RECREATION TO GO

By Kevin Livingston

Reprinted from TRAILER LIFE MAGAZINE, MARCH 2017

Carrying a kayak, canoe or other big items while towing a fifth-wheel is now possible with a Bolt-on apparatus from U.S. Rack

It is pretty much inevitable that at some point RV Owners will wish for more storage space and end up looking for alternatives outside the normal compartments in the trailer and cubbyholes in the tow vehicle. It's not uncommon to see storage devices begin to migrate outside the trailer, as indoor stow-away spots diminish---think racks and boxes that are hung on the ladder, bumper or in a hitch receiver mounted to the frame. This is especially true when wanting to take along kayaks, canoes, crates or coolers and much of the truck's bed space is occupied by a fifth-wheel hitch.

At times like this, thoughts of a roof rack come to mind, but obviously, the top of the trailer is simply too tall and difficult to access. Racks can be remounted on the truck, but because the bed must be free to facilitate turning a fifth-wheel, there are size and configuration limitations. For those who want to carry a portable boat or other big outdoor gear, an impressive fifth-wheel-friendly solution is offered by U.S. Rack, a company known for its specialty racks for trucks.

U. S. Rack's appropriately titled Fifth-Wheel Heavy-Duty Truck Rack is a well-engineered bed-mounted rack that takes advantage of the space above the cab. The steel rack is black powder-coated for a clean appearance and can hold 200 pounds of gear while keeping the bed free for the hitch and the front portion of the fifth-wheel trailer. The rack is U.S. Made, and the fit and finish show no shortcuts.

By the number of parts in the kit and the large size of the rack, it was hard to believe the whole thing could be quickly and easily bolted into position without drilling holes or using special tools. After assembling a small selection of hand tools consisting of a 3/8-inch ratchet, a
7/32-inch Allen socket (preferred if available) and ¾-inch and 9/16-inch sockets or ratcheting wrenches, it was time to bolt the rack together. An Allen wrench is included with the kit, but the job will be much simpler with a socket.

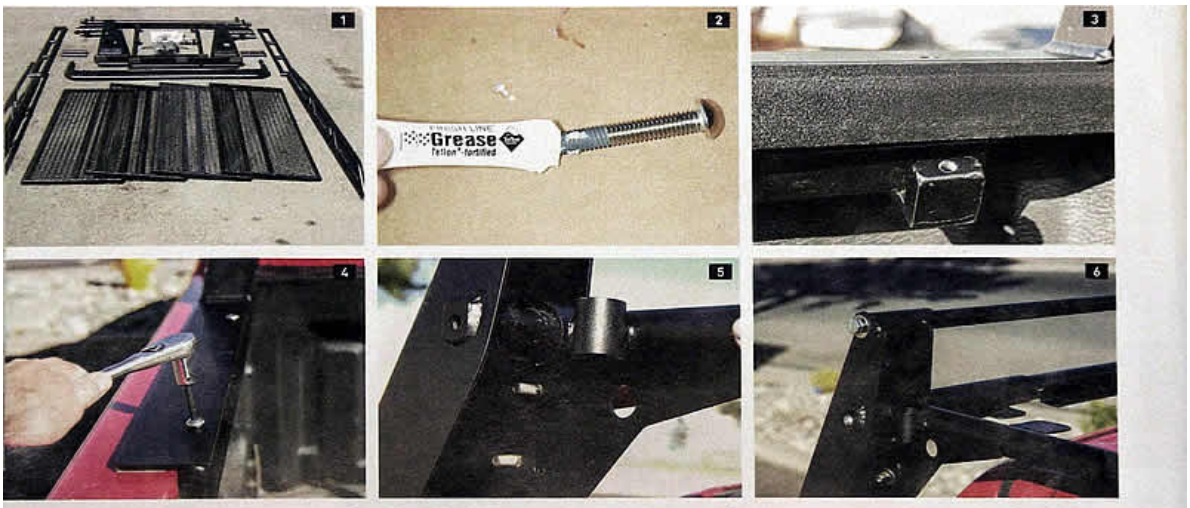
After completing the parts inventory, Teflon grease was applied to the beginning threads of each bolt needed for the assembly, as depicted in the instructions. The grease is included in the bags of high-end stainless=steel hardware, along with clear silicone for the final stage.

The main support components, the leg frames, are a base and stanchion in a mirrored pair. The leg frames ride on the clamp rails, which are mounted under the truck's bed rails and are much easier to position with a helper. The clamp rails are also a mirrored set, but the tail section points to the rear, so it's hard to install these in the wrong place. Once the proper positioning is verified, the left and right leg frames can be attached to their respective clamp rails via the 3/8 by 1 ¾-inch button-head bolts and matching stainless washers.

With the first major step out of the way, the rear crossbar can be temporarily installed using two metal washers and two of the nylon lock nuts, securing them only finger-tight at first. The next step involves positioning the side rails, which sit immediately over the cab. If your truck has four doors, like the Ram 2500 used for the install, it's likely your kit will include two cab cushions. Not only do I highly recommend using the cushions to protect the roof of the cab when the rack is loaded, but it's best to install them at the time the side rails are mounted, circumventing any difficulty with mounting later in the project.

With the side rails in their new homes, they can be locked into position using two more of the 3/8- by 1 ¾-inch bolts with black nylon washers and two ½- by 1/3/4-inch bolts up top. Make sure to tighten the lower bolts first, since the larger top bolts need to be adjusted against them, essentially setting preload by raising or lowering the front of the rail. With both side rails secured, the front crossbar (with a spoiler, in this case) can be installed and snugged down with the two 3/8-by 1-inch button-head bolts and a couple more nylon washers. Remember those finger-tight nuts holding the rear crossbar? They need to removed so the steel-mesh deck panels can be slid into their respective spots. The three mesh panels are part of the 2010-4ADCD kit but are optional with other kits. Once the deck panels are in place, the rear crossbar can be installed for the final time, using all six nuts and washers. This completes the structure, which will hold the deck panels securely in place and prevent movement

The only components remaining to complete the install are the dual crossbars and the associated quick-change retaining posts. For this step, the retaining posts are simply dropped through the looped ends of the front and rear crossbars, followed by the locking pins. The dual crossbars are constructed using a round and rectangle steel tube which makes them interchangeable for use with Yakima and Thule rack components by simply flipping them over. Also, the front crossbar may have the aforementioned spoiler, which makes it suitable for use on extended and four-door truck cabs.



1] The U.S. Rack Fifth-Wheel Heavy-Duty Truck Rack kit comes with all the components for assembly on a pickup truck. The 2010-4ADCD kit includes three deck panels, which are optional with other kits. The rack is designed for Ram, GM and Ford pickups with conventional fleet-side bed rails. 2] Before the assembly, all bolt threads are coated with the provided Teflon-fortified grease. This prevents seizing when disassembling. 3] Clamp rails in a mirrored pair are attached to the bed rails without the need to drill holes. These are the base for the rack, and they can be installed only one way. 4] Leg frames, also in a mirrored set, are bolted to the clamp rails on both sides. It's best to have a helper hold the pieces when bolting them together. 5] The rear crossbar is positioned on the leg frames. If deck panels are used, the bolts are secured only finger-tight at first, because the rear crossbar will need to be removed to facilitate the installation. 6] Once the rear crossbar is in place, the side rails can be bolted to the leg frames. Precision fabrication makes it easy to assemble the pieces without having to elongate holes or bend the rails.

7) The bolts have Allen heads, and the company provides a wrench that can be used to tighten them. We preferred to use a ratchet wrench and an Allen socket, which made the job easier and faster. 8) After removing the rear crossbar, the three deck panels are put in position and are locked in place when the crossbar nuts and bolts are tightened. Torque specs are not provided, so the installer needs to use good judgment when tightening the bolts.

Running a small bead of silicone around the slip joints used for connecting the tubing completes the job. This prevents water from entering the tubing and causing rust, which could impact later removal and reinstallation.

Although the rack with the deck has a $1,300 MSRP, it becomes an invaluable tool for those who want to carry a canoe or kayak. For years, friends have stuffed their kayaks inside the fifth-wheel, where it managed to damage the dinette structure and the surrounding furniture. The rack's cost can easily be amortized by preventing inevitable damage, and let's not forget the convenience factor.

Aside from its many uses out of the box, the rack can be equipped with a variety of add-ons, including loading and tie-down systems for kayaks and canoes. The Fifth-Wheel Heavy-Duty Truck Rack does not interfere with bed space or visibility, but it does add weight to the truck, especially with two kayaks onboard. The simplicity of the rack's design and installation is its biggest selling point. Its utilitarian nature makes it practical when there's just not enough space to carry all those essential outdoor-recreation items.

9) Retaining posts are put through the dual rear crossbar, which is aligned with the short vertical tubes on the front and rear crossbars. Another option (inset photo) is to first align the short tubes of the front and rear crossbars and drop the posts into both. 10) The rack fits close to the rear of the cab but may create a problem when turning with a shortbed truck, in which case an automatic sliding hitch should be used. 11) With deck panels in place, the rack extends past the front of the cab and provides space for items without inhibiting the area behind the cab. A front crossbar with a spoiler is used here to accommodate the four-door cab. 12) Cushions are bolted to the side rails to protect the truck cab when the rack is heavily loaded. We found it easier to install these at the time the side rails were bolted in place. 13) Silicone, provided with the kit, is applied around the slip joints to seal gaps between the connected rack pieces. This prevents water intrusion, which can lead to rust and difficulty removing the pieces when desired. 14) A kayak mounts easily on the rack. In this case the front dual crossbar was removed, and the kayak's flat bottom was placed on the deck panels and strapped down. Kits for carrying canoes and kayaks are available from U.S. Rack, and the front and rear dual crossbars are designed to accept cradles and straps from Yakima and Thule.