

Robison on Rovers

By John Robison

Welcome to the winter edition of Robison on Rovers. I hope the fall season finds you and your Rovers in good health, wherever you are. Just this week, I took calls from Land Rover owners in the Virgin Islands, Australia, and Africa – so I know there are plenty of Land Rover owners out there in nice climates even when it's 34 degrees and rainy here. We were able to meet some of you at the events we attended this summer, and we look forward to seeing more of you in 2005.

For those of you who wondered about my pre-Land Rover life, my brother – writer Augusten Burroughs - has a chapter devoted to that very subject in his newest bestseller – *Magical Thinking*. It's available in bookstores everywhere for those of you who seek our darkest secrets. Greasy broken cars, heavy metal bands, alien bondage – it's all in there.

In this column I'm going to talk about the Range Rover Classic models – how they evolved, problems to look for, and popular upgrades. In subsequent issues we'll do the same with the other Land Rover models. . .

The Range Rover was the only product Land Rover sold in the United States when they returned here in 1987. Beyond how the model evolved, I will point out some things to look out for if you are buying one or if you already own one.

Prior to 1995 these vehicle weren't called Classics – they were just Range Rovers. They became Classics after the introduction of a new design Range Rover – the P38A, or "new" Range Rover in 1995. But some people say the Classic moniker came from British fascination with American fast food – after all, Range Rover Classics appeared shortly after similar "Classic" offerings from Coke and McDonald's arrived.

Range Rover Classics were first sold in America in 1987. The first cars had cloth seats as the standard, no sunroof, and 3.5 litre engines. The 1988 cars were similar, but with the addition of leather seats and sunroof.

These early trucks were underpowered for American highways, but their simplicity and low cost makes them excellent trail trucks today. An early Range Rover with upgraded springs and wheels and the interior stripped out to save weight makes a very capable rig at modest cost.

The biggest problem with these early Range Rovers is rust and corrosion. Look for problems in these areas: around the liftgate glass; in the rear door jambs toward the back; where the front fenders attach to the body under the hood; under the plastic rocker moldings; in the frame rails; in the gas tanks; and in the floor boards under both front seats.

The transfer cases are rugged, but the linkages are prone to bind from rust if not shifted regularly. Engines are rugged also, but expect to do a valve job and repair head gasket leaks between 100,000 and 150,000 miles. These engines will build up sludge – visible in the oil pan and under the valve covers – if not well maintained. I suggest synthetic oil in any Rover to prevent this.

Radiators in Range Rovers seem to have a life of about 100,000 miles. If your temperature gauge rises in hot weather there is a good chance your radiator is at its limits (Check your viscous fan and thermostat also). I suggest brand new replacements but many people choose to re-core as a less costly alternative.

1987-1989 Range Rovers used a mechanical speedometer drive. The cables, angle drive, and heads are all prone to bind and fail in cold weather. They seem to break most often turning over the ten thousands column.

The metal transmission and engine oil cooler lines are prone to rust out. If these lines blow while driving they often spell sudden death for the engine or transmission.

The metal gas tanks on 1987-1989 models are prone to rusting out although many of these have been upgraded. Fuel pump connections inside the left rear wheel arch corrode.

Steering boxes tended to wear out. The pitman arm shaft gets loose and wobbles, resulting in a leaking steering box and sloppy steering. Factory exchange boxes are of a newer design – much better and they are available at moderate cost.

The suspension bushings used in these first American market Range Rovers were not very durable. The replacement parts – from Land Rover or from other makers of Poly Bushings – are much more durable.

In 1989 the engine size was increased to 3.9 litres in response to complaints that the vehicles lacked power. In addition, the manual locking transfer case was replaced with a viscous coupler type case. This improved on-road performance and

reduced noise.

There are no new service issues on the 1989 models. My comments for older trucks apply here as well. In 1990 we saw some cosmetic changes, the introduction of electronic speedometer, and installation of a fancier stereo. The metal gas tank was replaced with a more rugged plastic unit. Power increased slightly as a result of a freer flowing exhaust and other minor changes. 1990 Range Rovers had a third stop lamp in the rear window for the first time. Range Rovers began to appear in multiple trim levels – the County was the fanciest, the Hunter the most basic model. Various Special Editions began to appear at this time also.

1990 trucks have an improved fuel injection system, with a display box under the passenger seat that shows fault codes. 1990-1995 Range Rovers are probably user-friendliest Land Rovers from a back yard service standpoint.

1990 also saw the introduction of antilock brakes on the County models. The antilock system is generally reliable, but be wary of failures – the ABS valve assembly under the hood is over \$1,000 and not user-serviceable. Most ABS problems stem from either sensors or wheel bearings getting loose and causing bad sensor readings, and failure of the two system relays.

1990 also saw the introduction of front and rear anti roll (sway) bars on the top models. A few years ago kits to retrofit sway bars to the 1987-1989 vehicles were popular. Sway bars make a big difference in high-speed handling but they compromise off-road performance. At this point we have more call to remove sway bars for off-roaders than we do to fit them for highway drivers. In any case, kits for older trucks are still available.

In 1993, the County LWB (Long Wheel Base – 8 inches more floor between front and rear seats) arrived – an English Suburban. Alarm with push button locking was standard for the first time. LWB models were delivered with air suspension instead of coil springs. Changes in the steering box and front end made for a tighter road feel. LWB models had fancier interior trim – burl walnut, and memory seats were among the upgrades.

The County LWB models had a larger engine – 4.2 litres instead of 3.9. The bigger motor gave more low-end torque but reliability of the bottom end was less than for the 3.9.

County LWB models were the first to feature traction control. This system senses slippage of a rear wheel and applies brakes to the slipping side. It considerably improved the ability of these trucks to slog through mud and soft sand. The traction control system is usually trouble free.

The air suspension (EAS – Electronic Air Suspension) introduced with these models worked well on the street when it was new. But as the vehicles aged, the air suspension systems became problematic. The biggest issue is that any failure drops the car to the bump stops where it rests until reset by a shop with the \$10,000 specialist Land Rover test gear. The lack of user or field reparability spells the end of air suspension for the majority of owners. However, coils springs conversion kits that deliver a quality ride and are available at very reasonable prices. (More on this later in the article.)

1993 models have an improved stereo. The stereo system introduced in 1993 was continued on to the end of the line in 1995.

All in all, the County LWB trucks remain highly desirable for anyone who needs a Rover with carrying capacity. Interior volume is considerably greater in these models.

In 1994 the regular wheelbase Range Rover was offered with air suspension like the County LWB.

In 1995 the Range Rover was fitted with the dash design from the Discovery. Driver and passenger airbags were provided for the first time, engine power increased slightly, and a new push button locking system was fitted.

In my opinion, the 1995 models are far more comfortable to drive than older models because of the improved suspension and upgraded interior.

All of the Range Rover Classic models use distributor type ignition. The rotors are prone to burn through, causing sudden failure of your vehicle, and a long walk unless you happen to have a spare. Plenty of time to ponder the resurgence of mountain lions and bears in the New England woods as you attempt to walk out. I suggest you carry a spare, and when you go to install it – split the old one with a sharp chisel

because pulling up on it can break the fragile old distributor advance. Ignition coils also fail, as do plug and coil wires. Make sure yours, are in good shape. Oily dampness around the base of the coil is a sign the insulating oil has leaked and failure is imminent.

The other thing that will leave you as the blue plate special for the local wildlife, is the fuel pump. Vehicles over 100,000 miles are on borrowed time on their pumps. Failure is even more likely if the filter has not been changed, because it's harder to pump through a plugged one. Make sure the pump is good, and also pay particular attention to the wiring.

Popular modifications

Any Land Rover product of this vintage will benefit from an application of Waxoyl if you live in a climate where you drive in salty water or winter snow. One of my earlier columns covered this topic. It's available for download on the Rovers North or Robison Service web sites.

Shock and suspension upgrades - The Bilstein and OME shock absorbers give a firmer road feel and slightly improved handling. I prefer the feel of these upgraded shocks to that of the standard parts. When installing front shocks look at the condition of the front shock towers – we often replace them because they rust and weaken, and the shock can punch right through the hood on a hard bump if they fail.

The vast majority of owners of early air suspension trucks convert to coil springs to avoid trouble and expense. Coil conversion kits are available in a number of combinations of standard, medium, and heavy springs and shocks. These kits are easily installed by a mechanically inclined owner.

Stainless exhausts – the original exhaust systems had a life span of less than three years. The various stainless systems on the market have proven quite a bit better. Some are quiet and perform like stock, others are louder and produce a modest power gain.

There are many accessories available for off-roaders. Brush bars, Rock sliders, and roof racks are offered in many styles. Winches are often fitted to the front bars, with the Warn and Superwinch 9,000 and 10,000lb units being two of the better choices. In New England, we use synthetic cable on the winches, but folks who winch on rocky ground should consider the safety tradeoff given the greater abrasion resistance of steel cable.

Locking differentials, both the Detroit style and the air locker style, are often fitted to front and rear axles. Steel differential guards are also common, as are steel or aluminum skid plates.

In today's market, Range Rover Classic models are widely available at good prices. There is a huge array of custom equipment for any conceivable use – dog cages, roll cages, car top tents, and under car armor. Classics offer significantly better build quality than older Discoveries, and their off-road capability can be right up there with the best Defenders for a fraction of the cost. Furthermore, many people just love these Classic style Rovers. More and more, we see people doing extensive restoration work because the Rover Classic offers a package you just can't buy in a newer Land Rover.

So if you've already got one . . . keep it maintained because they aren't making any more. And if you're looking to buy one . . . I hope the advice in my column helps you to make a better choice.

See you in the spring . . .
 John Robison

(All products mentioned in this article are available at Rovers North)

