

Walter Kirn

Big Sky, Meet Small Car

At home on the range with a hybrid? How Montana started caring about m.p.g.

THANKS TO THE INTREPID LEWIS AND CLARK AND THE CREEPY, costumed re-enactors who periodically retrace their steps, my fellow Montanans and I understand that crossing our vast and mostly empty state without repeatedly feeding debit and credit cards into the maws of greedy self-service gas pumps is, at least in theory, possible. It's a romantic, enchanting notion: walking and paddling great distances without a bulky wallet in one's back pocket. I doubt I'll ever try it, though. In a state where a visit to the nearest Home Depot can take a whole weekend and require a motel stay, a person wants a large and gutsy vehicle capable of cruising uphill at 90 m.p.h. and allowing its driver to yawn and stretch his arms while his passengers doze or play Scrabble in the backseat.

Because size matters to many Montana motorists (and the distances here make motorists of everyone), I knew something was terribly wrong this summer when hybrid cars started popping up around me. What were golf carts doing on Western highways? I wondered whether they had been here for a while and I just hadn't noticed their low profiles from the vantage point of my 1-ton pickup, which is jacked up so high that the average Toyota Prius could drive underneath it without a scratch. Or had I ignored the cute scooters out of my own guilt?

When I began spotting hybrids everywhere—even in the driveways of old-school ranchers who had always driven Cadillacs to town—I knew something profound was happening and in the least likely place for it to happen. Montanans were conserving gas? Impossible. It would be easier just to shrink the state.

Then last month, in a small-town bakery, I overheard this astonishing conversation: "I'm sorry that I got here late from Billings, but I'm trying to drive 55 these days. It's nice. You can really appreciate the scenery." In Montana, scenery is for tourists and not a thing that most residents ever talk about. Nor do they boast of driving a hundred miles at the speed of a John Deere tractor hauling hay. I butted in and asked the slowpoke if she had truly enjoyed her drawn-out trip or if it was just a civic-minded experiment inspired by listening to too much public radio. "I did," she insisted, "and I got so much done. I cleaned my whole CD collection and dusted my dashboard. Fifty-five is great."

That's when I knew the crisis might last forever—well before the President's speech last week on saving fossil fuel and even before Hurricane Katrina hit, when gas finally went the way of water and coffee and turned from a modest, ordinary liquid into a fancy, specialized elixir. The signs of change were coming nonstop. At the Costco warehouse store in Bozeman, 50 miles from my home in Livingston, I stopped bumping into my neighbors on Saturday mornings in the cavernous dog-and-cat-food aisle. They had stayed home, buying kibble by the normal-size bag rather than in great, budget-priced sacks. I worked out the math and concluded that they were right. To save six bucks on puppy chow, I had burned more than \$16 in premium fuel.

"Don't fence me in," the cowboy sings, forgetting to add that without a healthy horse or a vehicle that he can afford to drive, he may as well be stranded on the prairie dying of thirst and hunger. To live surrounded by unlimited space that

one is incapable of moving through is the quintessential Western nightmare: homebound

on the range. Driving back from Bozeman that afternoon, I crunched some more discouraging numbers. I'd always heard that freedom had a price. And soon I'd determined what it was in my case, driving my mammoth, inefficient truck: 30¢ a mile.

This meant that my high-speed gallop along the highway was costing me roughly a dollar every two

minutes. I couldn't have been more flummoxed if I'd been told that I now had to pay a dime for every breath and a nickel for every heartbeat.

I mentioned this to an acquaintance, who laughed at me. He hadn't shopped in Bozeman since May, he said, because he and his family had sold their only vehicle large enough to hold pallets of paper towels. He asked me if I would be willing to take his shopping list if I went to Costco the following weekend. I said, "Sure," though I knew I wouldn't go back. I had heard a rumor that a friend of mine had ordered a Honda hybrid from a dealer (a waiting list for Hondas, in Montana?), and I decided to give him my list, since he could now drive to Bozeman all he wanted. I had formed my own conservation plan by then: keep my truck, but keep it parked—and, if I ever felt restless, dress up in buckskin. I have seen such characters trudging along the roads at times, and somebody always stops to pick them up. ■

