

5 TIPS to Save Your 4WD

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OFF-ROAD ESSENTIALS

Words by Tom Severin, Photos by Budd Stanley and Ford

Mechanical SYMPATHY

5 TIPS to keep your 4WD alive on the trail



I vividly recall a beautiful morning in the sand dunes drinking my first cup of coffee while watching the sun poke its nose over the bank of clouds behind an 18-metre dune. An early four-wheeler was testing his new injection system nearby. As he went up a razorback, I could tell he had too much throttle. As he cleared the top, a trail of sand followed the Jeep a good two metres above the crest. As razorbacks have a habit of doing, the drop on the other side proved more extreme than the Jeepers expected. The resulting endo was disastrous for his weekend. Luckily, he

walked away but the Jeep was another matter.

It goes without saying that a reliable vehicle is a must for four-wheeling. Without a dependable 4WD vehicle, we literally could not participate in this exciting hobby. That dependability is affected by how well we maintain our vehicles, and how we treat them off-road.

Which brings me to “mechanical sympathy.” I know it sounds strange. After all, do you really have sympathy for your 4WD vehicle? You probably do, but just don’t call it that. Mechanical

sympathy involves taking care of your vehicle and driving properly to mitigate possible damage so that the vehicle gets you home.

Mechanical sympathy entails several facets. Here are the more important ones.

1. Avoid reckless driving.

Testosterone poisoning can be a big problem among four-wheelers. When affected by this disease, we feel we need to prove ourselves by using excessive momentum to overcome lack of



Maintain proper speed, even Raptors break out in the wilderness.

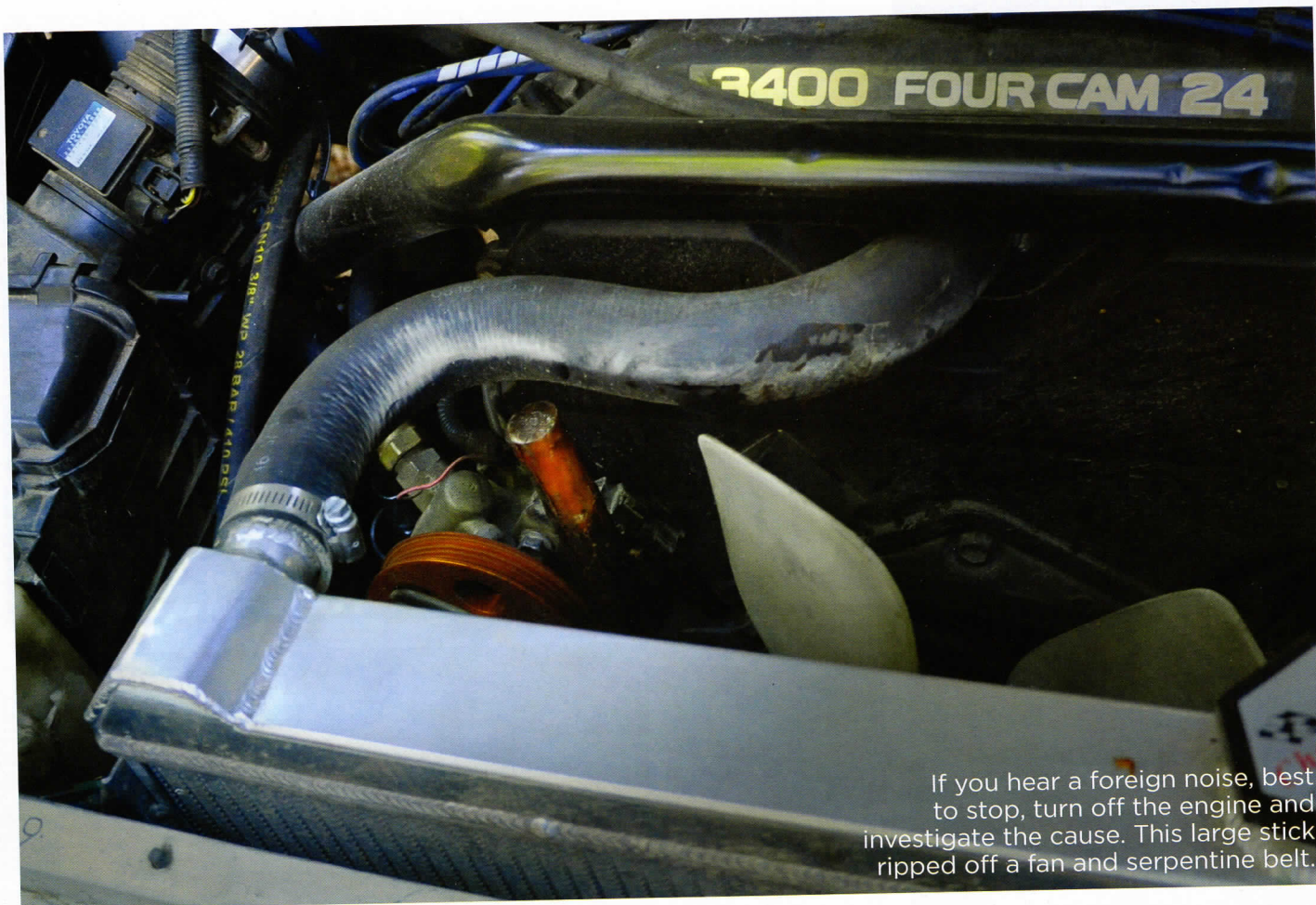


You know your rig better than anyone; know the signs of something wrong, like the sweet smell of coolant.

tractions, going airborne for the record, and trying highly risky obstacles. In addition to putting people at risk, that behaviour is tough on vehicles (and the environment). The only thing to “prove” while off-road is your ability to be a good ambassador for four-wheeling. Save the hot-dogging for the Xbox game back home.

2. Be aware of the environment.

Note the terrain around and below your vehicle. Listen for anything unusual. A slow pace allows you to properly place your tires (though a spotter is useful in



If you hear a foreign noise, best to stop, turn off the engine and investigate the cause. This large stick ripped off a fan and serpentine belt.

some situations). You also have time to respond to changes in the environment. Roll down the windows, turn the radio off, turn the air conditioner off, and listen carefully. Your vehicle tells you a lot about how it feels and a good deal about the terrain.

With the windows down, I know immediately when there's a new sound coming from the vehicle. Not every sound is a cause for concern. Some scraping under the vehicle is okay and won't cause damage. If you hear scraping and feel resistance however, stop, back out and recon before trying again – perhaps several centimetres over.

3. Maintain proper speed. Some four-wheelers think that if a little bit of momentum is good, a lot more must be better. That's simply not true. We want to drive as slowly as possible... the old adage is, "As slowly as possible but as fast as necessary." Too much momentum — read that as "speed" — can be dangerous. It's too easy to lose control.

The terrain takes over control. It can flip you up a bank or off the deep end of a shelf road. High speed on bumpy terrain is tough on your vehicle, too.

4. Keep up with maintenance. A properly maintained vehicle is less likely to break down — on the road or on the trails. Refer to your owner's manual for regularly scheduled maintenance. "An ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure," as the old saying goes. Regular maintenance can mean the difference between a vehicle that survives the trails and one that doesn't.

5. Perform a full inspection of your vehicle. Before starting and after lunch are good times for a 360-degree inspection. And, of course, before you get back on the highway. Even after numerous trips with no issues, don't stop the inspection regimen. Parts can break at any time. Plus, you become so familiar with your vehicle; it's much easier to recognize a problem. A new sound or symptom is readily apparent because it is so unusual.

I recommend a complete inspection before every 4WD excursion. But inspections are crucial while four-wheeling, as well. Look for drips or puddles, stuff hanging down, loose nuts and bolts and anything else out of place. Inspect the engine compartment, too. Anything out of place is really noticeable. Which is another reason to keep the engine bay clean.

"Mechanical sympathy" is a fancy term for a basic but important concept. Just as you (I hope!) take good care of your health, so should you take good care of your vehicle. Regular maintenance and sound driving habits will keep your vehicle at peak performance. And ensure that it's ready to take you on those thrilling 4WD excursions.

Tom Severin, 4x4 Coach, teaches 4WD owners how to confidently and safely use their vehicles to the fullest extent in difficult terrain and adverse driving conditions. Visit www.4x4training.com to develop or improve your driving skill.