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Get Off Road with Phil

Off-Road Driving Techniques

Words and Images: Phil Bianchi

Always check a water crossing before driving through.

Driving in on dirt roads with ruts, washouts, rocky areas, bulldust, mud and corrugations scares many four-wheel-drive travellers.

Some outback gravel roads receive regular grading while others, such as the Anne Beadell Highway or Canning Stock Route, haven't had a grader over them since construction or are self-made roads so there is gradual, long-term deterioration in road surface.

Beware of road surface advice from fellow travellers. I can't remember how many times my experience of a road surface is completely different from what I was told by a traveller. A few years back we were about to drive the Tanami Track from Halls Creek to Alice Springs and were told it was the worst and roughest road in Australia and they would never again drive it. When we got to Alice we were still looking for the rough bits!

By all means take advice on board, but form your own opinion because one person's idea of an easy or difficult to traverse road can be completely different from that of another.

Dirt Roads

In Australia it's impossible to avoid dirt roads if you want to tour the back blocks. Using commonsense you should have nothing to fear when driving on them.

Dirt road driving tips:

- Reduce tyre pressure at least 4–6 psi and reduce speed as well.
- Stay in the defined wheel tracks and avoid the soft or loose gravel.
- Be prepared for the unexpected, such as dips, ruts, washaways, rocky areas and poor road camber on corners.
- Always assume a vehicle is coming the other way, especially on hill crests.
- If you're in a convoy, stay back out of the dust to improve visibility and not clog your air cleaner.
- Engage 4WD or stability control to improve traction and safety.
- Have the headlights on to warn approaching vehicles.
- Slow down when approaching animals.

■ Slow down or stop for oncoming vehicles, especially trucks with dust clouds.

■ Slow down when going through a floodway or dip because this improves vehicle control and reduces the risk of tyre impact fracture damage.

■ Keep the airconditioner on and switch it to fresh; this will help eliminate dust entry or keep it to a minimum.

Corrugations

Driving on teeth-rattling corrugations would have to be one of the most unpleasant aspects of four-wheel-driving. You've got nowhere to go to get around them and the corrugations seem endless.

The cause of corrugations is often disputed; I, however, feel that hard tyres and excessive speed are the main culprits.

Some say increase your speed so that you skim over the top of the corrugations and you won't feel the bumps. This practice is dangerous because you can easily lose control of your vehicle resulting in a crash or roll over. It also

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tortures your vehicle's suspension and tyres; shock absorber failure in the back blocks can result in an expensive airlift of parts to your remote location.

Also, don't leave home if you have any suspect components on your vehicle such as exhaust systems, clamps, brackets, battery cradles, roof racks, fuel lines and so on. Corrugations will find any weakness and break or destroy components. You may be good at twitching with fencing wire, but that only goes so far. Wouldn't it be better to make sure all fittings are up to scratch and bolts tightened before you leave home? You know the score; 'A stitch in time...'

Reduce tyre pressures. Trial and error is the only way to find a satisfactory pressure, but don't be frightened to go down to 25 psi. On one trip down the Canning I started at one end with pressures of 20 and 24 psi and left them there for the whole three-week traverse.

Think of your tyre as a balloon, a soft balloon will spread over an obstacle, like a corrugation, more easily than a harder one. It is also more difficult to puncture.

Rocky areas, washouts and ruts

Again, lower your tyre pressures to reduce puncture risk; softer tyres reduce:

- Wheel spin and provide more traction.

- Flicking rocks backwards into the vehicle's undercarriage causing damage.

- The risk of impact punctures.

When dealing with steep ruts, rocky areas or washouts you may need to go into low-range and crawl over obstacles; always keeping your vehicle on the higher ground by straddling holes or deep wheel ruts.

For deep washouts you should always get out of your vehicle and check if it is possible to cross and to choose the best line. You may need to shovel away some of the steeper banks to reduce the risk of scraping the vehicle's undercarriage or being hung up. Also a spotter guiding you through the obstacle is a very good idea.

Bulldust

Bulldust is a fine talcum powder-like dust that appears to act like water when it runs down the windscreen. It often occurs when boggy areas dry up and vehicle traffic breaks up the track. Driving through bulldust at speed is dangerous because you don't know how deep it is or if there are any hidden obstacles such as rocks or logs.

Bulldust will readily clog air cleaners so regular checks may be required.

Water crossings

Water crossings, especially deeper ones, are probably the scariest type of driving that will be encountered by most off-road drivers.

In magazines or on the internet you may have seen vehicles ploughing through water with it rushing over the bonnet and in some cases over the windscreen. These vehicles have been specially prepared with radiator blinds, snorkels, raised diff breathers and so forth.

If you are an inexperienced off-road driver and the water level is above the height of the bottom of the bull bar/bumper it is recommended that you avoid such water crossings because they require special preparation and are best attempted after you've been trained or guided by an experienced person. Water can drown the engine, which may be catastrophic in the case of diesel motors, costing you a new engine.

Mud

Sooner or later you will get involved with mud driving. Some may think it's fun driving in and out of mud holes, I don't; I detest mud driving with a passion.

There may be hidden obstacles, deeper mud sections, it gets in everywhere, your tyre treads block up, inside your tyre rims get filled and when it dries out this can cause steering problems,

you may get stuck and need to be snatched out resulting in mud inside your vehicle and so on.

If you need to cross a muddy section, choose low-range second or third gear to reduce wheel spin. Start with normal tyre pressures to bite through the mud and hopefully to a firm surface below. If they don't hit a hard surface, reduce the pressures to get a bigger footprint and a floatation effect and, in the case of mud tyres, the side lugs will provide more bite.

Stick to the main wheel ruts and avoid the temptation to go around the mud patch; the wheel ruts have had the most traffic and will be the most compacted.

Hopefully this article hasn't scared you off; just remember we were all novices once. If you're still unsure book in for a four-wheel-drive driver training course, there are many accredited training companies or clubs that will assist.

See you in the bush. ❖



Top to bottom: Getting bogged in the sand requires a shovel and some hard yakka. ❖ Tyre preparation is paramount.



Counterclockwise from left: A threatening sky means washouts, water crossings and mud. ❖ Make sure your vehicle is in good condition and you have the appropriate safety and rescue equipment when driving off-road. ❖ This is the country we enjoy to explore. ❖ Mud caked on the tyre—I detest it with a passion! ❖ Choose your driving line carefully.

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