



roadworthy

{ SAFETY AND CANINE COMFORT TOP LISTS OF CONCERNS FOR DOG OWNERS. }

By Roxanne Hawn

Someone T-boned JoAnn McDermott's Ford Expedition in winter 2007. She remembers thinking of the accident as "not that bad," considering. Luckily, her four agility dogs—three Labrador Retrievers and one Australian Shepherd—were home, but this vehicle transports them to trials, often pulling a travel trailer for overnight stays.

At impact, all the airbags deployed. "Yeah, the airbags would have scared the heck out of them. They scared me," McDermott says, "but even after the accident, I felt pretty secure."

McDermott's dog-car criteria ultimately ruled out options popular with so many handlers. Living in Colorado, she needed four-wheel drive. Her RV required a higher towing capacity than minivans or crossovers offer. Yet, McDermott also carries passengers in daily life, which nixed a cargo van. An SUV simply made sense.

Depending upon your travel schedule, equipment load, number of dogs and their sizes, however, various car models might work well. The ultimate goal? Safety and comfort for all.

Here's the hitch: Car-safety ratings apply to human occupants alone. No one tests crash outcomes for canine passengers. So, we can only assume that cars built for our safety also offer some protection to them.

Christina Selter, founder of Bark Buckle Up (barkbuckleup.com), a pet-travel-safety advocacy group, hopes to remove the guesswork. Her StatTracker program asks police departments for accident data. She collects reputable, national information for lobbying efforts in Washington, D.C., to make pet restraint mandatory and to ensure automakers consider pet safety as their travel continues to rise. "Statistics from California Highway Patrol show there has been a rise in pet-caused accidents, just like cell phones," Selter says.

Officers in California also tracked pet restraint near a dog park and found 98 percent of dogs unprotected.

"Most of the dogs that have traveled over the years have been AKC dogs—show dogs, working dogs," Selter says. "They all travel in crates. It's not just the safest, but it's been the most used." This puts the dog-show community in the position of serving as canine-safety ambassadors.

avoiding crashes

The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety lists crash avoidance and crash worthiness (rated on a five-star scale) as the top two issues. In addition to airbags and safety-belt design, you should know your crumple zones, the sections of the car designed to compress during an accident to absorb energy from the impact.

Lindsey Wolko, from caninecommuter.com, an online catalog of products for traveling pets, drives to work 40 miles

each way with her three English Cocker Spaniels. After seeing the dogs crated in back of her old Honda CRV, a friend pointed out that they were riding in the crumple zone.

Wolko now drives a bigger Honda Pilot, but she is careful to crate her dogs with a good six-inch clearance from the crumple zones.

The good news, says Selter, is that rear safety has improved tenfold in the last 10 years as vehicles featured more third-row seating.

CAR MODELS AND STYLES

No one tests cars for canine safety, but web sites like DogCars.com offer reviews, details, photos, and ratings of vehicles from a dog-lover's perspective. Here are some of their picks from late 2008:

Dog Car of the Year

Dodge Grand Caravan



Best Small SUV (tie)

Ford Escape
Mercury Mariner
Mazda Tribute
Mitsubishi Outlander



Best Midsize SUV (tie)

Honda Pilot
Suzuki XL-7
Hyundai Santa Fe



Best Wagon (tie)

Volvo XC70
Subaru Forester



Other Tailwaggers

Ford Flex
Mini Cooper Clubman



Looking Promising for 2009

Toyota Venza (a new crossover vehicle)



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IN STYLE

DogCars.com named the Honda Element its first-ever Dog Car of the Year in 2007, so when Janina Franceschi from Pet-Friendly Accommodations Worldwide (*luxurypaw.com*) set out on a four-month, 30-state road trip with Beau, her Irish Setter, Honda supplied the car.

Franceschi loved that the front passenger seat folds completely flat, like a bed, so that Beau had more lounging space. The big selling point for her, however, was the stain-resistant fabric and easily cleaned interior. "The entire inside, with the exception of the seats, is plastic," Franceschi says.

Stability-control systems lower the risk of a single-car fatal crash by about half, and lower the risk of a fatal rollover crash by as much as 80 percent. Alarms for drifting out of a lane or backup cameras make sense, but researchers have not scientifically evaluated their crash prevention.

Other crash-avoidance features include smart braking systems.

Distractions greatly increase crash risk. According to the Highway Safety Research Center at the University of North Carolina, distracted driving contributes to 1.5 to 3 million crashes a year in the United States. To limit other distractions, automakers reduce the need to look down, through:

- Heads-up designs for climate control and car systems
- Hands-free designs for cell phones and entertainment

canine comfort

After safety, comfort is the next priority for most fanciers, especially important for show dogs who may spend hours traveling and must be alert and happy when they reach their destinations. Vehicle temperature features are key, and include:

- Window tinting (back and passenger areas)
- Multizone heat and air-conditioning
- Power shades for sunroofs

"You can never have enough screening for your car," says Susan Olsen, show chair of the International Kennel Club of Chicago, who competes in a variety of venues with her four Border Terriers. "The silver ones are typically more reflective and allow air to move through."

Pay attention to quirks such as wheel bump-outs. Cynthia Pagurski traveled half of each month in 2008 with her top-20 Boston Terrier bitch Carla. Currently, she drives her second Honda CRV and is happy for the deeper rear cargo area. "It doesn't have the big wheel wells like so many of the SUVs do," she says. "It's actually as roomy as the Range Rover I used to drive ... It was so hard to fit things back there because those wheel wells took up a lot of space."

In addition, Pagurski likes the new rear-door design, which swings up, rather than out.

Those with giant-breed dogs must pay extra attention to cargo area height. So-called "stow-and-go" or removable seats in the rear areas of SUVs and minivans can help with that by going completely away, rather than just folding over. Plus, such systems provide a flatter, lower spot to secure traveling dogs.

Measure window height if your dog gets either motion sick or overstimulated by visual input so that you know what your dog can and cannot see from his vantage point.

About.com's recommends cars with:

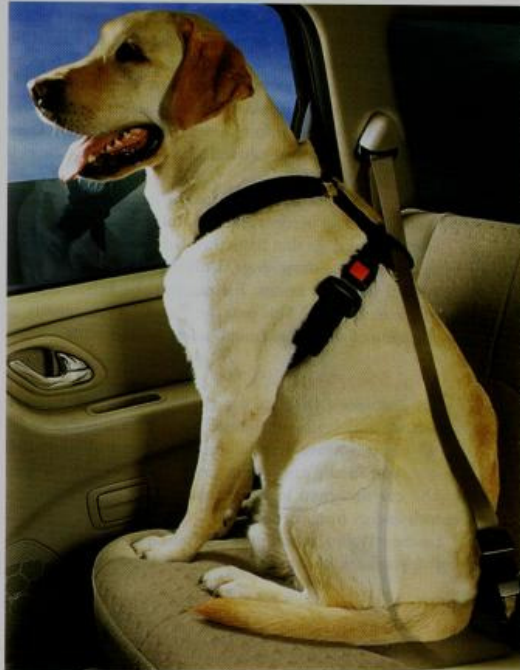
- Easy access so that dogs (and people) aren't injured maneuvering into tight spots.
- Small gaps at transition points since a toenail can snap from a misplaced foot being caught.
- Lower jump-up/jump-down heights to prevent orthopedic stress.

It's only a matter of time before someone gets sick or something spills, so check the cleaning hardness of carpets, seat fabrics, and door panels. Difficult cleanup can be a drawback of seats that collapse into the floor. Nooks and crannies abound down there, so cover those areas.

moving violations

Look for an abundance of built-in tie-downs so that you can hook crates to the car itself. It is not enough to strap crates to each other. "I see people [who don't] secure crates to the vehicle," says Stan Matsumoto, a retired professional handler. "If you have to slam on your brakes, you'd be surprised how much things move."

Flexibility is another important consideration for those



CREATIVE RESTRAINT

Unrestrained dogs are far more likely to be seriously injured, ejected, or killed in an accident. They also become a danger to people as projectiles inside the car. In addition, they can hamper rescue efforts by getting loose or being protective of injured owners, says Christina Selter, of **Bark Buckle Up**. That's why some kind of restraint system is recommended for all dogs.

Most agree that dogs traveling in properly secured crates are safest. There may be times, however, that you need another option. Lindsey Wolko, from **Canine Commuter.com**, got involved with pet safety after a sudden stop in traffic launched her Cocker Spaniel into the rear passenger-leg compartment. Despite wearing a dog-style seatbelt harness, her dog injured a leg.

Wolko developed a three-product system:

1. Use a good-quality harness that buckles into the vehicle's rear seat belt. (Wolko especially likes the ones by Solvit.)
2. Insert inflatable seat extenders that fill the gap between the seats. (Wolko suggests the one by PetEgo.)
3. Install a hammock-style seat cover, creating a contained space for the dog and covering up any gaps between seats.

Wolko consults with people about their dogs, cars, and needs. Teams of helpers, with a variety of dogs and cars, test everything the online store carries. "We just try to advise consumers because you know your dog better than anyone," she says. "You know how your dog is trained, how he will react."

Justin Monnin, of **Lucky 8 Off Road**, understands his sport and his dog well. He does off-road, four-wheeling expeditions with his Dalmatian, Rover Dog. Everyone inside the car gets jostled climbing through rough terrain. That's why Rover Dog wears a harness with four attachment points that connect to a D-ring on his back. "That D-ring is crucial, in my opinion," Monnin says, "because it allows him to walk back and forth a little bit in the seat, but if we were ever in an accident or had to stop short, it wouldn't get tangled up."

Selter adds that dogs should always travel in the back seats, never in front. Even if restrained with a seatbelt or booster seat, passenger airbags can cause major injuries to dogs just as they can to children and small adults.

Selter also says that cargo barriers that stay in place from pressure or other temporary systems should be avoided. They come loose in a crash. Instead, ask your car dealer about specific integrated barriers that bolt into the vehicle's safety structure, like those available in the **Volvo XC90**.



Rover Dog



Among the more popular items for creating a safe riding environment are hammock-style seat covers, which create a contained space for the dog, combined with harnesses that buckle into the vehicle's seat belts.

traveling with many dogs. Matsumoto agrees that sometimes you can fit everything into a minivan or SUV, rather than a specially fitted van or truck, but he warns, "If you're working out of a confined area, packing that vehicle means you have to be very precise."

As more and more people take their dogs with them when they travel, automakers are designing cars with four-footed passengers in mind. Honda and Toyota recently introduced "dog-friendly" vehicles, with such features as pet beds and restraint systems, stain-resistant seat covers, spill-resistant water bowls, and load-in ramps.

With so many options currently available, and others on the horizon, it's never been a better time to be a canine king of the road. 🐾

Freelance writer Roxanne Hawn lives in the mountains near Denver and trains in agility with her Border Collie, Lilly.

TRAVEL TIPS

- ★ Estimate crash forces by multiplying the weight of the dog by the speed of travel.—AAA
- ★ Currently, 25 states have laws requiring dogs in open areas to be tethered, but this is very different from true pet restraint.—AAA
- ★ Progressive is the first car insurer to offer pet-injury coverage in the case of a car accident. In March 2009, the company increased pet coverage to \$1,000 per incident (not per pet). The higher limit is free and included automatically with Progressive's private passenger-auto customers and RV customers with collision insurance. "If there are professional handlers who have business auto-insurance policies, this coverage wouldn't apply," explains company spokesperson Susan Rouser.