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1971 Plymouth Duster Restoration Guide

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RESTORATIONESSENTIALS

1971 Plymouth Duster

Factory-Correct Restoration Guide

Single-year guide · Model year 1971 only · Standard Duster and Duster 340

KEY FACTS AT A GLANCE

- **Model year covered:** 1971 only. The Duster debuted for 1970; this guide does not cover 1970 or 1972–1976 except where differences from 1971 are explicitly noted.
- **Body style:** 2-door semi-fastback sports hardtop only. No sedan, no convertible, no wagon.
- **Platform:** Chrysler A-body, 108.0-inch wheelbase, 188.4 inches overall length. Valiant from the cowl forward; new sheet metal aft of the cowl. The 1970 and 1971 Dusters share the same basic body shell — the differences are trim, grille, badges, stripes, and upholstery, not sheet metal.
- **VIN model codes:** VL29 (standard Duster), VS29 (Duster 340). The "29" denotes a 2-door sports hardtop. The Duster 340 remained its own VIN model through 1973; the 340 was replaced by the 360 for 1974 (itself a separate VS29 model), and the performance engine became an option package only in 1975–76.
- **Engines (1971):** 198 cu in Slant Six (125 hp), 225 cu in Slant Six (145 hp), 318 cu in LA V8 (230 hp), 340 cu in LA V8 (275 hp). Ratings are SAE gross; 1971 was the first year manufacturers also published SAE net ratings (the 340 was rated 235 hp net).
- **Transmissions:** 3-speed manual, floor shift (D13); A-833 4-speed manual (D21); TorqueFlite 3-speed automatic (A-904 behind sixes and 318; A-727 behind the 340).
- **1971 production:** 186,478 total — 173,592 standard Dusters and 12,886 Duster 340s. Roughly one car in 14.5 was a 340.
- **Base prices:** $2,313 (standard Duster), $2,703 (Duster 340). Shipping weights: 2,825 lb (standard), 3,140 lb (340).
- **Assembly plants:** Hamtramck, Michigan — VIN code B (Dodge Main plant); Los Angeles, California — VIN code E. Both are documented on 1971 Duster VINs; the available sources do not prove these were the only two plants.
- **Key 1971-only features:** sharktooth grille on the Duster 340 (and Twister); "Duster" name with the Valiant badges and Plymouth grille logotype deleted; bolder stripes with "340" numerals; Carter Thermo-Quad carburetor on the 340; 10.3:1 compression on the 340; 1971-only trunk vapor separator; 1971-only Rallye gauge cluster; one-year-only GY3 Curious Yellow paint.
- **New for 1971:** the Duster Twister appearance package (A51), which dressed six-cylinder and 318 cars in 340 looks. The Gold Duster package continued from mid-1970.

1. Manufacturer history: Plymouth

Plymouth was created by Walter P. Chrysler in 1928 as Chrysler Corporation's entry in the low-priced field against Ford and Chevrolet. The brand took its name from Plymouth binder twine, a symbol of New England craftsmanship — the Mayflower ship on the early emblem reinforced the association. The first Plymouth, the 1929 Model Q, was unveiled on July 7, 1928, and notably offered hydraulic brakes when competitors still used mechanical brakes, a value-and-engineering positioning the division held for decades.

Plymouth survived the Great Depression on low prices and solid engineering, and by the 1950s it was a full-line make riding Virgil Exner's "Forward Look" styling. The 1960s transformed Plymouth's image: the compact Valiant (1960) gave the division a strong small-car base, and the performance era brought the GTX (1967), the Road Runner (1968) — a back-to-basics muscle car that won Motor Trend Car of the Year — and the rapid-fire "Rapid Transit System" marketing campaign that grouped Plymouth's performance models under one banner. The Duster 340 joined that system in 1970, and the campaign ran actively through 1971 as Plymouth's answer to Dodge's Scat Pack.

The early 1970s were turbulent at Chrysler. During 1970 the corporation went through one of its customary financial crises, and the Duster's runaway success led planners to cancel the all-new 1972 compacts the studios had already designed — the existing A-body cars were carried forward instead. Plymouth's 1971 performance stable therefore spanned the compact Duster 340 (the budget-muscle flagship of the compact line) and the intermediate B-bodies — Road Runner and GTX — plus the E-body Barracuda and 'Cuda, all sold under the Rapid Transit System banner.

For the restorer, 1971 matters because it sits at the peak: the last year of the high-compression 340, the last year before SAE net ratings and emissions equipment rewrote every specification, and the year the Duster got its most aggressive factory face — the sharktooth grille. The 1972 cars that followed were detuned (8.5:1 compression, 240 net hp), re-faced, and re-trimmed. A factory-correct 1971 restoration honors the one-year-only details that separate it from the 1970 launch cars on one side and the 1972 detune on the other.

2. Model history: the Duster

The Duster was born from a modest assignment. Plymouth product planners were given roughly $15 million to freshen the dowdy Valiant compact for 1970 — not enough for a clean-sheet car. Designers Milt Antonick and Neil Walling, working under the constraint of reusing the Valiant's cowl, doors, front clip, and 108-inch-wheelbase A-body platform, drew an all-new semi-fastback roof with a steeply raked windshield, extended C-pillars, pronounced tumblehome in the side glass, and fresh rear sheet metal with a special rear valance. The result looked like a clean-sheet coupe for a fraction of the cost, and the buying public loved it: 217,192 Dusters sold in the debut year, including 24,817 Duster 340s.

For 1971 — the Duster's second model year — Plymouth refined the formula rather than reinventing it. Production totaled 186,478 cars: 173,592 standard Dusters and 12,886 Duster 340s. The 340's share of the mix fell from roughly one in nine cars to roughly one in fourteen and a half, as insurance surcharges and the first whispers of emissions regulation began squeezing the budget-muscle market the Duster had created.

The Duster's 1970 success had a corporate consequence: for 1971, Dodge demanded its own version, and got it — the Dodge Demon, a Duster twin with vertical-slat taillamps the Duster team had originally drawn for the 340. Plymouth, in turn, was given a version of the Dodge Dart Swinger 2-door hardtop, sold as the Plymouth Valiant Scamp. The compact performance field was suddenly crowded with siblings, and Plymouth answered by dressing the 1971 Duster 340 more aggressively than ever: the sharktooth grille, bolder stripes with "340" numerals, an available canted "340 Wedge" hood decal, and the new Duster Twister appearance package (announced in February 1971), which put 340 looks — sharktooth grille, special striping, blacked-out hood treatment — on six-cylinder and 318 cars.

The 1971 Duster 340 remained a genuine performance bargain. *Car Life* tested an automatic 1971 car at 0–60 mph in 6.2 seconds and judged it a great buy overall. The 340 kept its 275-horsepower gross rating (with newly published net figures of 235 hp), its forged crankshaft, and its 8.75-inch rear axle — but the first detuning steps were visible:

compression slipped from 10.5:1 to 10.3:1, and the previously standard front disc brakes became optional, with 10-inch drums standard. By 1972 the 340 would fall to 8.5:1 compression and 240 net horsepower. The 1971 car is the last of the high-compression Dusters, and the only year with its particular combination of the sharktooth face, the Thermo-Quad carburetor, and the Rallye gauge cluster.

3. What is unique about the 1971 Duster

A factory-correct 1971 restoration must honor the one-year-only details. The items below are verified 1971-specific features; 1970 parts are incorrect on a 1971 car, and 1972-and-later parts are equally wrong.

Exterior identification — 1971 only:

- The Duster 340 (and the Duster Twister) received the new **sharktooth grille**: a one-piece unit with narrow, rectangular, vertically oriented "corrals" with rounded corners, black horizontal slats running behind argent "teeth," and parking lamps that appear to sit behind the grille. It is far more aggressive than the 1970 grille — and it is 340/Twister-only. Standard 1971 Dusters kept the carryover grille: tightly stacked thin horizontal black slats recessed in an argent surround.
- The small **"Valiant" fender badges were deleted** for 1971 — and with them, the "Valiant Duster" name itself. For 1971 the car is simply the Duster.
- The **"Plymouth" logotype in the grille was deleted** for 1971 (the 1970 grille carried a medallion).
- **Revised upholstery and door-panel patterns** for 1971. Seat patterns, door-panel patterns, seat belts, and standard-dash cluster bezels all differ from 1970 — treat 1971 upholstery as year-specific and match 1971-spec covers, not 1970 interchange. 1971 cars also got the **Rallye gauge cluster**, which was replaced by a standard Valiant-like cluster for 1972.
- **Bolder Duster 340 stripes with "340" numerals**: a wide body-side stripe (available in black or white only) running from the fender across the door onto the rear quarter, with "340" callouts on the rear quarters. A sizeable **"340 Wedge" decal, canted at a 45-degree angle**, was available for the hood in 1971 only.
- **Taillights and side-marker lights were carried over from 1970** — the rectangular side markers set in pot-metal bezels and the twin horizontal taillamps are the same both years. Both were changed for 1972 (surface-mount corporate markers, larger one-piece taillamps).
- The **decklid was still flat** (no center high-point crease) through 1971 — with a documented running change: cars built in the last roughly two months of 1971 production received the 1972-style peaked decklid and bumper jack slots. A peaked decklid on a 1971 is evidence of a very late build, not automatically a wrong part — check the fender tag's scheduled production date.

Duster 340 mechanical equipment — 1971 only:

- **Carter Thermo-Quad** four-barrel carburetor (list numbers 4972S for 4-speed, 4973S for automatic), replacing the 1970-only Carter AVS. The 1971 Thermo-Quad is a one-year-only design.
- **10.3:1 compression ratio** on the 340 (down from 10.5:1 for 1970; down to 8.5:1 for 1972). Output held at 275 hp / 340 lb-ft gross — and 1971 was the first year the factory also published net ratings: 235 hp / 310 lb-ft.
- **"J" cylinder heads, casting 3418915**, replacing the 1970 X-heads. From 1971 the 340 used 360-family heads; the 1971 heads were reamed for the 340's 2.02/1.60-inch valves per the factory service literature (one enthusiast-compiled casting reference lists 1.88/1.60 for the 340 application of this casting — where the two conflict, the factory service literature governs).
- **Forged crankshaft retained** for 1971 (1972 switched to cast iron).
- **Breaker-point (dual-point) ignition remained standard** on the 1971 340. Electronic ignition (sales code N23) was a rare, late-model-year option on 340 cars only — it did not become standard on the 340 until 1972, and across all Chrysler engines until 1973. Do not install an electronic-ignition distributor as "factory correct" on a