

PROJECT

TRAIL-CRUSHER CAMARO

The Vaterra Ascender goes from Bronco to bonkers with style mods, performance boosts, and a wild new look

BY KEVIN HETMANSKI



I'm a fan of the Ascender, and I wanted to give mine the project treatment, but I wanted to do something a little different. I've always been a fan of "car-body" rigs and have been looking to build one of my own for a while, so this was the perfect chance. I also wanted to improve performance, get a great scale look, and give my truck an appearance that you wouldn't see anywhere else. This build ticks off all those boxes, and I think it came out killer. Check it out.

Sweet '69 SS Shell

There are plenty of body options I could have chosen to get the car look I was going for, but the one that really caught my eye was the '69 Camaro RS that normally sits on Vattera's V100 on-road chassis. New body-post holes had to be made to get the body to fit, and I covered existing body-post holes along with the front-bumper holes with black vinyl to hide them once the paint job was finished. I went with something a little different in the paint department. I gave the underside a classic black paint job, then after pulling off the overspray film, I laid down some Parma flame masks before spraying some flat clear over the entire body. This gave me a cool flat hot-rod look with gloss black flames.



BEFORE
A stock 1972
Ford Bronco
Ascender.

Vattera's Camaro body looks killer, and the two-piece design allows the rear "sheet metal" to wrap under the bumper realistically.



RPM's blower looks good if you just sit it on the hood, but it looks great if you cut an opening for it and drop it down a few millimeters.

Super Swampin'

I wanted to increase grip on the trail, so I replaced the stock tires with a set of Pro-Line Super Swampers. I went with the standard 1.9-inch tires because they fit the proportions of the body better than the taller XL versions that Pro-Line offers. I'll lose a little ground clearance by going with smaller tires, but it's worth it to me for the look. The Swampers are molded in soft G8-compound rubber and include memory-foam inserts, which do a great job of letting the tires conform to various surfaces. The tires are mounted to RC4WD's Mickey Thompson Metal Series bead-lock wheels. The machined-aluminum wheels come four in a package and look just like the full-size rims they are modeled after. They fit the look of my truck perfectly, and the extra weight of the aluminum helps further lower the truck's center of gravity.



Pro-Line's Overland roof rack houses the 6-inch light bar perfectly. It's bright!



Aluminum hubs and hub carriers add strength and allow you to mount Vattera's optional brass weights.

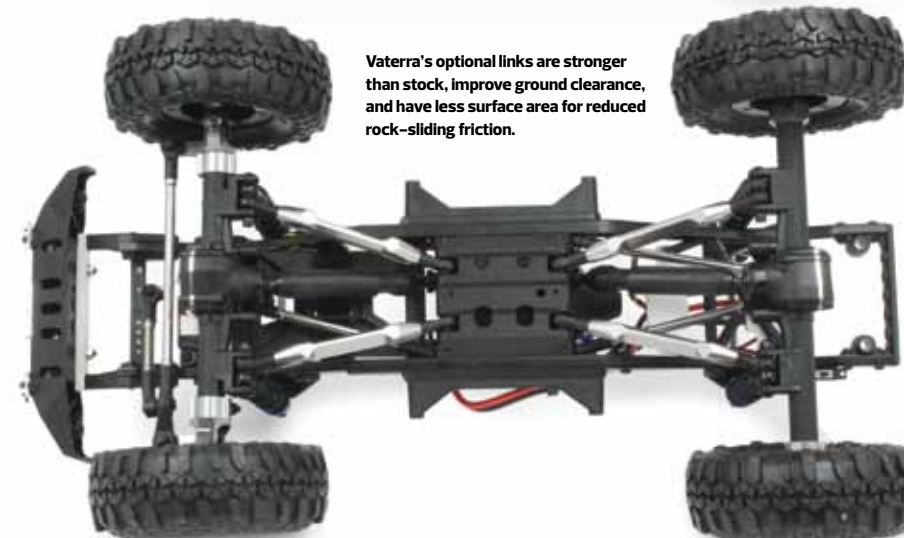


I replaced the Ascender's faux fuel cell with 3D-printed mounts for the receiver and speed control.

Drivetrain Beef

The ends of the axles undergo a lot of stress when put under extreme conditions, and for that reason, I decided to beef them up a little bit. Vattera offers aluminum hubs and hub carriers for the ends of the axles, which increase durability and help lower the truck's center of gravity thanks to the extra weight that they add. Want to add more ounces? Vattera offers brass weights designed to look like brake rotors and calipers. I originally planned to install these, but they interfered with the RC4WD wheels I chose.

To make the drivetrain totally bombproof, I also upgraded to a steel spur gear. Robinson Racing's spur gear and slipper pads for the Vattera Twin Hammers will bolt right on because the Ascender uses the same transmission.



Vattera's optional links are stronger than stock, improve ground clearance, and have less surface area for reduced rock-sliding friction.

Suspension Tune-Up

The Ascender has a capable suspension out of the box, but with a few factory option parts, you can make it even better. I started by removing the stock lower links and replacing them with Vattera's one-piece aluminum lower links. They are available in three lengths to suit different wheelbases (instead of using spacers for longer lengths, like the stock parts), and their "knife-edge" shape offers less surface area to hang up on rocks. The Ascender's plastic shocks are surprisingly smooth, but for a boost in appearance and durability, I installed Vattera's aluminum versions. The silver- and blue-anodized finishes look great against the black components used on the chassis, and just like the stock shocks, the aluminum upgrades have threaded bodies and a dual-cap design for easy seal access.



The aluminum hop-up shocks provide a smooth ride and look great doing it.

A steel spur gear and slipper assembly from Robinson Racing adds beef to the drivetrain and a wider range of adjustment on the slipper.

PARTS LIST

- Dynamite** / dynamiterc.com
 - Reaction 7.4V 2S 4000mAh 50C LiPo, Hardcase: 96mm-DVN8380DEC, \$50
- Hitec** / hitecrcd.com
 - HS-7954SH High Voltage, High Torque, Steel Gear, Coreless Premium Digital Servo-37954S, \$80
- Parma** / parmapse.com
 - Flames Design Paint Mask-10786, \$5
- Pro-Line** / prolineracing.com
 - Overland Scale Roof Rack-6278-00, \$28
 - 4-inch Super-Bright LED Light Bar Kit 6V-12V-6276-01, \$47
 - Ridge-Line Bumper-6088-00, \$34
 - Interco TSL SX Super Swamper 1.9-inch G8 Rock Terrain Truck Tires-1163-14, \$28
- RC4WD** / store.rc4wd.com
 - Mickey Thompson Metal Series 1.9-inch Bead-lock Wheels-Z-W0237, \$170
- RPM** / rpmrcproducts.com
 - Mock Intake and Blower Set-Chrome-73413, \$12
- Spektrum** / spektrumrc.com
 - X8R 6-Channel DSMR Smart Radio-SPM6400, \$500
- Tekin** / teamtekin.com
 - FX-R and T35 HD Brushed Motor-TT2109, \$140
- Vattera** / vatterarc.com
 - 1972 Ford Bronco Ascender-VTR03031, \$400
 - Adjustable Coil-over Shocks, Alum-VTR334017, \$38
 - Front Spindle Set, Alum-VTR334018, \$38
 - Front Carrier Set, Alum-VTR334019, \$38
 - Rear Hub Carrier, Alum-VTR334020, \$25
 - One Piece Lower Link, Alum, 66mm-VTR334022, \$25
 - 1969 Chevrolet Camaro RS Clear Body Set-VTR230005, \$38



Driving the Trail-Crusher Camaro

I brought the finished rig over to my favorite trail for its first drive and was instantly reminded just how smooth and precise the Tekin power system is. My Ascender had plenty of speed to keep up with me while walking down the easy sections of the trail and had ultra-fine crawling control when approaching rocks and other obstacles. I had driven the stock truck many times at the same location, and it was able to get up and over rocks—but not like the Camaro. With the soft Pro-Line rubber digging in and weighty wheels helping press the tread against the rocks, there was no wheelspin—just lots of grab. The Pro-Line Super Swampers conformed well to the rocks' surfaces, and they pulled the truck along nicely. As expected, the smaller-diameter tires (compared to stock) allowed the axle housings to clip the rocks more often than taller tires would, but the Ascender's low-profile pumpkins slid over easily. Despite the relatively large Camaro body and the extra weight of the accessories I added to it, the project Ascender still felt less tipsy than the stock truck did with its large and weighty Bronco body. The slimmer Camaro body also shined in tight sections on the trail; its narrow shape let it more easily slip between sticks, rocks, and other obstacles that caught the stock body. After sundown, I went for a cruise around the yard to try out the Pro-Line light bar, and it proved impressively functional. It throws a broad pool of cool-white light in front of the truck, and you really can trail-run at night by the glow of the light bar.



There's no such thing as too much steering torque on the trail. Hitec's HS-7954SH servo puts out 400 oz.-in. of twist and features a finned case for improved cooling and metal gears for durability.

Smooth Operator

I finished off the project with my favorite power system for trail work: Tekin's FX-R speed control and T35 Heavy Duty brushed motor. I reviewed this setup back in the May 2015 issue, and it's a powerful and versatile combo. The FX-R's Quick-Tune programming system is easy to use, but I went with Tekin's optional HotWire system to enable programming via a computer—very handy.

The T35 motor is full rebuildable and is not some off-the-shelf motor with a Tekin decal; it's got a larger commutator, lay-down brushes, and a precision-balanced armature, which make its performance much better than the motor that came with the truck. For super-precise throttle feel and gravity-defying torque, this is the power system you need.

Tekin's FX-R speed control and T35 brushed motor give my truck plenty of torque and smooth control.



Final Word

I'm very happy with how my project "Trail-Crusher Camaro" Vattera Ascender turned out. I can't say enough about the awesome Mad Max look that it has. With time on the trail and the scratches it will see, the look will only get better. I feel that the Ascender is one of the most capable trail trucks out of the box, and I have had plenty of fun with the stock RTR version. The changes that I made make it feel and drive like an entirely new truck, and it easily outperforms its stock cousins with smooth control, powerful steering, and dialed suspension. It is a lot of fun to drive. 🚗