

## **Dune Riders**

**by H. W. Moss**

A Toyota truck and a Ford SUV entered the state park at Grover Beach just south of Pismo where their drivers paid the day fee. They drove to within a few hundred yards of the crashing surf and the lead driver pulled to a stop. The second followed suit.

“Time to deflate the tires,” Rory said as he came around the side of the Tacoma and bent down to begin the process. The driver of the Explorer and his passenger got out and both began to perform the same maneuver. They punched the tires down from 35 p.s.i. to around ten according to Rory’s recommendation. At 20-years-old Rory was the youngest member of the expedition; he was also the most experienced. He had been coming to the dunes since he was six and had a photo from that age showing him toodling along the flat glistening beach into a receding wave astride a motorized three wheeler which was no longer legally allowed anywhere in the state they were so dangerous to operate.

A constant flow of recreational vehicles passed them by as the tires pancaked. Barry and Tom knocked the air down in all four of the Explorer’s tires, sat back and surveyed their work. They had effectively made the vehicle non-road worthy. Now it was adapted to coastline driving.

“If we had a Hummer we could change the tire pressure, up or down, without getting out of the cab,” Barry said and motioned toward a black H 2 that at the moment straddled a fresh water stream which meandered into the Pacific. The driver had mired all four wheels of the oversized machine in the banks on either side of the stream and was exerting every ounce of temporarily stranded energy to escape the trap he had made for

himself. Barry did not add that the “air suspension package” as it is known is an additional \$1,175 added on to the vehicle’s base price of \$49,000. The H 2 they watched may or may not be equipped with the device.

It only took a moment for the Hummer to rock itself free and lurch forward up onto the other side of the stream. It sped away into the distance seeking more and equally difficult driving conditions among the actual dunes.

Tom got back in the passenger side as Barry conferred with the driver in Rory’s vehicle. When he returned, Barry jumped in the Explorer’s cab and gunned the engine before letting out a long, “Yiiiiippppeeee,” as he joined the pursuit of fun surrounding him.

The California coastline is more than eleven hundred miles long which amazes drivers from other parts of the country who are surprised to learn they can travel for an entire day from sunup to sunup and not cross another state line. However, the only place on that coastline where it is legal to drive a vehicle along the shore and on coastal sand dunes is two point five miles of beach located at Oceano in San Luis Obispo County, which sits within a state park that covers all told about 90,000 acres.

Another fact: California is the only state that demands drivers use chains in snowfall conditions, say, for example, in the Northern High Sierra Mountains where Donner Pass is probably the most infamous place those chains are sometimes required.

Other states do not have tire chain laws, they patiently explain, because their drivers know how to handle icy roads. They know that if you go into a slide on black ice in Illinois, you regain traction by turning the vehicle’s steering wheel in the direction of the

slide, no brakes and no accelerating. This is not only counter intuitive, it sounds just plain wrong and California drivers don't get it, at least as far as the CHP is concerned.

The same holds true when you lose traction on a sand dune. Sliding down a sand dune is very much like sliding around on an icy road. Turn the wheel toward the slide and don't hit the brakes or accelerate. Trouble is, few California drivers know this or are practiced in the art. They are, after all, required to use chains. Maybe they should be required to use them on sand dunes as well.

The two vehicles joined a flowing line of traffic moving steadily south toward the dune riding area which was inland and further down the stretch of beach. They did not reach excessive speeds, actually never hit twenty as they approached the shore and paralleled the crashing surf for another thousand yards.

Along the way they passed encampments of weekend visitors who came stocked with food and drink, who built corrals to pen in their many motor vehicles, not just the ones they drove from home and lived in, but mechanized devices for each and every member of the family: sometimes two machines for mom, two for dad and two for each of four kids who had a penchant for motorcycles with high pitched two-stroke engines, tiny high-riding fenders, knobby tires and thin frames. A pack of these small rice burners paralleled the traffic flow and buzzed along the shore, while individual riders occasionally fell in behind the Tacoma and in front of the Explorer.

Tom was in awe. "Lookit that little prick," he pointed at a quad which flitted straight down from his left on a perpendicular to the two car caravan. Its rider was little more than a helmeted baby. The child drove between them not ten feet from their front tires and

directly into the surf. “What’re we in, a redneck wonderland? That’s just crazy. I mean, that’s nothing more than a child fer crissakes.”

In fact, there was a multitude of children riding motorized devices. Barry, who had little use for anyone under the legal drinking age, said, “Makes you realize they’re not only expendable, they’re fungible.”

It was the second day of a four-day Thanksgiving weekend and park rangers anticipated that by nightfall there would be double the number of people camping out. The Dunes are within the 15,000 acre Guadalupe-Nipomo Dunes Complex which 1.5 million people visit annually.

“Yah, well last year I went off road with Roar and Denny into the mountains above SLO. Man, that was treacherous terrain,” Barry related the story as he drove. “We forded streams, climbed hills, bounced along a single lane dirt path in an otherwise pristine forest environment. It was exhilarating and exciting, moderately dangerous although more damage was done to Denny’s new Tacoma which is somewhat dented if you look closely at the fenders.”

“So, did you enjoy your testosterone inspired adventures?”

“Damn straight.”

Barry was a rural real estate appraiser, so there was some justification for his owning an off road vehicle. He really did use it to follow a farm property line or examine a gravel pit on the side of a mountain. Denny, on the other hand, purchased his Tacoma precisely because he did not need it. He was a computer programmer who worked inside an LA office and commuted on freeways that almost always turned into parking lots when he was on them. The Tacoma gave him an excuse to go away for the weekend.

In addition to SUVs and four wheel drive trucks, the dunes were crawling with All Terrain Vehicles or ATVs, “quads” which look like small four wheel tractors, sand rails which have four wheels and a metal cage but no skin on the frame, and numerous two wheel dirt bikes. Three wheelers might be illegal, but Hummers abounded.

Waves lapped at their wheels as they rode firm wet sand paralleling the Pacific. There were four lanes of traffic, two in each direction, moving rather slow, doing between eight and ten, maybe fifteen miles per hour. But the most astonishing thing was the great number of children, many who could barely be seven or eight years old wearing helmets and leather gauntlets, who wove in and out of the traffic lanes or along beside the huge SUVs on miniature motorized two and four wheel cycles dodging fishermen with lines in the water. The fishermen had to be alert. They were continually waving the youngsters away from their poles and just as often were forced to get out of the way of oncoming motorists.

Tom and Barry followed the shore for approximately a mile and passed campsites every one of which had some type of dune rider, many with a half dozen of all types, parked nearby. Traffic became congested at another fresh water stream flowing into the ocean as everyone attempted to ford it. Some drivers deliberately chose the worst possible place to cross.

Following Denny, they turned inland and again came to a halt. Tom surveyed the windswept sandy hills he thought looked like a scene straight out of “Lawrence of Arabia” as Barry got out and stood beside his Explorer. He gestured expansively in an all encompassing embrace that took in the coastline for miles in either direction and said, “You’re looking at the bane of the Sierra Club.”

In fact, The Sierra Club is opposed to driving on any beach which they say endangers the wildlife. To that end they filed a lawsuit against the state several years ago which was settled in June, 2003, basically in the park service's favor. The state park responded to the Club's argument by pointing out that these areas were managed. "If it wasn't for controlling the traffic and charging fees, people would ride the dunes anyway and these species would disappear," the club's lawyer told the judge.

Rory got out of the Toyota and joined Tom and Barry. He gave a quick course in dune driving safety and etiquette saying there were two things to keep in mind. First, when going up a hill, do not stop. Otherwise, you'll roll backward or simply get stuck. Second, climb to the top of a dune and stop. You must look down before driving down. Otherwise, you might run into someone coming up the other side or find the vertical face too steep for judicious descent. Basically, look before you leap.

"Oh, and the red flag attached to the antenna on the back of everyone's bike, that's to warn you they're coming up the hill you're sitting on. You see the flag before you see them."

A constant bee hive buzzing sound emanated from the engines of the motorbikes which rode in packs. Clusters of them could be seen rising and falling on mountains of sand. Each rider wore special garments, usually leather, and a helmet, their faces covered by protective plastic which lent them the appearance of alien creatures in an alien landscape.

There were no dividing lines or traffic lanes to separate motorcycle, sand rail, truck or SUV from one another and you could drive anywhere you wanted in any direction until you came to a fence. It was quite liberating in that respect, being able to drive left,

right or straight ahead at your whim, in circles if you wished, and not follow any specific course.

“There are few rules to dune driving,” Rory told them, “although the paramount one is Be Careful. You’ll never hit highway speeds, but it is possible for two vehicles to collide doing thirty. That’s a sixty mile per hour crash.”

Then the Tacoma led the Ford around for fifteen minutes, drove in wide arcs kicking up fans of sand in its wake, swerved around oncoming riders, descended one hill at an accelerating rate, hit the valley bottom and started up the other side without slowing, lost some speed but never its forward momentum as it reached the lip on the other side where it halted majestically and turned around to face Tom and Barry.

After a while, Barry relinquished the driver’s seat to Tom who discovered that much of the dunes are soft and shifting. However, there are places where an actual road bed evolved, created out of sand compacted from frequent use. Tom compared it to riding a skateboard through a half pipe with lots of throttle and a good set of brakes. Still, it was a surreal landscape and he was just getting the feel of the vehicle when the Toyota drove up an incline in front of them and came to an abrupt halt.

Tom was following too closely. He should have stopped, they were on a hard packed heavily traveled surface, but he did not stop. Instead, he made a sharp left which took them up toward the top of a 40 foot tall dune. The dune was peaked and unspoiled; no other vehicles had driven up or down which turned out to be sensible on their part. This dune was a little too steep, its crest too sharply angled to make driving up or down in any type of four wheeler easy. Even a bike rider could spill forward, head over heels.

But the Ford was committed and Tom was left with no choice in the matter. The Ford breached the lip and started down the other side which was why Rory had stopped abruptly in front of them: to survey what he was getting himself into down there.

A sand dune only holds together until its inclined plane reaches 32 degrees, then it falls apart from wind and gravity. The incline on the opposite side seemed greater than the one they had just ascended and very nearly approached or exceeded that 32 degree threshold. The instant the hood of the Explorer shot over the top Barry found himself looking directly down, almost vertically, into a narrow valley bordered on the other side by another sand dune that was as steep as the one they were beginning to descend.

Tom hit the brakes which merely caused the wheels to stop turning and all 6,000 pounds of SUV began gouging, plowing its way toward the bottom. Although they had straight ahead momentum, Barry immediately felt the SUV begin to pitch to the left and -- you can't fool the cochlea -- his inner ear told him they were quite likely going to roll. At the same time the vehicle's three ton mass pulled them down the dune face to the right. Tom was no longer in control and began frantically turning the steering wheel. He took his foot off the brake and found the accelerator which spun the tires ineffectively and merely served to compound the error.

Out of the corner of his eye, Barry saw Tom frantically turn the wheel to the left which would have been dead wrong according to Rory's earlier admonitions and what little Barry knew about ice driving. Tom had his foot on the gas pedal and gunned the engine in hopes of getting the Ford onto a straight path instead of being pulled in two directions at once: hood down and to the left while the tail arced around and down in a rightward direction.

Barry's sense of duration altered as the split seconds loomed large in his mind. The Ford was no longer headed straight but was angled across the flat face of the dune, sliding across it while, at the same time, the rear end drifted gently in an arc to the right. Both motions were precariously balanced out with the additional potential for flipping. He grew light headed, felt sheer dread course down his spine and was desperately helpless.

Barry turned his attention from the driver and looked out the passenger window. Suddenly he realized they were not the only sand flea that had made the mistake of coming down this too steep hill. Stalled at the bottom, resting with its tires buried to the axles, a grey Honda sat quietly at the base of the valley as the rear of the Ford drifted like a lead weight directly toward it. There was nothing Barry could do to prevent the collision; he could merely watch in growing horror.

His eyes became large with surprise as he realized one of the Honda's passengers was a blond wisp of a child, perhaps twelve years old, who stood in the sand on the driver's side just inside the open door. It was as if she had just stepped out of the cab and was about to walk away when she saw the SUV caught in a gravitational pull coming straight at her.

She was tall enough that her head was above the roof line, but her slender white neck was blocked from view by the top of the open door frame. Barry realized she was staring straight at him as the Ford continued its uncontrolled glide and he thought, calmly and with a strange clarity, "She should jump out of the way or all 6,000 pounds of this Explorer is going to slam into that door and decapitate her."

Tom fought for control. He spun the wheel and, although they were no longer in danger of tipping over, they still had no traction. The tail end of the Ford continued its sliding ride down to the right and Barry had the dismal impression there was no way they could possibly avoid hitting the girl as her face drifted within six feet of his, then it was three feet away, then two and then within six inches of his own.

As if from a great distance he heard the sound of metal scraping metal when the Ford made initial contact. Maybe it would be relatively minor, Barry's mind instantly flashed optimistic consolation, but just as quickly rejected that outcome. He realized, as her face came closer and closer, the girl returned a blank stare as if she had not yet come to understand the immediacy of the impending danger. She was a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming car; a rabbit stopped stock still and staring at a predator about to pounce. She did not reflect Barry's wide-eyed frightened, surprised, dismayed gaze as the SUV slipped closer and closer toward crushing her.

Barry knew as certainly as he knew his own name that he and Tom were going to kill that girl and there was no way to avoid it.

For an instant it seemed the Explorer's tires found a grip and they could shoot away to the left of the Honda and begin climbing the dune opposite. But that hope faded as the Ford's rear quarter panel met the Honda's plastasheen gunmetal gray surface and wrinkled, Barry thought in an instant of circumspection, the way an eggshell wrinkles before it cracks and thin lines appear where the shell is about to separate.

Then the passenger side of the Explorer where Barry sat met the open front door of the Honda with the impact and finality of a guillotine. He was aware of what happened next but was so close to the violent, bloody result he could not say exactly what he

became aware of first. At the inquest, Barry explained he thought he saw the torso fall into the front seat as normal as you please, the way a person got into a car and sat down to start the ignition.

It was not until later, he explained, that he realized the head was no longer attached to the body. Or that the door frame had also severed the girl's two feet just above the ankles.

He was allowed to continue talking long after he satisfactorily answered the question put to him by the plaintiff's attorney in the multi-million dollar law suit that grew from the crash.

"The Honda had no business being there," he told the court. "No one was at the top of the dune to wave us away. Someone should have warned us. But we couldn't come out of the slide, either. I believe Tommy turning the steering wheel in what was probably the wrong direction is what actually killed the child."

Tommy refused to take the stand in his own defense, but he never spoke to Barry again. The defense attorney presented evidence that every year for the past four years there have been fatalities at Oceano Dunes. It was just Barry's great good fortune he had not been behind the wheel when this one occurred.

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