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HANDS-ON | by OWEN MITCHELL

TOW DEFENDER

Roadmaster's safeguard against dinghy paint damage

Despite full-width mud flaps that hang behind the dual rear wheels of most motorhomes, the tires usually kick up enough stones, sand and debris to damage the paint, chrome and windshield of a dinghy vehicle — unless a defense is mounted.

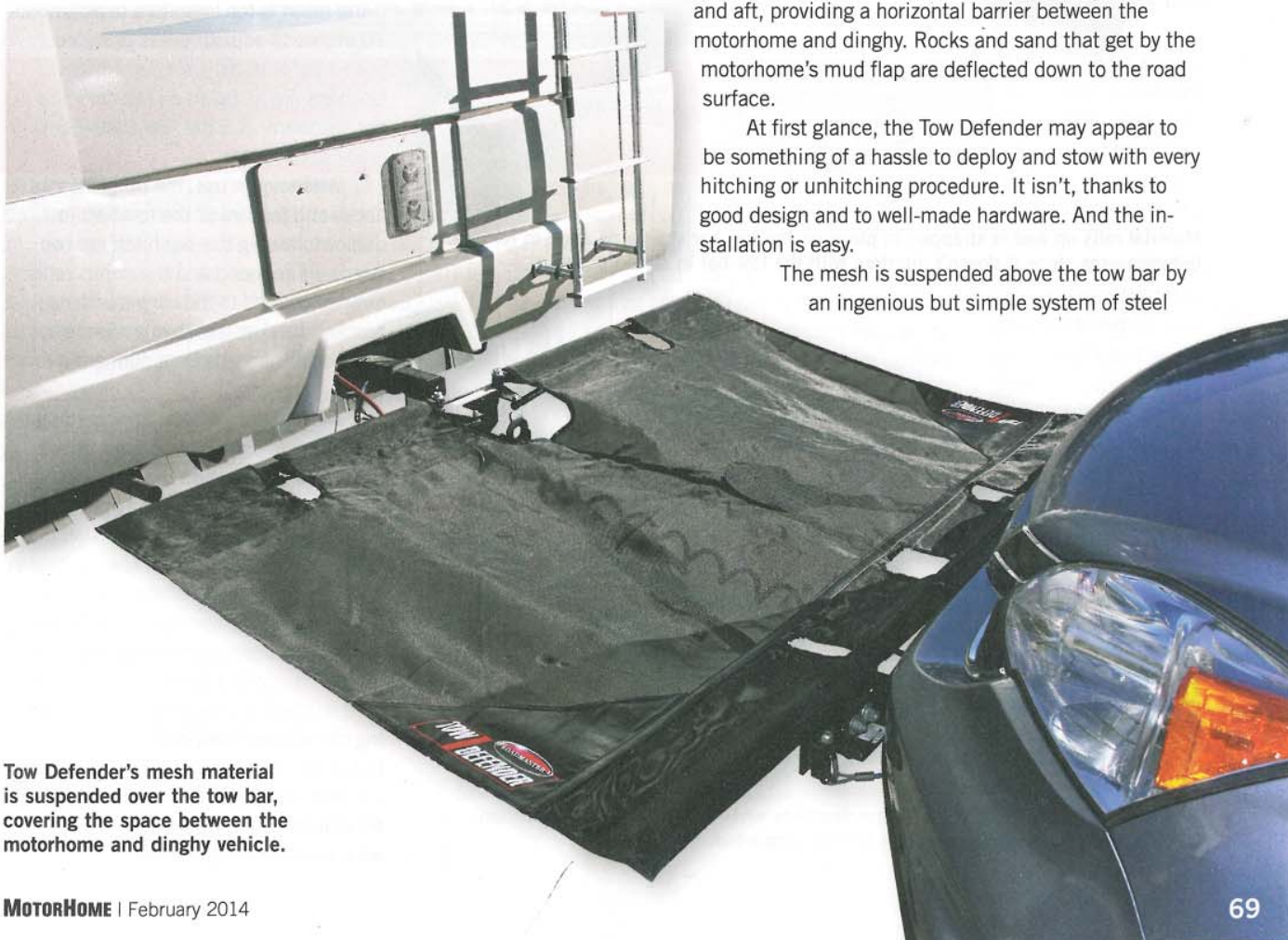
One such product is the Tow Defender by Roadmaster, which is designed to keep the rocks and debris where they belong — below the vehicle.



The Tow Defender is a large (72-by-50-inch) panel of vinyl-coated mesh that is secured by steel tubing fore and aft, providing a horizontal barrier between the motorhome and dinghy. Rocks and sand that get by the motorhome's mud flap are deflected down to the road surface.

At first glance, the Tow Defender may appear to be something of a hassle to deploy and stow with every hitching or unhitching procedure. It isn't, thanks to good design and to well-made hardware. And the installation is easy.

The mesh is suspended above the tow bar by an ingenious but simple system of steel



Tow Defender's mesh material is suspended over the tow bar, covering the space between the motorhome and dinghy vehicle.

TOW DEFENDER



Rolling out the mesh material takes less than a minute. The collar holds hardware to the tow bar shank; the other end is attached to the baseplate brackets.



Material rolls up and is strapped in place on the tow bar shank; no need to remove between uses since it doesn't interfere with the tow bar in stored position.



Tubes and struts fold the material for clearance when turning in either direction. Material pops back into place when turn is completed.

bars and struts. A collar is fitted on the tow bar shank (stinger) of the tow bar assembly, which in our case is a Roadmaster Sterling.

Attached to the collar are two pivoting steel tubes and two gas struts that form the moveable end of the Tow Defender. These tubes and struts allow the Tow Defender to compress at either forward corner when the motorhome is being steered sharply left or right.

At the aft (dinghy) end of the mesh is another steel tube; while towing, it's secured with steel clips to brackets that are latched to the tow-bar bracket assembly. The Tow Defender instructions and the parts list illustration offer perspective on how the components are arranged (<http://roadmasterinc.com/support/manuals.html>).

Installation involves removal of the tow bar from the hitch receiver so the Tow Defender collar — with its steel tubes and gas struts — can be slid onto the shank. The tow bar is reinstalled, and the mesh is fed onto the hardware. If the mesh is too long (fore to aft), about 10 inches of adjustment is provided, but longer is better (more coverage). Brackets are installed on the car's tow bar hardware, and the Tow Defender is ready to defend.

When not in use, the unit is stored above and forward of the tow bar. To deploy following tow-bar hitching, two straps are released and the unit is rolled out and clipped to the car's tow bar bracket. It takes less than a minute, and about the same time during the stowing process.

A couple of caveats: 1. According to the Roadmaster instructions, check the clearance between the Tow Defender and motorhome body during tight turns. If it's insufficient, a hitch extension may be needed. 2. Location of rear-venting exhausts (engine, generator) may be an issue for possible damage to the mesh.

Instructions are detailed and Roadmaster has done a fine job with quality on this product, including powder coating of the steel components. The Tow Defender can be found at RV parts retailers (and online) for \$399 plus shipping. **Roadmaster Inc., 800-669-9690, www.roadmasterinc.com** ♦