> Plymouth Road Runner History <

Plus

THE REAL STORY - the Godfather of Road Runner

How it came to be - the car - the name - beloved horn

The Plymouth Road Runner was a muscle car built by the Plymouth division of the Chrysler Corporation in the United States between 1968 and 1980. In 1968, the first muscle cars were, in the opinion of many, moving away from their roots as relatively cheap, fast cars as they gained options. Although Plymouth already had a performance car in the GTX, designers decided to go back to the drawing board and reincarnate the original muscle car concept. Plymouth wanted a car able to run 14-second times in the quarter mile (402 m) and sell for less than US $3000. Both goals were met, and the low-cost muscle car hit the street. The success of the Road Runner would far outpace the upscale and lower volume GTX, with which it was often confused.

First Generation Road Runner *(the true "muscle car" in every respect)*

Production	1968 - 1970
Body Style	2-Door Coup, 2-Door Hardtop, 2-Door Convertible
Platform	B-Body
Engine	383, 440 Six-Barrel (added mid-year), and 426 Hemi
Transmission	3-Speed Automatic, 4-Speed Manual
Wheelbase	116.0 Inches
Length	202.7 Inches
Width	76.4 Inches
Height	54.7 Inches (with five passengers on board)

1968 Road Runner

Paying $50,000 to Warner Brothers to use the name and likeness of their Road Runner cartoon character (as well as a beep-beep horn, which Plymouth paid $10,000 to develop), and using the Chrysler B platform as a base (the same as the Belvedere, Satellite, and GTX), Plymouth set out to build a back-to-basics muscle car. Everything essential to performance and handling was beefed-up and improved; everything nonessential was left out. The interior was spartan with a basic cloth-and-vinyl bench seat, lacking even carpets in early models, and few options were available - just the basics such as power steering and front disc brakes, AM radio, air conditioning (except with the 426 Hemi) and automatic transmission. A floor-mounted shifter (for the four-speed) featured only a rubber boot and no console so that a bench seat could be used. The earliest of the 1968 models were available only as 2-door pillared coupes (with a B-pillar between the front and rear windows), but later in the model year a 2-door hardtop model (sans pillar) was offered. The Road Runner of 1968-1970 was based on the Belvedere, while the GTX was based on the Satellite, a car with higher level trim and slight differences in the grilles and taillights.

Plymouth dealers gave away this promotional windbreaker in 1970. The "heart with an arrowhead at bottom" design was part of Plymouth's ad campaign that year. The Road Runner is holding a helmet with the same symbol on it.

The standard engine was an exclusive-to-the-Road Runner 383 CID (6.3 L) Road Runner V8 rated at 335 bhp (250 kW) and 425 lb·ft (576 N·m) of torque. Its extra 5 horsepower rating was the result of using the radical cam and heads from the 440 Super Commando and a .25 raise in compression to 10.5:1 (vs. 10.25:1 with the 330 horsepower 383). When air conditioning was ordered, the cars received the 330 h.p. version, as the radical cam specs of the 335 h.p. version didn't create enough vacuum to accommodate a/c; and there were concerns of overrevving which would grenade the RV-2 York compressor. For an extra $714, Plymouth would install a 426 CID Hemi rated at 425 bhp (317 kW) and 490 lb·ft (664 N·m) of torque. Combined with low weight, the 6-passenger Road Runner could run the 1/4 mile in 13.5 seconds at 105 mph (169 km/h). It would prove to be one of the best engines of the muscle car era, and the Road Runner one of the best platforms to utilize it.

The standard equipment transmission was a four-speed manual with floor shifter and Chrysler's three-speed TorqueFlite automatic was optional. Early four-speed '68 Road Runners featured Inland shifters, which were replaced by the more precise Hurst shifters during the course of the model year.

Plymouth expected to sell about 2,000 units in 1968; actual sales numbered around 45,000. This placed the Road Runner third in sales among muscle cars with only the Pontiac GTO and Chevy's SS-396 Chevelle outselling it. Dodge debuted the Road Runner's cousin, the Super Bee, as a mid-1968 offering after seeing Plymouth's success with the Road Runner, along with demands from Dodge dealers for their own low-priced muscle car as the Dodge Boys started the model year with the higher-priced Charger R/T and Coronet R/T - both of which were priced similar or higher than the Plymouth GTX.

1969 Road Runner *(currently most sought after of the Road Runner Lineup)*

The 1969 model kept the same basic look but made some slight cosmetic changes (i.e. rear tail lights, optional bucket seats, new Road Runner decals). The Road Runner added a convertible option for 1969 with 2128 droptop models produced that year, and only ten with the Hemi (j code). Six of those Hemi convertibles were automatics; only the remaining four were four-speed manual transmissions. Three are known to exist.

An "Air Grabber" option (N96 code) was introduced this year; it consisted of an air duct assembly bolted to the underside of the hood that connected to twin rectangular upward-facing scoops in the hood. When the hood was closed, a rubber seal fitted over a large-oval unsilenced air cleaner assembly that ducted air directly into the engine. The scoops in the hood could be opened and closed via a lever under the dashboard. The lever opening the louver vents was labeled "Coyote Duster." A convertible was added.

While the 383 engine remained the standard powerplant, a 440 CID engine with three two-barrel carburetors, known as the 440 6bbl, was added to the lineup at mid-year to qualify the engine for the Super Stock drag racing class. Dodge marketed its three two-barrel setup as the 440 Six Pack on Super Bee models and this familiar moniker is often mistakenly associated with Plymouths. 440 6bbl Road Runners had no wheel covers or hubcaps, had flat black H wheels, and an organisol black lift-off fiberglass hood with functional hood scoop. This model of Road Runner and Super Bee had a Code M as the fifth character in the VIN and was also known as the A12 model. Its 440 engine produced 390 hp (291 kW) and 490 lb·ft (664 N·m) of torque at 3200 rpm, very similar numbers to the Hemi and at a lower engine speed. This meant the cheaper 440 6bbl was nearly as fast as the 426 Hemi, at least up to highway speeds. This option, along with the economical yet fast 383 and the outrageously fast Hemi helped propel Plymouth, and corporate sibling Dodge, to the top of the dragstrip echelon.

In order to up the resale price of the bird was the illegal and false practice of replacing the stock 383 badge with a fake 440 badge on the stock hood. This was not only common in the private resale sector, but routinely practiced by shady dealers... because a 440 was thought to bring a higher price and quicker sale than the standard 383. The average buyer was unaware that the 69 Road Runner only had three engines... the standard 383, the mid-year 440-6BBL, and 426 Hemi. The only 440 was the one with the three two-barrel carbs and only came with the fiberglass liftoff black hood. So, if you ever see a 68 or 69 Road Runner touting a 440 badge on the side of the stock hood... IT'S A 383... and the owner may not even be aware of it's false identity!! So there ya go and there ya have it!! If it's a 440 it better have three two barrel carbs and a glass liftoff hood. Of note... the majority of Hemi and 44-6BBl Road Runners are clones that were originally 383 cars.

The Road Runner was named *Motor Trend* Car of the Year for 1969. Sales almost doubled to 82,109, second to the Chevelle SS-396 and more than 10,000 units ahead of the Pontiac GTO, which dropped to third place in this market segment.

1970 Road Runner

1970 brought new front and rear end looks to the basic 1968 body, and it would prove to be another success. Updates included a new grille, leather seats, hood, front fenders, quarter panels, single-piston Kelsey-Hayes disc brakes (improved from the rather small-rotor Bendix 4 piston calipers of '68 - '69), and even non-functional scoops in the rear quarters. The design and functionality of the Air Grabber option was changed this year to increase both efficiency and the "intimidation factor". A switch below the dash actuated a vacuum servo to slowly raise the forward-facing scoop, exposing shark-like teeth on either side. "High Impact" colors, with names like In-Violet, Moulin Rouge, and Vitamin C, were options available for that year. The 1970 Road Runner and GTX continued to be attractive and popular cars. The engine lineup was left unchanged although a heavy-duty three-speed manual became the standard transmission, relegating the four-speed to the option list along with the TorqueFlite automatic. This was to be the second and last year of the Road Runner convertible, with only 834 made. These cars are considered more valuable than the 1969 version due to a better dash, high impact colors and more options including the new high-back bucket seats shared with other Chrysler products which featured built-in headrests.

The relatively popular 440 Six Barrel was relegated to option status for 1970. The 1969 "M" Code Edelbrock aluminum intake was replaced by a factory-produced cast iron piece; however, due to a porous casting, there was a recall early in the iron intake-equipped 440+6 run, and these were supposed to be replaced with the more-desirable Edelbrock intake from the year prior.

Sales of the '70 Road Runner dropped by more than 50 percent over the previous year to around 41,000 units (about 1,000 ahead of Pontiac's GTO but still about 13,000 units behind Chevy's Chevelle SS-396/454). This would also be the last year of the road runner convertible with 834 total production. Only 3 hemi (R) code road runner convertibles were built. The declining sales of Road Runner and other muscle cars were the result of a move by insurance companies to add surcharges for muscle car policies - making insurance premiums for high-performance vehicles a very expensive proposition. Also, Plymouth introduced another bargain-basement muscle car for 1970, the compact Duster 340 which was powered by a 275-horsepower 340 Magnum V8 which in the lighter-weight compact A-body could perform as well if not better than a 383 Road Runner. Furthermore, the Duster 340 was priced even lower than the Road Runner and its smaller engine qualified it for much lower insurance rates.

Second Generation Road Runner

(the generation that moved further away from "Musclecar" status)

Production	1971 - 1975
Body Style	2-Door Coup
Platform	B-Body
Engine	318 small-block (not a muscle car), 383, 400, 440, 426 Hemi
Transmission	3-Speed Automatic, 4-Speed Manual
Wheelbase	115.0 Inches
Length	203.2 Inches

In 1971, the coupe bodywork was completely changed to a more rounded "fuselage" design in keeping with then-current Chrysler styling trends, including a steeply raked windshield, hidden cowl, and deeply inset grille and headlights. In a departure from previous thinking, the B-Body two-door bodies shared little if any sheet metal, glass, or trim with the four-door bodies. The convertible was canceled. 1971 was a high-water year for ride and handling for the Road Runner. The overall length was decreased, but the wheelbase was increased, and a rear sway bar was used in conjunction with staggered rear leaf springs, resulting in better handling and cornering without the stiff ride. It also saw the introduction of the 340-4bbl option, and a detuned 383 "Road Runner" engine with 8.7 compression, hardened exhaust valve seats, and power dropping to 300 HP. In return, Road Runners with the 340 and 383 engine received a standard insurance rating without the costly premiums normally tacked on to muscle cars. The 383 would now run on regular gas. Aerodynamics were much improved over the first generation Road Runners, resulting in much-improved high-speed handling. 1972 saw new emission regulations drive power down and 1/4 mile times up.

1972 Road Runner

The 1972 model was nearly identical to the 1971 with a few minor changes. The grille design was cleaned up, and the tail lights were changed to match the new aerodynamic look of the grille. Side marker lights changed from the attractive, stylish, flush-to-the-body surface side markers to the cheap, protruding, smaller "Chrysler Corporate Generic" tack-ons for the 1972 model year (the green one to the right is 1971?). The optional bumper guards for 1972 included a rubber strip surrounding the tail lights and a rubber strip below the grille. The big differences came in the suspension, rear axle ratios (a 3:55 ratio was the tallest available), rims and tire sizes (14"x6" rims, G60 series tires biggest available) and lastly (and most noticeably), the engines, with the big-block 383 being replaced by a larger-bore (and lower performance) 400 CID version. A 440 CID engine with a 4-barrel carburetor was available. All of the engines suffered a drop in compression ratios to allow use of low-lead/no-lead gas, as well as to meet the first round of emissions regulations. The 280 hp 440 engine was the basis for the "GTX" package (as the GTX was no longer available as a separate model) that was available on Road Runners from 1972 to 1974. Many interior and comfort/convenience options were gone, such as power windows/seats, leather seat covering being the most noticeable.

Power ratings on all engines looked much lower on paper due to the new SAE net measurement system. The famed 426 Hemi was gone for 1972, and only five 440 Six Barrel equipped cars were produced before the engine option was dropped (it was determined the 440 six-pack could not meet the stricter 1972 emissions regulations) in the fall of 1971. The 1973-74 models received completely new sheet metal and had more conventional squared-up front-end styling and changes to the rear that more closely resembled the four-door models than the 71-72s. The restyling helped sales which were up 40% over the 1972 models. In testing 1/4 mile times were getting close to the 16s, top speeds had dropped to barely over 120 mph (190 km/h), and the car moved further away from "musclecar" status. The base engine for the 1973-74 models had dropped down to Chrysler's workaday 318 CID V8; however, dual exhaust (which bumped the power up to 170 hp) was still standard. After 1972, no 440 with four-speed manual cars were built. The 400 was the biggest engine Plymouth offered with the four-speed, which could also be had with the 340 (1973) and 360 (1974) engines. The 440 was still available for 1973 and 1974, but only mated to the 727 TorqueFlite automatic.

The 1975 model was based on the newly restyled, more formal-looking B-body which was now called the Fury (the former full-sized Fury being called Gran Fury). The Road Runner came with a blacked out grille and a special stripe treatment to distinguish it from the Fury. As before the 318 was the standard engine, but it was now just with a single exhaust. The 360 (220 hp) and the now largest engine was the 400 (though still with a four barrel and dual exhausts, the horsepower was down to 230) were also available. In Car and Driver magazine testing of a 1975 car with the 400 engine; 0-60 happened in 8.1 seconds and quarter-mile times were solidly in the 16-second range. While just a shadow of the 1970 figures, this performance was at least respectable for the times. Plymouth's most powerful engine, the 440, was restricted to police models, though it has been rumoured that a few were built (via special factory order) with the 240 hp (180 kW) police spec 440, and the police spec suspension and wider rims. 7,183 Road Runners were built in 1975, and most (over 50%) had just the 318 engine.

Though the name of the car the Road Runner was based on changed from Belvedere to Satellite to Fury, the Road Runner remained a B-body through 1975. While the Road Runner name was planned to be on a B-body in Plymouth's published literature for the 1976 model year, the name was transferred to an optional appearance package for the all-new Volare.

Third Generation Road Runner

(or the "*they should have stopped at the second generation*")

Production	1976 - 1980
Body Style	2-Door Coup
Platform	F-Body
Engine	225 Slant-Six Weenie Motor, 318 Small Block, 360 Small Block
Transmission	3-Speed Automatic, 3-Speed Manual, 4-Speed Manual
Wheelbase	108.7 Inches

In 1976 the Road Runner name was switched to the 2-door model of the replacement for the compact A-body Valiant/Duster series. This car, based on the new F platform, would be known as "Volaré". The new Road Runner was little more than a trim and graphics package; however, many suspension parts were borrowed from the police packages. A 360 CID engine was offered as an option (but only with a two barrel carb for 1976-'77 and single exhaust) to the standard 318 V8, but only paired with the 3-speed automatic transmission. Rated at 160 hp (119 kW), the F platform's best 1/4 mile times would be just inside 16-seconds at 88 mph (142 km/h). Although no comparison to the earlier stormers, the 360 powered models were respectable performers in their time. By 1978 and thru to 1980 the 360 was offered with a four-barrel carb and, for 1980, dual exhaust, bringing power up to 195 hp (145 kW). However, performance continued to suffer, and by 1979 the 225 CID Slant 6 six-cylinder became standard. The Road Runner continued as part of the Volaré line until its discontinuation in 1980.