

Are you tired of taking the mini-van Elk hunting?



By: Chris Sgaraglino



As I walk out my front door and look into the driveway, I hear myself say it once again, "I am tired of taking the mini-van Elk hunting!"

Among other specifics, successful bowhunting for Elk requires solid and sound equipment. Vital to that equipment list is a good vehicle. The ability to carry hunting and camping gear to your favorite hunting spot, getting your harvested animal to the processor, getting in and out of the woods after a long hunt in a good solid truck just seems to top off the week spent there.

So I headed to the local dealership. As I was sitting there with the salesman going over the numbers of that beauty I saw on the lot, adding in the little extras that I will need, my beauty now has a price tag of more than \$40k. Ouch!

Not exactly what I had in mind, or in the bank, but I'm not going back in the woods in the mini-van again. So, what are my alternatives? Well, I could buy used, but then there is the reliability issue. I truly don't want to be stuck in the wilderness miles and miles away from civilization with a sour lemon. Then there is the Lottery, fat chance there. So let's go back to the used idea. What if I bought used and then re-built it to meet my own needs? Now there's an idea.

So let's get busy and build one; what do I need for features and options? I will need 4 wheel drive, closed lockable space, agile suspension, light towing, reasonable upgrade prices and available parts.

I headed for the computer and started looking at older SUVs, Jeeps, Toyotas, Chevys and Fords, and ran across the Ford Bronco II. This is a good solid truck of which I have owned before. It fits the requirements above and parts are readily available. There are several places to look for a Bronco II. Start at your local used car lot, car auctions, newspapers, and even eBay has pretty good deals. For the most part you should be looking for one that has good suspension, body, and interior. Don't worry about the miles to much as you should rebuild the motor and clutch at minimum (it's that reliability thing I spoke of earlier). If you are looking with these standards in mind you should not have any problem finding one for under \$1000. I purchased a clean running 1990 Bronco II with 175,000 miles for \$850 plus a tent. Yes, a tent was thrown in and actually was the item that sealed the deal. When dealing with older vehicles, you might be surprised how fast someone will trade for that obscure item you never use anymore.



I should note here that there are few things to look for before you buy. a) The heads are prone to cracking and warping. You'll want to make sure that the heads are in good shape. This can be hard to recognize at times as the valve covers are prone to leaking, coating the heads in oil. The easiest way for you to check this is to have the cooling system pressure checked at your local shop. b) The automatic transmissions have lots of issues that are costly to get fixed, I would recommend that you stay with a manual transmission and manual hubs. c) Look for rust around the fender wells.

Now that you have found and purchased your truck, it is time to look at the motor. Find yourself a solid reputable machine or auto shop and go sit down and talk with them. Ask friends who they have used, these are usually your best references. Once you have found the shop you intend to use, let them know how the vehicle will be used. I chose Cylinder Heads Plus in Colorado Springs and after discussing the trucks purpose, I presented Cotty, the owner, with the following questions; should I buy a rebuilt stock 2.9 v6 and replace the existing, should I look at a rebuilt 4.0 at twice the cost and a few other headaches, or should I have the existing motor rebuilt. Note: Pricing for getting a motor rebuilt can range from \$500 to about \$3000 for the Bronco II. Remember that cheaper is not always better.

Another consideration while the motor is out is to replace the clutch. Bronco II's come with an 8.5" clutch instead of the normal 10", which is why they don't always last as long as others might or should. This will easily save you a couple hundred dollars if you have to do this at a later date, and you will.

Here is what I did: After a thorough inspection of the existing motor by Cotty, I chose to have my existing motor rebuilt, mainly because it was in good shape and I wanted to enhance a couple of things to better suit my needs. So besides the basic valve job, cylinder bore and crank grinding, I had the block decked which raised my compression and gave me more horsepower and I chose to go with a RV Camshaft for more low to mid range torque. This added torque will help when I put on the taller tires and when I'm towing my popup trailer. I also replaced the clutch plates and the master clutch cylinder, the starter, and all the belts and hoses.



Now let's focus on the suspension and wheels. In looking at the truck I bought, I noticed that the shocks were not stock and were still in fairly good shape, so I opted not to change them. I also checked the ball joints and bushings and they looked fine as well, another Bronco II issue noticeable by slop in the steering wheel. With that all checked I headed out to buy tires and wheels. I wanted 30x9.5 truck tires, the max size you can get away with without adding a lift kit. A benefit of truck tires over car tires is that the thicker side wall of the truck tires will stabilize the rocking you sometimes get with Bronco IIs. I decided against both the body and the suspension the lift kits because the tires will give almost 3" of actual lift over the stock tires and I wanted to keep

my center of gravity low. Another reason for staying away from a suspension lift kits is that Bronco II's have serious alignment issues when the suspension is lifted over 1.5 inches. With tires in hand I started looking through the catalogs for wheels. I found that the basic black spoke wheels were an excellent low cost solution. You can get these as little as \$23.00 each if you look for them on sale. They also come with off-set options, so I selected the model that moved my tires out 2 inches. This with the low center of gravity gives me a very stable ride on and off the road.

I know that the exhaust system is not part of the suspension, but while I was under there I noticed that the catalytic converters were a bit rusted and dinged. And when I tapped on them with my hand, they rattled quit a bit. I went ahead and took it to a muffler shop and I had the Pre-catalytic converter and the main catalytic converter removed and replaced with a single high-performance one, adding a few more horses to the new motor. Note: make sure that you stay within your states regulations for street legal use.

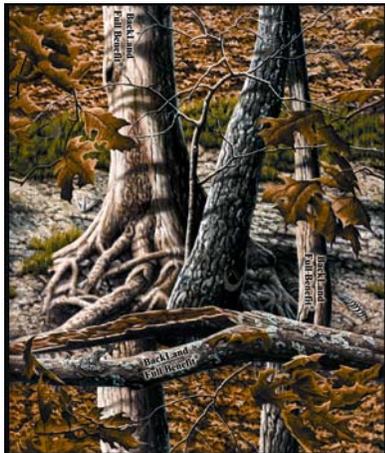
The truck is running great with lots of restored power and torque. Now is the time to take a look at the interior and exterior. I actually got lucky and the interior only needed a good cleaning and a few items from Wal-Mart. I did get good sturdy seat covers even though I did not need them, but I did this so that I could throw them in the wash after hunting season. I really don't want the smell of elk urine in my truck when I'm on

the way to a restaurant! And, not to mention the mud and blood that seems to find its way in as well. I did toss in a perk for myself. If you go to any car audio store, ask them for their in-dash stereo demonstration units. You'll save between 25% and 75% off the retail value of these units. And if you keep an eye out, most offer free installation if you spend a specific amount. These dealers cycle these units off the walls as new products become available. I found an Alpine In-Dash CD deck for under \$100 bucks, which was enough to get the installation free. This unit sounds so much better than the 14 year old stock Ford in-dash radio. Another nice thing about the Bronco IIs are the stock speakers, these actually sound pretty good, even with the new CD deck.

The Bronco IIs are a small truck, which gives them the agile versatility needed for off road use. A tight turning radius and short wheel base are also a plus. But as with all small trucks there is not a lot of room on the inside if the rear seats are up, even when down its still limited. So I opted for a Bauer AdventureRack® and 23" extension roof rack from Cabelas. This gave me a platform that measures 64.5" x 37.25" with a 4" lip that I was able to get three 118qt coolers in. That with the space inside when the back seats are down gives two bowhunters the ability to haul a weeks worth of hunting, camping, wall tent, stove, food, and other gear with out a trailer.



The exterior was also in pretty good shape, besides a few dings and small dents here and there, it did not warrant any body work. There were a few spots that had minor rusting that needed attending to, and the paint had the typical Ford fade and deterioration going on. So I start researching Paint and Body shops. I wanted new paint but was worried about the abuse it would get in the mountains. After some more research on the internet and a few calls to some local paint shops, here is what I came up with.



I contacted Mark Miller at Backland® Outdoors and discussed with him my needs and concerns. Backland® Outdoors has a High Performance 3M vinyl film in which they print their Full Benefit® Camouflage pattern on. This is a very durable vinyl; it is 7mils thick and backed by a 7 year warranty. Someone paid very close attention to the details when designing the Full Benefit® pattern. Other than the typical trees, grass, sticks and leaves, you'll find buried deep in the woods things like a whitetail shed, turkey feather, and a frog respectfully named Hopi sitting on a log just minding his own business.

For the paint, I selected Earl Scheib in Colorado Springs. I did not want to go with a high-priced paint job on a truck whose primary purpose was to get me in and out of the woods. I sat down with Will and we started discussing options. From paint colors to prep time, we went over all the details. I had the vinyl with me and after looking at it closely we chose a midnight metallic blue and we chose to only paint the top half of the truck. The vinyl is a permanent material, so removing it at a later date is totally out of the question. With the fact that only half the body was being painted, my cost was also cut in half. We did sand and chemically washed the bottom of the truck in preparation for the vinyl.

The vinyl material went on very well, and was pleasant to work with. Adding a little Dawn dishwashing detergent to a spray bottle of water and wetting the treated surface of the truck, gave us the needed time to adjust the vinyl during the application phase, so that it lined up with the body lines of the truck. We then used the supplied squeegees to remove the air bubbles and excess water. After a short drying time, we started working all the corners and angles. The trick here was to heat the vinyl a touch and then use the squeegee to work it around the corners. The instructions were easy to read and documented this process in detail. The nice thing about this specific vinyl was the ability to stretch it about 25% without any major distortion or tearing.

A few touch-up items such as a new windshield, painting the tire carrier and windshield wipers, fender flairs, shovel, axe, and hi-lift jack I found at the swap meet, made a huge difference.

Now here is the kicker to this project, after executing some patience and extreme bargain hunting, I was able to build and upgrade this rig for under \$3500.00 out of my pocket. This includes the cost for the truck! Spread that out over the year I took to get it done, it only cost me about \$290.00/month. Now let's put that into true perspective. The total cost of this project was less than the suspension upgrades to the new truck I was looking at on the lot, and the total payment for each month is half of what the new truck would have been for the next 60 months. Now that I am done, I have no payments and I own the truck 100%. Not a bad deal if you ask me.



In looking at the buy vs. build theory, I feel that the build, or re-build, option was the best choice here. A \$3500.00 price tag is much easier than \$40k to justify to your budget and spouse. I enjoyed working on this project, seeing my hard work and patience take an old worn out truck and turn it into a truck that I will be proud to drive in the mountains and the city for the next ten years. Who knows, maybe it will get passed to my son when he's old enough to drive.

Now as I walk out my front door and look into the driveway, I hear myself say it once again, "I can't wait to take my truck hunting!"

Lessons Learned:

1. If you're told it will take 2 weeks, expect it to take 4
2. Make sure that you have a solid block and heads to start with
3. Look for rust on the floor pans (under the truck)
4. Be prepared to be without your truck for several weeks as each part of the project is completed
5. If changing the exterior colors, match to your interior
6. Remove your front and rear lights before applying the vinyl, these will help keep the vinyl tucked tight to the body
7. Paint the door jams
8. After installing the fender flares, trim away the excess from inside the fender wells for complete tire clearance
9. Don't put the bigger tires on until you have at least 500 miles on the new engine, give it a chance to break in
10. Make sure that you upgrade your insurance, blue book value is a lot lower than what it is worth now, I went a head and added full coverage to my existing liability policy



Manufactures and Suppliers

Cylinder Heads Plus
Cotty Hayes
712 Valley St.
Colorado Springs, Co 80915
719-638-6556

Earl Scheib
Will Boyne
3250 E. Platte Ave
Colorado Springs, Co 80909
719 634-6448

Big Boyz Toyz
Greg Howson
3923 Maizeland Rd.
Colorado Springs, Co 80909
719-531-6069
www.big-boyztoyz.com

Backland® Outdoors
Mark & Scott
17128 240th Street
Hutchinson, MN 55350
320-234-6192
<http://www.backlandoutdoors.com>

Bauer Vehicle Gear
834 Striker Ave. Unit F
Sacramento, CA 95834
916-563-7340
<http://www.bauergear.com>

Outdoor Studios
5495 Galena Dr
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