Subaru approves manual-transmission models, and the towable field grows more versatile

1998 Dinghy

JOEL DONALDSON

As in past years, the dinghy-towing scene for 1998 includes some good news and some bad news. On the positive side, Subaru has designated the company’s entire line of manual-transmission cars and sport-utility vehicles as towable. And, new dinghy-towable vehicles have been introduced by Dodge, Honda, Nissan and Suzuki. Meanwhile, several formerly towable vehicles from Ford and GM were either discontinued or lost their towability for 1998. Sport-utility vehicles (SUVs) continue to dominate the dinghy-towing scene. In glancing at the list of towable vehicles, it quickly becomes apparent that entire product lines from some manufacturers are missing. This isn’t an oversight, but rather an indication that some manufacturers don’t ap-

Subaru Forester

Ford Escort SE

Honda CR-V

Hyundai Elantra Wagon

Kia Sportage

Suzuki Esteem Wagon

Saturn SC2

Dodge Durango

Nissan Frontier 4X2

MOTORHOME, FEBRUARY 1998

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In glancing at the list of towable vehicles, it quickly becomes apparent that entire product lines from some manufacturers are missing. This isn't an oversight, but rather an indication that some manufacturers don't ap-
prove any of their vehicles for dinghy towing as a matter of policy. Frequently, it boils down to a matter of money—the expense involved in testing a number of vehicles for long-term durability while being towed may not generate enough additional sales volume to justify the effort. Also, some manufacturers prefer to avoid any endorsement of dinghy towing out of concern over potential legal liability.

This isn’t to say that some of these vehicles don’t make excellent dinghies. It’s just that the manufacturer won’t formally approve this sort of use and, in some cases, may decline any warranty work that could be attributed to it.

In other cases, there are legitimate mechanical reasons why a particular vehicle shouldn’t be towed on all fours. For example, the lubrication pump in most automatic transmissions will deliver oil only when the engine is running, and some manual transmissions also have lubrication problems. Consequently, even though towing the vehicle causes internal transmission components to spin, very little lubrication is available. This can quickly cause extensive damage. Some four-wheel-drive (4WD) vehicles get around this limitation by having a transfer case that can be shifted into neutral, thus avoiding spinning the automatic transmission output shaft while towing. Unfortunately, the general trend is toward transfer cases that lack a neutral position, especially among the more expensive vehicles. Worse yet, these same vehicles rarely offer a manual transmission as a means of circumventing this problem.

On a brighter note, aftermarket
### TOWABLE CARS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Make</th>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Base Curb Weight</th>
<th>Speed/Distance Limits</th>
<th>TOWABLE W/MANUAL TRANS</th>
<th>TOWABLE W/AUTO TRANS</th>
<th>EPA MPG City/Hwy</th>
<th>Base Retail Price</th>
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<tr>
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<td>no</td>
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<tr>
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<td>2,308</td>
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<td>yes</td>
<td>manual 28/39</td>
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<tr>
<td>SL Series</td>
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<td>2,326</td>
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<td>yes</td>
<td>manual 28/39</td>
<td>$11,595</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SW Series</td>
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<td>65/none</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>manual 27/37</td>
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<td><strong>SUBARU</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impreza L Sedan</td>
<td></td>
<td>2,690</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>yes</td>
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<td>Impreza L Wagon</td>
<td></td>
<td>2,795</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>23/30</td>
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<tr>
<td>Impreza Outback Sport</td>
<td></td>
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<td>none</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
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<td>$17,995</td>
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<tr>
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<td>no</td>
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<td>Legacy Brighton Wagon</td>
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<td>2,905</td>
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<td>no</td>
<td>23,30</td>
<td>$16,895</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>SUZUKI</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Esteem Sedan</td>
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<td>2,227</td>
<td>55/none</td>
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<td>27/33</td>
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<td>no</td>
<td>27/33</td>
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<td>Swift Hatchback</td>
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<td>1,895</td>
<td>55/none</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>39/43</td>
<td>$9,099</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Equipment is available for most vehicles that permits reliable four-wheels-down towing. Which hardware is best for your vehicle depends upon what you're driving. Electrically operated lubrication pumps can be installed in most vehicles, mechanical driveshaft and drive-axle disconnects can be fitted to a number of specific vehicles. You can also use a tow dolly or a trailer for your vehicle.

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**General Motors**

GM continues to be the only manufacturer to offer towable automatic transmissions in some of its car models (the Pontiac Sunfire, Chevrolet Cavalier and Malibu, and all non-electric Saturn products). Pontiac also continues to offer a five-speed manual transmission in the Grand Am. Note that the Geo brand is no longer available; all former Geos are now sold under the Chevrolet label. Also, Chevy's Blazer 4WD SUV and S-10 4WD pickup are no longer towable, due to the elimination of a manual-shift transfer case on these models.

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**Ford**

The Ford Probe and Mercury Aspire were discontinued for this year, which leaves the Contour/Mystique and Escort/Tracer twins as the only towable Ford automobiles. Although the Contour and Mystique are sold as midsize cars, most interior dimensions put them closer to the compacts. The Escort and Tracer are available in sedan and station-wagon versions. On the truck side, properly optioned F-150, Ranger and Explorer models remain viable vehicles for dinghy service (electronic reprogramming by dealer required), although the F-series and Explorer also are comparatively heavy. Note that the Ford Expedition and Lincoln Navigator are not towable, due to the absence of a manual transmission or a suitable transfer case.
## 1998 Dinghy Towing Guide

### TOWABLE SPORT-UTILITIES & PICKUPS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Base Curb Weight</th>
<th>Speed/Distance Limits</th>
<th>Towable W/Manual Trans</th>
<th>Towable W/Auto Trans</th>
<th>EPA MPG City/Hwy</th>
<th>Base Retail Price</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

#### CHEVROLET
- **Tracker 2-dr**
  - 2,339 lbs
  - 55/200*
  - Yes*
  - Yes*
  - 23/26
  - $14,665
- **Tracker 4-dr**
  - 2,747 lbs
  - 55/200*
  - Yes*
  - Yes*
  - 23/26
  - $15,605
* With manual hubs only; after 200 miles, operate engine one minute with manual transmission in second, automatic transmission in drive.

#### DODGE
- **Dakota**
  - 3,508 lbs
  - None
  - Yes*
  - Yes*
  - 20/25
  - $12,975
- **Durango**
  - 4,568 lbs
  - None
  - N/A
  - Yes
  - 15/18
  - $27,425
- **Ram**
  - 4,640 lbs
  - None
  - Yes*
  - Yes*
  - 14/19
  - $14,485
*With 4WD only.

#### FORD/MERCURY
- **Explorer 2WD**
  - 3,911 lbs
  - 55/none
  - Yes
  - No
  - 14/19
  - $19,880
- **Explorer 4WD**
  - 4,146 lbs
  - 55/none
  - Yes**
  - Yes**
  - 15/19
  - $22,650
- **F-Series 4WD**
  - 4,260 lbs
  - 55/none
  - Yes*
  - Yes*
  - 15/19
  - $18,005
- **Mountaineer 4WD**
  - 4,370 lbs
  - 55/none
  - N/A
  - Yes**
  - 14/18
  - $29,765
- **Ranger 2WD**
  - 3,134 lbs
  - 55/none
  - Yes
  - No
  - 20/25
  - $11,385
- **Ranger 4WD**
  - 3,626 lbs
  - 55/none
  - Yes*
  - Yes*
  - 15/20
  - $15,765
* With manual transfer case. ** With electric (dealer-activated program required) or manual transfer case.

#### HONDA
- **CR-V**
  - 3,146 lbs
  - Legal/none
  - N/A
  - Yes*
  - 22/25
  - $19,400
* Only with prescribed towing procedure.

#### JEEP
- **Cherokee**
  - 2,979 lbs
  - None
  - Yes*
  - Yes*
  - 20/23
  - $16,480
- **Grand Cherokee**
  - 3,621 lbs
  - None
  - Yes*
  - Yes*
  - 16/21
  - $25,845
- **Wrangler**
  - 3,045 lbs
  - None
  - Yes*
  - Yes*
  - 19/21
  - $14,090
* With 4WD only.

#### Hyundai
All of Hyundai's manual-transmission products are approved for dinghy towing. The Elantra is now available in both sedan and station-wagon versions.

#### Kia
The lightweight Sportage SUV remains a vehicle that many motorhomes can handle with ease. The new two-door convertible model has a considerably shorter wheelbase than the other versions.

#### Nissan
Like the model it replaces, Nissan's new Frontier compact pickup is approved for dinghy service. Nissan's Maxima also continues to be the only midsize passenger car that's towable when equipped with a five-speed manual transmission—an interesting blend of sportiness and creature comfort.
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<th>EPA MPG City/Hwy</th>
<th>Base Retail Price</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>KIA</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sportage 2WD</td>
<td>3,186</td>
<td>55/400*</td>
<td>yes*</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>19/23</td>
<td>$14,895</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sportage 4WD</td>
<td>3,230</td>
<td>55/400*</td>
<td>yes*</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>19/23</td>
<td>$16,395</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* After 400 miles, operate engine for three to five minutes to lubricate transmission.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **MAZDA**            |                  |                      |                        |                      |                  |                   |
| 2WD B-Series Pickup  | 3,025            | 55/none              | yes                    | no                   | 20/25            | $10,885           |
| 4WD B-Series Pickup  | 3,433            | 55/none              | yes*                   | yes*                 | 15/20            | $15,415           |
| * With manual transfer case |

| **NISSAN**           |                  |                      |                        |                      |                  |                   |
| Pathfinder 4WD        | 3,920            | 60/200/500*          | yes**                  | no                   | 16/18            | $25,999           |
| Frontier Pickup 2WD  | 2,911            | 60/500               | yes                    | no                   | 22/26            | $11,990           |
| Frontier Pickup 4WD  | 3,433            | 60/500               | yes**                  | no                   | 18/21            | $16,990           |
| * V-6 engine, 200-mile limit; 4-cylinder, 500-mile limit. Start engine to circulate transmission fluids when this limit is reached. ** Transfer case must be left in 2H, transmission in neutral. |

| **SUBARU**           |                  |                      |                        |                      |                  |                   |
| Forester             | 3,020            | none                 | yes                    | no                   | 21/27            | $18,695           |
| Legacy Outback       | 3,155            | none                 | yes                    | no                   | 21/27            | $22,495           |

| **SUZUKI**           |                  |                      |                        |                      |                  |                   |
| Sidekick 2-dr 4WD    | 2,480            | 55/200*              | yes*                   | yes*                 | manual 23/26     | $14,869           |
|                      |                  |                      |                        |                      | auto 23/24       |                   |
| Sidekick 4-dr 4WD    | 2,756            | 55/200*              | yes*                   | yes*                 | manual 23/26     | $15,999           |
|                      |                  |                      |                        |                      | auto 22/25       |                   |
| Sidekick Sport 4WD   | 2,964            | 55/200*              | yes*                   | yes*                 | manual 22/25     | $17,899           |
|                      |                  |                      |                        |                      | auto 21/24       |                   |
| X-90 SUV 4WD         | 2,469            | 55/200*              | yes*                   | yes*                 | manual 25/28     | $14,799           |
|                      |                  |                      |                        |                      | auto 23/27       |                   |
| * With manual hubs only; after 200 miles, operate engine one minute with manual transmission in second, automatic transmission in drive. |

---

### Subaru

An official at Subaru says they were prompted to approve dinghy towing in response to customers who expressed a desire to buy a Subaru model "but had this special need." All 1997 and 1998 manual-transmission models can be dinghy-towed. Moreover, all Legacy, Impreza, Outback and Forester manual-transmission models dating back to 1990 also are dinghy-towable, according to the official. No special speed or distance requirements are specified.

### Suzuki

Suzuki continues to add to its line of towable vehicles, most recently with the introduction of the Esteem. Available in both sedan and station-wagon versions, this new subcompact provides good value for the money—especially since items like air conditioning and a cassette stereo radio are standard equipment.

### Now, Go Forth and Tow!

Before you make a decision on a dinghy vehicle, you'll have to do a little arithmetic to determine whether your motorhome is rated to handle the additional load. It's important to know the loaded (water, fuel, propane, supplies and passengers) weight of your motorhome. See page 103 for full details.
your motorhome; if you don't have this figure, take the rig to a certified public scale and weight it. Subtract this weight from the gross combination weight rating (gcwr) of your coach (actually, your chassis). Compare this figure with the weight of the dinghy vehicle.

Keep in mind that even though the difference between the actual loaded weight of the motorhome and its gcwr may be higher than the weight of the dinghy vehicle, some chassis manufacturers may have additional restrictions. For instance, Ford only approves of towing a 1,500-pound unbraked load, and GM is even more strict with a 1,000-pound limit.

After you have settled on a dinghy vehicle, you'll probably also want to give some consideration to selecting a suitable tow bar and baseplate. The July '97 issue of MOTORHOME has a tow-bar buyers guide that covers 29 different models.

Finally, you may want to look into a supplemental braking system for your dinghy vehicle, since the brakes on many motorhomes are not adequate to handle the weight of the motorhome plus an unbraked towed vehicle. The April '97 issue has a dinghy-brake buyers guide, and the April '96 issue has a buyers guide for exhaust retarder systems.

Although the charts shown in this article list only the 1998 models, used-car shoppers will be glad to know that reprints of dinghy-towing guides for years dating back as far as 1990 are still available. Call (805) 667-4366 for information on how to obtain any of these earlier articles.

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