both cars had a slap-stick shifter, which when working properly is as nice an option as you can get for the money. Both of ours worked as advertised, although I have driven some

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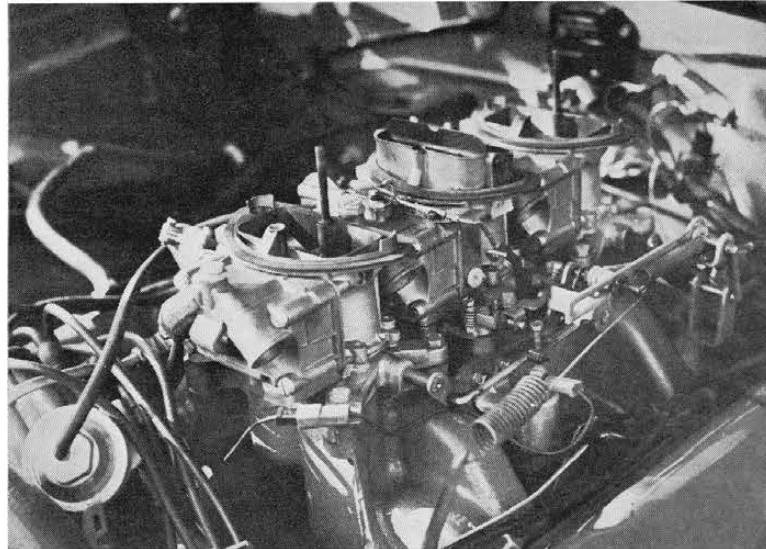


in the past which were loose and uncertain, and constituted more of a detriment than an asset. This was before the days of Chrysler's recognition of the need for better quality control. It was most enjoyable to reach down and give the stick a little tap to up-shift, producing a quick, positive gear change with no lag and never diverting my attention from the road. The only way it could be improved is if they made it so you could down-shift with a tap, at least to second. With a two-way slap it would be superior to a stick for close control on the road. It wouldn't hurt on the handling course, either.

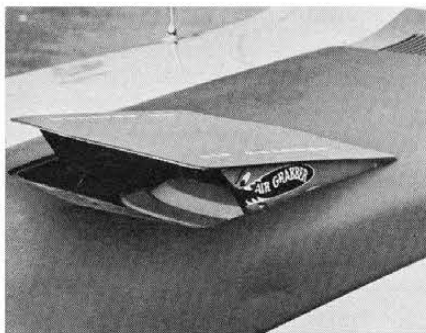
The Goodyear G60-15 bias-belted polyglas tires give enough road holding ability to make you think that you really can drive. Under normal circumstances, the handling is superior, announcing with sufficient warning when the adhesion limit is reached for even the slowest reactors to make a proper correction. The 440 has a slightly stiffer suspension, giving it a tendency to hop over some of the rough spots in a hard corner on the handling course. While this is slightly disconcerting, it does provide for a flatter cornering attitude.

The higher spring rate in the 440 (118 lbs. per in. to 111 lbs. per in. at the front, and 150 ppi to 138 ppi at the rear) is a real asset in the braking department. The two were about even in the 30 mph panic stop, with the 383 having a one foot edge, 28 ft. 9 in. to 29 ft. 9 in. In the 60 mph panic stop the 440 ground to a smoking halt in 117 ft. 1 in., which is an excellent stop for any car. The 383 smoked in at 130 ft. 9 in., which is also a good stop. The primary difference here was in the fact that the 383 produced some wheel hop in the rear suspension as it decelerated. Both stops

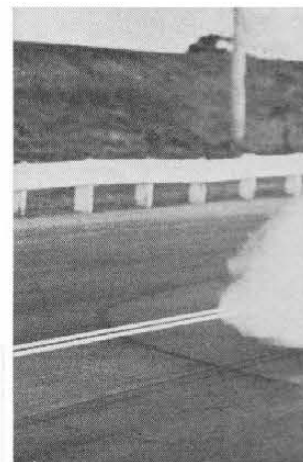
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Above: Nerve center of the 440 is the cluster of three Holley 2V carburetors perched atop a high rise manifold. Center carb is used for basic engine requirements. Two outboard carbs are for getting it on.



Above: Vacuum actuated air grabber hood scoop is driver controlled by instrument panel switch. Right: Panic stop from 60 mph on power front discs and drums was dead on.



ROADRUNNER 440

Plymouth Roadrunner V8	
2-door hardtop	\$3,120.00
Bucket Seats—cloth & vinyl	105.95
Light package—includes fender mounted turn indicators, trunk light, glove box light, map courtesy light, ash tray light, time delay ignition light	31.95
Basic group—includes radio—solid state—AM, power steering, variable speed windshield wipers, remote control mirror—left—chrome	199.90
Super track pak	219.30
Roadrunner decor group—Custom style vinyl trim, deluxe steering wheel, wheel lip moulding, rear bumper tape treatment, hood scoop sport stripes	85.60
Console	57.65
Torqueflite transmission	237.50
High impact paint	15.05
440 CID engine 8 cyl. 3/2 bbl.	262.15
Dual racing mirrors—remote control—left, manual—right—body color	11.75
Undercoating	22.60
Moulding—door edge protectors	6.50
Bumper guards—front	16.85

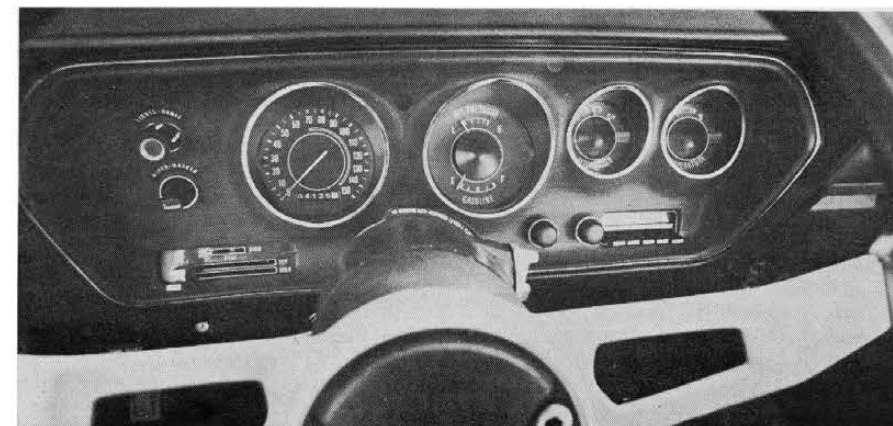
Carburetor—fresh air pack	68.90
Woodgrain rim blow steering wheel	20.10
C Pillar & roof strobe stripes	34.00
4 Rallye road wheels—std. spare	58.95
Tires—G60x15 raised white letters	63.10
Total	\$4,637.80

ROADRUNNER 383

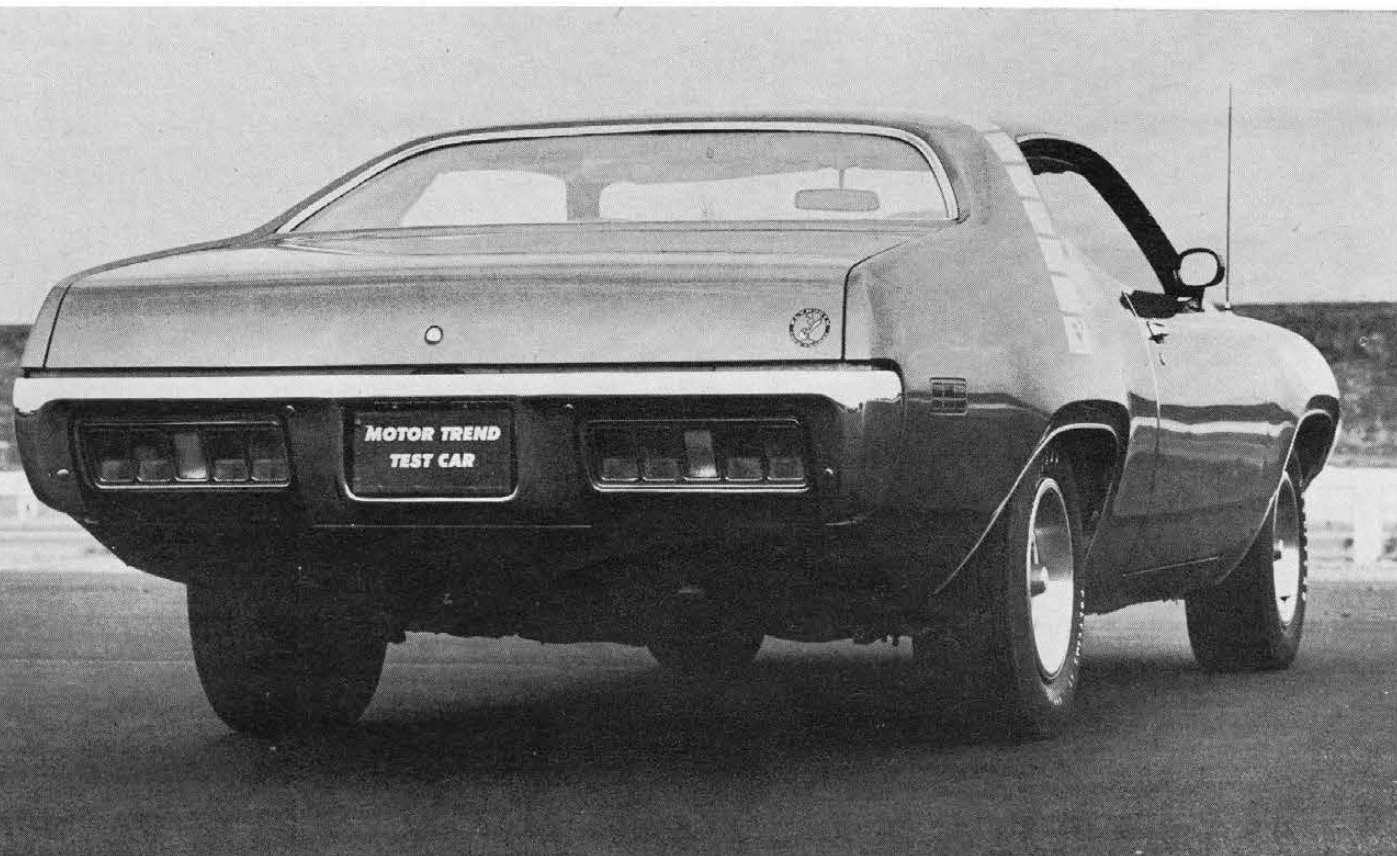
Plymouth Roadrunner V8	
2-door hardtop	\$3,120.00
Bucket seats—vinyl	105.95
Light package—includes fender mounted turn indicators, trunk light, glove box light, map courtesy light, ash tray light, time delay ignition light	31.95
Basic group—includes radio—solid state—AM, power steering, variable control mirror—left—chrome	199.90
High performance axle package	81.80
Road Runner decor group—custom style vinyl trim, deluxe steering wheel, wheel lip moulding, rear bumper tape treatment, hood scoop sport stripes	85.60
Disc brakes—front	24.45
Power brakes	45.15
Console	57.65
Torqueflite transmission	237.50
383 CID engine—8 cyl—4 bbl.	Std.
Dual racing mirrors—remote control—left, manual—right—body color	11.75
Undercoating	22.60
Moulding—door edge protectors	6.50
Bumper guards—front	16.85
Carburetor—fresh air pack	68.90
Woodgrain rim blow steering wheel	20.10
C Pillar & roof strobe stripes	34.00
4 Rallye road wheels—std. spare	58.95
Tires—G60x15 raised white letters	94.30
Total	\$4,323.90

SPECIFICATIONS	ROADRUNNER — 383	ROAD RUNNER — 440
Engine	90° OHV V8	90° OHV V8
Bore & Stroke — ins.	4.25 x 3.38	4.32 x 3.75
Displacement — cu. in.	383	440
MP @ RPM	300 @ 4800	385 @ 4700
Torque: lbs.-ft. @ RPM	410 @ 3400	490 @ 3200
Compression Ratio/Fuel	8.7/regular	10.5/premium
Carburetion	4-V Holley w/ram-air	3/2-V Holley w/ram-air
Transmission	3-spd auto Torqueflite	3-spd auto Torqueflite
Final Drive Ratio	3.55:1 high perf.	4.10:1 Super Track Pak
Steering Type	Power	Power
Steering Ratio	18.7:1	18.7:1
Turning Diameter (Curb-to-curb-ft.)	40.6 ft.	40.6 ft.
Wheel Turns (lock to lock)	3.5	3.5
Tire Size	G60-15	G60-15
Brakes	Power disc/drum	Power disc/drum
Front Suspension	Torsion bar w/stabilizer	Torsion bar w/stabilizer
Rear Suspension	Leaf springs	Leaf springs
Body/Frame Construction	Unit body	Unit body
Wheelbase — ins.	115	115
Overall length — ins.	203.2	203.2
Width — ins.	79.1	79.1
Height — ins.	52.7	52.7
Front Track — ins.	60.1	60.1
Rear Track — ins.	62.0	62.0
Curb Weight — lbs.	3,950	4,050
Fuel Capacity — gals.	21	21
Oil Capacity — qts.	4 + 1	6 + 1
Luggage — cu. ft.	14.2	14.2
Weight/horsepower	12.86:1	10.09:1
Weight distribution front & rear with one passenger — percent	47.6/52.4	47.6/52.4
Shipping weight—lbs.	3,857	3,885
PERFORMANCE	ROAD RUNNER 383	ROAD RUNNER 440
Acceleration		
0-30 mph	2.8	3.0
0-45 mph	4.5	4.9
0-60 mph	6.7	6.7
0-75 mph	9.5	9.6
Standing Start		
1/4-mile Mph	14.84	15.02
Elapsed time	94.5	96.0
Passing speeds		
40-60 mph	3.2	2.95
50-70 mph	3.6	3.6
Speeds in gears*		
1st mph @ rpm	41.5 @ 5000	42.5 @ 5500
2nd mph @ rpm	67.5 @ 5000	72.2 @ 5500
3rd mph @ rpm	97.5 @ 5000	104 @ 5400
Mph per 1000 rpm (in top gear)	19.5	19.26
Stopping distances		
From 30 mph	28.9 ft.	29.9 ft.
From 60 mph	130.9 ft.	117.1 ft.
Gas mileage range	10.1-11.9/11.1 average	10.6-10.9/10.78 average
Speedometer error		
Electric speedometer	30 45 50 60 70 80	30 45 50 60 70 80
Car speedometer	31 45 50 60 70.5 81	31 46 51 61 72 82

*Speeds in gears are at shift points (limited by the length of track) and do not represent maximum speeds.



Above: Instrument panel was identical in both cars. In spite of good selection of engine monitor gauges, absence of tach is unforgivable. More central location would improve display.



ROADRUNNER

continued

were dead on, with no control difficulties.

While Detroit tended to overshoot in the "muscle car" department, Chrysler-Plymouth being no exception, they have evolved what the public and the enthusiast clamored for during the dark days of mushy suspensions, bad brakes and insufficient power. With safety being the prime consideration, no one can argue that factors built in towards the prevention of an accident should be considered before any efforts towards survivability after having one. Good handling, good brakes and adequate power for passing and maneuvering are safety factors. They were 10 years ago when we didn't have them and they will be 10 years from now when, hopefully, they won't have been lost. The 383 Roadrunner fills all of these qualifications.

While the dealers and manufacturers may not like it, the 440 is just a bit too much for reasonable needs. Granted, it is considerably safer than the 383 up in the 90-110 mph range, but most of us really don't travel up there. Tempering enthusiasm with common sense, the 383 has enough for interest, but not too much to handle. Even when you blast on with full power at the strip, the rear end does not break loose and try to come around.

From the insurance standpoint, the 383 has a shipping weight of 3,857 lbs. The gross horsepower rating is 300. Even using the gross figure, which is really about 25 percent too high, the wgt/hp ratio is 12.86:1. This puts the car out of the normal surcharge range for most companies. The 440 weighs 4,050 lbs., which at 385 hp slip-sticks out to a ratio of 10.09:1. This is down where it hurts.

If you are considering a Roadrunner, bear in mind that most of the options have available weight listings. They should be figured in when calculating the ratio, and we included them. While the average insurance agent cringes at mere mention of the word Roadrunner, the car does have all of the necessary attributes for safe operation and it does qualify outside the announced surcharge criteria. Just to bring a ray of sunshine into the lives of the clandestine car nut, C-P has announced, effective immediately, that the 340 ci., 275 hp engine is now available as an option for the Roadrunner. With the 340 installed in the same vehicle as tested with the 383, the weight to horsepower ratio is 13.62:1. That should satisfy any insurance company in the country and you will still be able to have the necessary good braking and handling.

As in all things, all was not sunshine and roses for the Birds. While the dash panel is well equipped with engine monitoring gauges, the temp gauge and alternator indicator are tucked away behind your right fist, out of sight, but at least they are included. The most important gauge of all, the tachometer, was omitted

from both cars, logic notwithstanding; if the car is intended for an enthusiast, then the tachometer is a mandatory item and should be a delete option. One of these days the gentlemen who design dash panels will put the speedometer, tach, oil pressure and temp gauges in the middle where they can all be seen.

The heater control panel was not illuminated and we had all the light options available. There was an air leak around the door handle, which isn't too bad in Southern California, but would be quite noticeable in Michigan. The 440 transmitted an excessive amount of heat in the passenger compartment, and the gentlemen who designed the hood latch must drive another model car. It is not the easiest way to open a hood. The looping exhaust manifold neatly hides the spark plugs from the eyes of the curious. It also makes for warm hands if any changing is contemplated before letting the engine cool off.

The final complaint is the good old power steering. While it turns the wheels with ease, there is minimal to nonexistent road feel and insufficient pre-loading. It can be better and it really should be. It is an annoying point of an otherwise most enjoyable car.

Since styling is a thing of individual taste, you can't really call it good or bad. I personally happen to like the Roadrunner's, and visibility from within is excellent, regardless. With smooth lines all about and no protrusions, the minor parking lot damage should be minimal — another insurance plus. So, in summary, the Roadrunner revised is still an enjoyable car to drive, it still has all of the good features of an enthusiast machine and, in certain readily available configurations, is quite insurable. Car nuts take heart, the war isn't over yet; we're just getting back to some common sense driving. /MT

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