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Sharing Oversize Safety

Sharing the Australian highways with very big loads is part of the adventure of travel.







The fastest, cheapest caravan conversion to pop-top is to ignore pilot vehicles.

Failing to see the pilots and the very large vehicles they are escorting could also convert your vehicle to a convertible.

These **“pilot vehicles”** travel our highways with a large yellow sign on the roof, accompanied by two yellow, rotating beacons. You can’t miss them.

Experience demonstrates some motorists do miss them, completely. Which is rather fortunate when you consider the consequences,

What are they thinking about while they’re driving? Could it be, “Are we there yet?”

Or they could be thinking about the next destination, the road conditions, how the towing vehicle is travelling. In many circumstances it seems they aren't concentrating on the job in hand – driving.

The vehicles with the bright yellow sign and bright lights on the roof warn motorists of the approach of an oversize load, not road works. Most oversize moves occur during daylight hours, between sunrise and sundown. Only extremely large oversize movements may happen at night to avoid disturbing heavier day time traffic. These moves are well lit and are accompanied by a convoy of support vehicles, including Police escorts.

The truck driver and escorts communicate on UHF Radio, channel forty. These vehicles can be travelling very slowly from sixty kilometres hour to one hundred kilometres an hour, depending on size and weight, and state laws of course.

Anything wider than two and a half metres is **oversize**, and the truck carrying this load will be flashing you with bright yellow, rotating beacons. If you are approaching the rear of such vehicle, you may see a bright yellow beacon, also warning you the load is wider than normal.

If the load is being escorted by one pilot, it's wider than three and a half metres. If the load is preceded by more than two pilots and a Police Traffic Escort, the load is huge and you will have to pull over in a safe place off the road.

The first pilot vehicle you see may also have alternating flashing drive lights known as "wig-wags". This indicates the load is more than four and a half metres wide.

Then there's the rear pilot. It's this driver's job to warn vehicles approaching from the rear of the presence of something big sharing the highway ahead.

Sharing is the key to your survival. Ignore these warnings at your own risk. Arrogance and challenging these vehicles could cost your life.

No one is too sophisticated to travel without UHF radio when motoring the hi-ways and bi-ways of Australia. It could save your life, or at the very least, your caravan or motorhome. A few stone chips are the least of your worries if you fail to give way to oversize vehicles.

If you do have a two-way radio, use it to scan or monitor channel 40. Staying on channel eighteen or twenty will not save your life. It's recommended drivers use channel 40 as the "call channel", and move to other channels for a chat.

You will hear some very strange language, but in most cases it is English – the truck driver's muttered version. There will be strategic information which you can use to your advantage to make your travels safer. Most of the time the radio language is purely and simply information about road and traffic conditions without the expletives. There is a very short window of chat opportunity when passing in opposite directions.

Some examples of terminology are, "Southbound oversize is 4.5 metres. You may need to back off and make some room."

Another example, "Copy in the caravan? We have six metres. Please find a safe place to pull over."

In some states, particularly in Western Australia, oversize vehicles can travel in convoy. So the call from the Pilot may be, "Copy southbound? We have two at four and a half metres."

In most circumstances the pilot or truck driver will instruct you how to safely negotiate the wide load from either direction with safe negotiation as the priority.

One of the most frustrating experiences for an oversize team is to follow a caravan which isn't fitted with extension towing mirrors or a two-way radio. Rear-view cameras are not good enough to provide adequate range of vision to the rear.

The fact the driver isn't using mirrors becomes apparent very quickly - the erratic driving, hugging the centre line, and not making any effort to allow the convoy to pass, is a definite indication of ignorance, and arrogance.

It is in the motorist's best interest to communicate with the pilot and truck driver. It's a simple matter of calling up on channel 40. Don't use the radio to abuse them. They have a job to do, and they do everything in their power to keep everyone in the vicinity of the load as safe as possible. Your co-operation will make their job much easier. If they don't see any indication you're waiting to overtake, you may stay behind the convoy for more kilometres than you had planned.

Sit back and enjoy the scenery. If all else fails, pull over in a shady spot, brew a cuppa, and reconsider your behaviour in the vicinity of oversize loads.

Safe and happy travels.

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