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The opening pages of

## **1974-1993 Dodge Ramcharger & Trail Duster Buyer's Guide**

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## RESTORATIONESSENTIALS

Factory-Correct Restoration Reference

# 1974-1993 Dodge Ramcharger & Trail Duster Buyer's Guide

Model Year 1974-1993

|             |                                             |
|-------------|---------------------------------------------|
| Models      | Ramcharger / Plymouth Trail Duster          |
| Years       | 1974-1993; removable roof 1974-80           |
| Smart money | TBI 1988+; documented 1st-gen; Trail Duster |
| Watch for   | Roof completeness; fenders; 4WD health      |
| Parts       | Mechanical excellent; roof/trim thin        |

Every specification in this guide was checked against factory literature, marque references, period road tests, and documented survivor cars. Where sources disagree or the record is silent, this guide says so rather than guessing.

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### Inside This Guide

The chapter order follows the RestorationEssentials house standard: history first, then year-specific identity, then the technical chapters you will use at the car.



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## Chapter 1 — Two Generations, Twenty Years

The Ramcharger ran 1974–1993 in two generations — twenty model years, plus the 1999–2001 Mexico trucks. First generation (1974–1980): removable roof, spartan standard equipment, five-engine menu, full-time NP203 4WD. Second generation (1981–1993): fixed roof, one-piece hatch, new dashboard, part-time 4WD, and eventually fuel injection and overdrive. The 1981 facelift is the bright line between them.

For buyers, the generations are two markets: the first generation is the collector market — removable roof, early-year tells, special editions, Trail Duster twin. The second generation is the usable-classic market — TBI fuel injection from 1988, overdrive automatics from 1991, and the most refined Ramchargers ever built. Buy the first generation for character and collectibility; buy the second for driving.

| Generation | Years   | Buyer take                       |
|------------|---------|----------------------------------|
| 1st        | 1974-80 | Removable roof; collector market |
| Facelift   | 1981    | Bridge year; Trail Duster ends   |
| 2nd        | 1982-93 | Fixed roof; TBI 1988+; OD 1991+  |

## Chapter 2 — 1974-1980: The Removable-Roof Years

The first generation's identity is the removable roof: no roof, dealer fabric top, or removable steel roof with flip-up tailgate window. The 1974 half-door trucks (pillars on the roof, to build date 6-10-74) are the rarest by construction. Through 1975, only the driver's seat was standard — the passenger seat was optional, which tells you everything about the truck's market position.

Buying the first generation means buying the roof: its presence, completeness, and condition are the first inspection items and the biggest price variables. A 1974–1980 truck missing its steel roof is missing its signature — price the hunt before you buy. The engines run 225 to 440; the 440 needs paperwork (1974-only per one account); the 400/440 were gone after 1978.



Year notes: 1974 (half-doors, 4WD only at launch), 1975 (2WD added, Sno\*Drift win), 1977 (Macho/Top Hand editions), 1978 (last 440, stacked quads uppers), 1979–1980 (NP208 part-time arrives for 1980). The 1980's part-time 4WD is the easier ownership proposition; the 1974–1979 full-time trucks want their front bearings inspected with prejudice.

## Chapter 3 — 1981-1993: The Fixed-Roof Years

The 1981 facelift changed the truck's character: fixed roof, one-piece rear hatch, extended quarter glass, dual rectangular headlights, and an all-new dashboard that ran through 1993. The removable-roof romance was over; the usable-SUV era began. For buyers who want to drive rather than collect, the second generation is the rational choice.

The mechanical evolution matters: 1988 brought throttle-body injection to the 318 (230 hp/280 lb-ft), 1989 to the 360 (240 hp); 1991 brought the A500/A518 overdrive automatics; 1992 the Magnum 318 MPI; 1993 the Magnum 360. The NP241 replaced the NP208 in 1988; the clutch went hydraulic in 1988. A 1991–1993 truck is the most refined Ramcharger ever built — and still leaf-sprung at both ends, the last of its kind.

Buying the second generation: the TBI trucks (1988+) are the sweet spot — fuel injection reliability with the classic body. The Magnum trucks (1992–93) are the ultimate evolution but carry the newest-truck premium. Avoid the trap of paying first-gen money for a second-gen truck: the fixed roof is honest and useful, but it's not the collector configuration.

## Chapter 4 — Trail Duster: Plymouth's Only SUV

Plymouth made exactly one SUV in its 1928–2001 history: the Trail Duster (1974–1980/81), the Ramcharger's identical twin. Same shortened AD platform, same mechanicals, same roof configurations (including the vinyl roof with roll-up sides), same spartan standard equipment. The differences are badges, grille details, and trim — and rarity.

The Trail Duster's rarity is structural: Plymouth sold fewer, and the nameplate died with the 1981 facelift. Trail Duster badging is the rarest trim in the Ramcharger world — worth a premium to the right buyer, and worth verifying: a Trail Duster with Ramcharger badges (or vice versa) is a story, not a restoration. The mechanical inspection is identical to the Ramcharger's; the cosmetic authentication is Plymouth-specific.

Pricing: Trail Dusters trail Ramchargers slightly in the general market but lead among Mopar completists — the 'Plymouth's only SUV' story has real pull. Documentation matters more here than on a Ramcharger, because the production numbers are softer and the clones are easier.

## Chapter 5 — Engines Across the Years

| Engine        | Years   | Buyer take                             |
|---------------|---------|----------------------------------------|
| 225 slant six | 1974-80 | Base; honest, slow                     |
| 318 LA        | 1974-93 | The standard; TBI 1988; Magnum 1992    |
| 360 LA        | 1974-93 | More torque; TBI 1989; Magnum 1993     |
| 400/440       | 1974-78 | Rare; 440 needs paperwork              |
| 318 Magnum    | 1992-93 | MPI; the ultimate 318                  |
| 360 Magnum    | 1993    | The ultimate factory Ramcharger engine |

The 318 is the default across all twenty years — and the TBI 318 (1988+) is the reliability sweet spot: 230 hp, fuel injection, no carburetor moods. The 360's thirst is legendary (owner reports: 35-gallon tank, weekly fill-ups) —