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Zapcar Xebra, a truck of a different kind

It's a truck. It's a motorcycle. It doesn't need gas. But it does need a place to plug in.

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Matt Gentry | The Roanoke Times

Blacksburg David Roper with his Zapcar Xebra electric truck at his home in Blacksburg Wednesday. The back bed rises to access the batteries. Note the "Sun Roper" decal he placed on the truck.



David Roper drives his Zapcar Xebra electric truck on Hethwood Blvd in Blacksburg Wednesday. The vehicle has a top speed of about 40 mph.

The electric blue pickup rolled noiselessly away. As it picked up speed, the truck began to hum. Was that the sound of motor or the whir of new tires rolling over pavement?

If your pulse quickens when you hear the rumble and roar of a big V8 engine or if you get a rush from seeing scenery rush by in a blur, the three-wheeled Zapcar Xebra may not be the pickup for you.

"I was going 45 on the way to town the other day," said David Roper of Blacksburg. "I was going down hill."

The Xebra isn't just electric blue. It's electric -- the first pickup of its kind in Virginia. A bank of batteries stowed beneath the truck's dump bed provide the power -- 6.7 horses worth -- that pushes it along. It has a top speed of 40 mph, according to the spec sheet on the Zapcar Web site. The truck can travel 25 miles on a single charge. If you can find a place to plug it in during the trip, you might stretch that to 40 miles. Roper thinks that might apply in Kansas. He expects he won't do quite that well here among hills and mountains,

"I wouldn't take it to Radford," Roper said, "because I probably wouldn't be able to get back."

Roper paid extra to get better batteries, which extends the truck's range a bit. He's going to install a solar panel over the bed. That will add a little more.

The Xebra's payload is rated at just 500 pounds, but Roper said he's seen a photograph of a Xebra with firewood packed as high as the cab, so he's sure it can haul more than a quarter ton.

But Roper didn't get his Xebra for speed. Or range. Or payload. He got the battery-powered pickup because he's concerned about global climate change.

Xebra spec sheet

- Top speed: 40 mph
- Range: Up to 25 miles per charge
- Seating: Up to 2
- Dimensions: 10 feet long, 4.66 feet wide, 5.05 feet tall
- Weight: About 1,820 pounds
- Colors: White, blue
- Price: The Ropers' Xebra with a radio, upgraded batteries and leather seats cost about \$12,000.

"It cuts down the carbon dioxide emissions enormously," he said.

Even when the electricity powering his truck is generated by a coal-burning power plant, Roper said, the Xebra puts half as much carbon dioxide into the air as a conventional gasoline-powered truck. The company claims it can cut emissions as much as 98 percent. Of course, Roper said, if the electricity came from windmills or solar panels, there wouldn't be any emissions at all.

Roper, a retired Virginia Tech physics professor, and his wife Jeanne Roper, a retired Tech associate professor of urban affairs and planning, already own two gas-electric hybrids, a Prius and a Highlander.

"I don't need this car," Roper said. "I bought it because I think we need to start thinking in that direction."

Roper has already spread the gospel of gas/electric hybrids. He's taught classes about them at the YMCA's Open University. Now he wants to spread the word about all-electric vehicles.

Roper got his from a dealer in Kansas, though there are dealers as close as South Carolina and Pennsylvania. The basic truck is built in China, then shipped to California, where it's outfitted with seat belts and other things that make it ready for the American market. The truck has a heater but no air conditioner, so Roper installed a solar powered fan in his. He also had most of the lights changed to LEDs. They use less electricity, and the less electricity used on things like lights, the more electricity is left to power the drive train.

Roper held an online contest to name his truck. "Sunroper" was the winning name, so the tiny tag just below the tailgate reads SUNRPR. It's a motorcycle tag, because Virginia's Department of Motor Vehicles considers the Sunroper a motorcycle.

"It's a motorsickle," Roper said. "It's rated a motorsickle."

That means Roper has to get a motorcycle license. And, technically, he's supposed to wear a helmet when he drives his Sunroper. Once a few more Xebbras roll into the state, Roper said, he's going to lobby to have that rule changed.

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