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Letter from the Editor:



THIS WEEK MY VILLAGE SUFFERED A HORRIBLE TRAGEDY when an Amish buggy, carrying two young children to school, was hit by a reckless driver. An eight year-old was killed and her twelve year-old brother was badly injured. These two kids passed by our house each day on their way back and forth from school. They always offered a friendly wave to everyone, even that fateful morning a few days ago.

The accident has rocked the Amish community, not just here, but across the country. Our village of 1000 people is expecting over 800 Amish from around the country to attend the funeral today, March 29.

While our village is grappling with this horrific accident, I'm starting to see a glimmer of hope and of compassion for people that are ideologically different and that we don't know. Our community Facebook page, in a matter of less than 24 hours did a complete 180° turn, from people reporting stray dogs, or complaining about unchaperoned kids at the park, or music blaring, or wondering when the local restaurant will be open, to rallying around a family that most of us don't know.

You see, 800 Amish people from around the country can't make it to Michigan with 3 days notice without help. As I write this, some of the local Amish people have started to come by our house in their buggies on their way to the funeral. But others are relying on drivers to pick them up from bus and train stations in Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, and Illinois. By Thursday night, a mere 36 hours after the accident, our village had amassed enough drivers to help with their transportation needs. Food has been delivered to them for meals these last few days. And we've rallied to provide them with all of the food that they requested for the post funeral meal for the expected 800+ people. There's been an outpouring of support for this family that most people don't know, nor will ever know. (Over 1000 Amish actually attended the funeral.)

This gives me hope. This gives me hope that despite our differences we can still have empathy and compassion for others. **This gives me hope** that we can stop beating down others, but instead lift them up. **THIS GIVES ME HOPE** that we can show up and stand up for people we don't know.

Safe travels and happy camping! ■

Live Tiny. Live Free.

Lisa Adams

Editor

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Installing a DC-DC Charger

How I installed our Victron Orion XS Charger **BY LISA ADAMS**

KEEPING YOUR CAMPER'S BATTERY CHARGED while on the move is a game-changer for off-grid trips. In August 2024, I installed a Victron Orion XS 12/12-50A DC-DC battery charger in my tiny camper, using my Jeep Gladiator's alternator to charge the camper's lithium battery while driving. This article walks through that installation in a step-by-step, DIY-friendly way. We'll cover everything from mounting the charger in a metal battery box, running heavy-gauge wiring with proper fuses/breakers, adding a quick-disconnect between the Jeep and camper, and configuring the charger using Victron's app. If you have a teardrop,

squaredrop, or any tiny camper, these instructions and tips will help you tackle a similar project with confidence.

Why a DC - DC Charger?

A DC-DC charger (also called a battery-to-battery charger) ensures your camper's house battery gets a proper, multi-stage charge from your vehicle's electrical system. Unlike a simple isolator or direct 7-pin connection, a DC-DC charger boosts and regulates the voltage, crucial for efficiently charging lithium batteries. The Victron Orion XS 12/12-50A (50 amp) model is ideal for charging a 12V house

battery from a 12V vehicle system – it can deliver up to 50A (700W) of charge current and is compatible with smart alternators and lithium batteries. This means even if your Jeep Gladiator has variable alternator voltages, the Orion will adapt and charge properly. I chose the Victron Orion XS because of its rugged design (IP65 water-resistant), Bluetooth programmability, and Victron’s solid reputation in off-grid power gear.

Project Overview: The charger was mounted

in the camper’s metal battery box, with cables running from the Jeep’s battery to the camper through a quick-disconnect plug at the hitch. We used thick 6 AWG marine-grade wire for both the input (vehicle-to-charger) and output (charger-to-battery) sides to handle the 50A current with minimal voltage drop. To protect the wiring, 60A circuit breakers were installed at both the Jeep battery end and the camper battery end, acting as fuses and shutoff switches. All cable connections were made with heavy-duty tinned copper lugs, crimped using a hydraulic crimper for reliability. Once the hardware was in place, we configured the Orion via the VictronConnect app, initially using the preset for lithium batteries and the automatic engine detection feature. Later, we fine-tuned the voltage thresholds in the app to maximize charging time, given the Gladiator’s alternator behavior.

Below, I’ll detail each step of the installation, the tools and parts used, and share tips and lessons learned along the way. This should help you plan your own DC-DC charger install for a small camper or trailer. Let’s get started!

Tools and Materials

Before diving into the install, make sure you have all required components and tools on



hand. The table on the right is a summary of the major parts and tools I used, along with their purpose and where you might source them. Having these ready will save a lot of headaches. With the gear assembled, let's move on the installation steps.

Part/Tool	Description/Use	Source
Victron Orion XS 12/12-50A DC - DC Charger	12V-to-12V DC-DC battery charger (50A output). Charges the camper's battery from the vehicle's alternator, supports smart alternators and lithium batteries	Click link to purchase on Amazon
Blue Sea Systems 7184 60A Circuit Breaker (285-Series, surface mount)	60 amp DC circuit breaker (thermal trip, manual reset). Placed at both batteries to protect wiring (acts like a 60A fuse). Trip-free and ignition protected (safe for engine bay use).	Click link to purchase on Amazon
Orion Motor Tech 50A Quick Disconnect Harness Kit	50A two-pole quick connector (Anderson-style plug) for 6-12 AWG wires. Allows easy disconnect of the power cable between Jeep and trailer. Mounted to Jeep with an L-bracket for easy plug/unplug. Comes with connector pairs, terminals, and dust covers.	Click link to purchase on Amazon
6 AWG Marine-Grade Wire (Tinned Copper)	Heavy-gauge flexible cable for 12V DC wiring. Used for both the positive feed and ground return between Jeep and camper, and for connections inside the battery box. Fine-stranded, tinned copper resists corrosion and ensures low resistance	Click link to purchase on Amazon
Wirefy Tinned Copper Lug Kit(assorted sizes)	Copper ring terminals (lugs) with tin plating for corrosion resistance. Used to crimp on cable ends for secure connections to battery posts, circuit breaker studs, and the quick-connect terminals. Chosen sizes to fit 6 AWG wire and 1/4" studs.	Click link to purchase on Amazon
Hydraulic Crimping Tool (Hydraulic Lug Crimper)	Heavy-duty crimper (8-ton hydraulic type) for crimping large gauge lugs onto cables. Ensures a solid, low-resistance crimp joint on 6 AWG cables (far better than trying to solder or use pliers).	Harbor Freight
Large Cable Shear/ Crimping Tool	Specialized cutter for heavy gauge wire. Provides clean cuts on 6 AWG cable without squashing strands, making it easier to insert into lugs. Set includes a non-hydraulic crimper used for most connections.	Click link to purchase on Amazon
Rubber Grommets(assorted sizes)	Used to line the holes drilled in the metal battery box. Protects cables from chafing on sharp metal edges. Choose grommet size to fit the 6 AWG cable outer diameter.	Local hardware store
Zip Ties	Nylon zip ties for securing cables along the vehicle frame and trailer. Optional split loom tubing to further protect cables, especially under the vehicle.	Local hardware store
Metal L-Bracket (for connector)	A sturdy L-bracket used to mount the quick-disconnect plug to the Jeep's hitch or bumper. Keeps the connector secure and accessible. Many quick-connect kits include a bracket or one can be easily fabricated.	Had extra brackets that are normally used for attaching an awning to a roof rack

Part/Tool	Description/Use	Source
Drill & Step Drill Bits	Power drill and step bit (unibit) for drilling clean holes in the metal battery box for cable pass-throughs. Step bits make it easy to create large-diameter holes for grommets.	Local hardware store
Basic Hand Tools	Wrenches and sockets (for battery terminals, breaker nuts, bracket bolts), screwdrivers (for Victron terminals), wire stripper (for 6 AWG), measuring tape, etc. Plus safety gear (eye protection when drilling).	Local hardware store

Planning the Installation and Mounting the Charger

Every good DIY project starts with a bit of planning. I began by reviewing Victron's official installation manual for the Orion XS to understand the wiring requirements and safety recommendations. According to the guide, the Orion should be mounted close to the battery it's charging, on a solid surface, and oriented vertically with the terminals facing down for optimal cooling. In my camper, the house battery (a 100Ah LiFePO4) sits inside a steel battery box on the trailer tongue. I decided to mount the Orion charger inside that same battery box, both to protect it from the elements and to keep the cable runs short. Mounting it near the battery helps minimize voltage drop, which is important for high current charging. I was not able to mount it vertically as recommended.

Using the Orion's mounting flange as a template, I drilled pilot holes and then fastened the charger with self-tapping metal screws (bolts with nuts and lock washers

would work too, if accessible from both sides). The Orion XS is relatively compact, so it fits well on the bottom of the box, with enough clearance around it. I ensured there was a few



inches of space above and below as Victron recommends some air gap for cooling.

One important consideration when mounting inside a metal box is cable routing. I needed to get the input and output cables into the box. That meant drilling holes in the battery box for the cables to pass through. I ended up drilling two 3/4" holes in the side of the battery box (one for the incoming cable from the Jeep, one for the ground cable, since I

chose to route a full negative cable as well). A stepped drill bit made it easy to enlarge the holes to the right size. After drilling, I installed rubber grommets in each hole to protect the cable insulation. This is crucial – the grommets act like a buffer so that the sharp metal edges won't rub through the cable over time. The rubber grommets I used are 7/8" outer diameter, 3/4" inner, which fit snugly in the holes and around the 6 AWG cable jacket.

While planning the layout, I also chose locations for the 60A breakers on both ends. These breakers serve as high-amp fuses and can be manually tripped to cut power. They are ignition protected for safe use under the hood. On the trailer side, I mounted the Blue Sea 7184 breaker on the interior of the battery box, just a few inches from the battery. (Space was extremely tight with the battery and charger in there.) On the Jeep side, I planned to mount the identical 60A breaker close to the vehicle battery, using a L bracket secured to the firewall of the engine bay. I used the existing fastener to do this. The rule of thumb is to place your fuse or breaker as close to the power source as possible – in this case, within about 12" of the battery positive terminal – to protect the entire length of the cable. The Victron manual called for a 60–70A fuse on the input cable, so a 60A breaker fit the bill. These Blue Sea breakers have M6 studs (about 1/4") for cable lugs, so make sure your lug ring terminals match that size.

By the end of the planning phase, the game plan was: Orion charger mounted inside battery box, holes with grommets ready for cables, breaker in trailer box near battery, breaker on Jeep near its battery, and a quick-disconnect in between. With mounting sorted, it was time to run the wiring.

Wiring the Jeep (Tow Vehicle) Side

The next step was to wire from the Jeep Gladiator's battery back to the trailer hitch area, where the quick-disconnect plug would join the two vehicles. This is the "input" side feeding the charger. Using 6 AWG marine tinned wire for both the positive and negative runs, I measured out a length that could go from the Jeep's engine bay to the rear bumper area following the frame. I initially used 20 feet of wire, then cut to length in the rear. But, roughly 15 feet was sufficient to reach from the battery, down along the frame, to the hitch. The choice of 6 AWG was based on the current (50A) and the round-trip distance – Victron's guide recommended 6 AWG for cable runs up to about 5 meters (≈16 feet) at 50A. The fine-stranded marine cable not only can handle the amperage with minimal voltage drop, but its flexibility made routing easier in the vehicle's undercarriage.

Connecting at the Jeep battery: I installed a ring lug on one end of the 6 AWG positive cable to attach to the Jeep's battery positive terminal. Before crimping the lug, I slid a piece of heat-shrink tubing on the cable (to seal the connection later) and then used the hydraulic crimper to compress the lug onto the stripped wire end. A quick tug test verified the lug was securely crimped. I then attached this lug to the stud of the 60A circuit breaker mounted near the Jeep's battery. A short 6 AWG jumper (just a few inches long) was used from the other stud of the breaker to the battery's positive post clamp. Essentially, the breaker is inserted in-line on the positive lead. Using the breaker's manual switch, I left it in the

“off” (open) position for now, to avoid any live voltage on the long cable until everything was finished.



For the negative side, I ran a matching 6 AWG negative cable from the camper side back up to the Jeep’s battery as well. Some might choose to ground the trailer’s negative to the vehicle frame, but I wanted a robust ground return through the connector. So I connected the negative cable lug to the Jeep’s battery negative terminal (or you can use a ground bolt on the frame, as the Gladiator’s battery negative is grounded to chassis anyway). In either case, ensure the ground connection is solid and metal-to-metal; remove any paint or coating if using a chassis ground.

Routing the cable: With the cables attached in the engine bay (but not yet “hot” due to the breaker being off), I routed them along the Gladiator’s frame towards the rear. I followed an existing wiring loom where possible (like the route of the taillight/7-pin trailer wiring harness) and secured the 6 AWG cables with zip ties every foot or so. It’s important to keep

the cables away from moving parts (steering, driveshaft) and heat sources (exhaust). The Gladiator has a pretty neat frame with holes and other lines to tag alongside. I found that by following the brake lines part of the way and then the factory trailer wiring, I could get to the rear bumper area cleanly.

At the back of the Jeep, I chose a spot to mount the quick disconnect plug. I used an Orion Motor Tech 50A connector, which is essentially a two-pole Anderson SB50 style connector. These connectors are genderless and plug into each other; one half would be on the Jeep cable end, the other half on the trailer cable end. I had a leftover L-shaped metal bracket which I used to surface-mount the connector to the underside of the rear bumper (right near the hitch receiver). I didn’t have to drill any holes in the Jeep to attach the bracket, which was ideal, and the red connector half sits securely. I stopped checking to make sure this bracket was tight a few months ago since it’s been snug since the install nearly seven months ago. The



placement of the connector makes it easy to plug in the trailer's harness when hitching up, and unplug when disconnecting – much like plugging in a big electrical connector. The connector also had a tethered rubber cap to keep dirt out when not in use, which is handy for an exposed location.

Wiring the quick disconnect was straightforward: I crimped the provided terminals onto the 6 AWG positive and negative cables coming from the front, and inserted those terminals into the Jeep's half of the connector (one into the + slot, one into the – slot, according to the connector's markings). The Orion Motor Tech kit's terminals are silver plated copper and rated for 50A, which matched our needs. A good crimp with the hydraulic tool ensured they won't heat up or pull out. This was my first time using this tool and it's necessary for this work. Once crimped and snapped into the connector housing, I tugged on each wire to confirm it was locked in. The result: a nice mounted plug at the back of the Jeep, with a heavy-gauge positive and negative running up to the engine bay, protected by a 60A breaker at the battery.

Before moving on, I double-checked the Jeep side wiring: Battery -> breaker -> (through 6 AWG cable) -> quick plug -> back through 6 AWG -> charge controller -> breaker -> camper battery. The Jeep side half was now in place. I kept the breaker off, so effectively no power was at the rear plug yet. Now onto the camper side wiring.

Wiring the Camper Side (Battery Box and Trailer)

On the trailer side, the wiring goes from the quick-disconnect plug (at the trailer tongue) to the Victron charger's input, then from the charger's output to the camper battery. I tackled the trailer side in a similar way to the Jeep:

Quick-disconnect at trailer tongue: The matching half of the Anderson 50A connector extends beyond the trailer tongue, so it can reach the Jeep's plug when hitched. The key is to allow a bit of slack and flexibility in the cable so it's not under tension when turning. I have about an extra 2-3 feet that I keep from hanging on the ground when driving.

I then ran 6 AWG positive and negative cables from this trailer plug into the battery box. These passed through the rubber-grommeted holes I prepared earlier in the metal box floor. The breaker on the trailer side serves the same protective purpose: if there's an overload or short towards the charger or battery, it will trip and cut power, and it also allows me to disconnect the charger during setup. The negative cable from the trailer plug I routed directly to the battery's negative. The Orion's negative input and the battery negative must share a common ground for the system to



complete the circuit (since I'm using the non-isolated Orion, which uses a common ground). In practice, I connected the negative from the plug, the Orion's negative input on the battery's negative post.

Connecting the Victron Orion: The Orion XS has a removable two-piece terminal block at the bottom labeled IN, GND, OUT. I loosened the screws and inserted the stripped 6 AWG wires. The wire from the Anderson plug connected to the IN+. From the Orion's OUT+, I ran a short 6 AWG cable to the positive terminal of the trailer-side 60A breaker. Essentially, the output of the charger goes to the breaker, and from breaker to battery via a short cable with crimped lugs. Some may choose to not fuse the output if the input is already protected, but I followed the manual suggestion of fusing both ends for maximum safety. The battery connection was straightforward. I just added the DC-DC charger's output via the breaker onto the battery post and a heavy jumper for the negatives at GND (or you can run the negative directly from battery to the GND terminal). The Victron's terminals can accept up to 4 AWG wire, so 6 AWG fits comfortably. I tightened the terminal screws to the specified torque (Victron even lists torque values for each gauge – essentially very tight, but without stripping). It's important these connections are solid, as a loose screw on a high-current terminal can lead to heat. Once secured, I slid the rubber cover over the terminal block.

At this point, the physical wiring was mostly done: The Jeep's breaker was off, the trailer's breaker was off, the connectors were mated (when hooked up), and all cables landed where they should. I went over each

connection to verify correct polarity and tightness. **Pro tip:** Label your cables or use red/black heat shrink to identify them – it helps avoid any mix-ups, especially since both cables are the same gauge and could be confused. I didn't do this, but will add either red heat shrink (or red tape) on the ends of the positive cables and I left the negative with black insulation only.

Now, one lesson I learned from others: Do not rely on a small factory trailer wiring feed for this job. Some vehicles provide an aux 12V pin in the 7-pin trailer socket, but those are usually limited to 30A or less and use thinner wire. In fact, a fellow Gladiator owner had attempted to use the 7-pin for a DC charger and saw the alternator voltage drop to 9V when the charger kicked in (because the wiring couldn't handle it). That's why running dedicated 6 AWG wiring like we did is essential for a 50A charger – it ensures stable voltage and avoids overloading factory circuits.

With wiring complete, I double-checked that both breakers (Jeep and trailer) were still in the off/open position. Then I reconnected the Jeep's battery (I had disconnected the negative while working, as a safety precaution). Now it was time to power up and configure the charger.

Initial Configuration of the Victron Orion XS

With everything wired, I flipped on the circuit breakers to connect the system: first the one at the Jeep battery, then the one at the trailer battery. The Victron Orion XS came to life, indicated by its LEDs. By default, Victron DC-

DC chargers won't start charging until they detect the engine is running (to avoid draining the starter battery). The Orion XS has engine shutdown detection built-in, which looks at the input voltage to decide if the alternator is on. However, before testing that, I wanted to configure the charger for my battery type using the VictronConnect app .

The Orion XS includes Bluetooth connectivity, so you can pair it with Victron's smartphone app. I opened the app on my phone and found the Orion XS in the device list. Connecting to it, I went into the settings. Since my camper uses a lithium iron phosphate (LiFePO4) battery, I selected the Battery Preset: "Victron Lithium (LiFePO4). This preset sets the appropriate charging profile (e.g. bulk up to ~14.2V, then absorption, no float or low float for lithium, etc.), and also disables certain features like equalization that are not used for lithium. I confirmed the absorption voltage and float were in the ranges recommended by my battery's manufacturer. The app also lets you set the output current limit, but by default it was 50A which is what I wanted. I eventually lowered it to 30A on long drive days since that was enough to top off the battery.

Next, I checked the engine shutdown detection setting. Victron devices typically default to "Smart alternator mode" for engine detection, meaning they use a combination of voltage thresholds and timing to decide when to turn on/off. The Gladiator has a smart alternator that can vary output, so this feature is handy. I left it enabled for the initial test. (The Orion allows you to alternatively use a dedicated ignition wire or disable detection entirely for "always on" operation, but you must be careful doing that as it could drain the vehicle battery if the engine is off .)

I set the Orion to Charger Mode (vs. power supply mode) which is the normal setting for charging a second battery. In charger mode, the Orion will only output power when it thinks the engine is running or "allowed to charge." With everything configured, I saved the settings in the app.

Now it was the moment of truth: I started



the Jeep's engine. After a few seconds, I heard a soft click from the Victron and saw its LED go into "Bulk" charge mode (visible on the unit and also indicated in the app's live data). It had detected the engine running (voltage jumped to ~14V at the alternator) and started charging the camper battery. Success! On the VictronConnect app, I could watch the input voltage from the Jeep and the output voltage/current to the camper battery in real time. It was charging around 45-50 amps as expected since the camper battery

was partially discharged.

I let the vehicle idle and monitored the charger. By default, Victron's engine detection will turn off if the input voltage drops below a certain threshold for a bit (to prevent draining the car battery at engine-off). In my initial test, whenever I shut the engine off, after about 10 seconds the Orion stopped charging – exactly as it should. No issues there.

Fine-Tuning for Increased Uptime

During the first road trip with this setup, I noticed that the Orion charger sometimes would stop charging while I was driving, then start again later. Using the app's history and some observation, I realized what was happening: the Jeep Gladiator's smart alternator occasionally drops its voltage to ~13.0V or even high 12's under certain conditions (like when the vehicle's starter battery is full and there's low load, or during eco mode coasting). The Orion's factory engine detection threshold was a bit too high, causing it to think the engine had turned off when in fact it was still running, just at lower voltage. To fix this, I went back into VictronConnect settings and adjusted the input voltage lock-out thresholds. Essentially, I lowered the "Engine shutdown detection" floor a little – setting the cut-off to around 12.7V and the restart (engine-on) detect to around 13.2V (down from the default maybe 13.4/13.7V). This way, the charger would stay on as long as the Jeep's system stayed above about 12.7V (which is still safely above a resting battery voltage). After tweaking these settings, I found the charger's uptime improved significantly. Even when the

Gladiator's alternator dropped to ~13.0V on a long smooth highway drive, the Orion kept



charging. If you have a vehicle with a smart alternator, you may need to play with these settings or even consider running an ignition trigger wire to the Orion's remote terminal for more positive control. Victron's manual notes that some Euro 6 vehicles are tricky and you might have to disable the engine detect and rely on a direct signal. In my case, adjusting the thresholds was sufficient. The VictronConnect app makes it easy to do this – you can find these under "Input voltage lock-out" settings, and set a custom on/off voltage. Just be cautious not to set the cut-off too low; Victron suggests around 12.5V as a low limit to avoid draining the starter battery.

With the fine-tuning done, the Orion charger

would reliably kick in a minute after engine start, and stay on almost continuously whenever I was driving, keeping the camper's lithium battery happily charged at around 14.2V.

Tips, Lessons Learned, and Final Thoughts

Installing the Victron Orion DC-DC charger in my tiny camper was a rewarding project, and the result is worry-free charging on the go. I love that we can be on a 5+ hour drive and arrive at a campsite with a fully charged battery! Here are a few lessons learned and tips for anyone considering a similar setup:

- **Use the Right Gauge Wire and Protect It:** Don't skimp on cable size. The 6 AWG marine wire I used was just right for the roughly 15-20 foot run and 50A current. If your run is longer, consider 4 AWG. Make sure the cable is multi-stranded and high quality – marine tinned cable or welding cable ensures low resistance and durability. Always use grommets or loom anywhere the cable passes through metal to prevent chafing.
- **Fuse or Breaker at Both Batteries:** It might seem redundant to have breakers on both the vehicle and trailer battery sides, but it's good practice. If either end of the cable shorts to ground, the respective breaker will trip and prevent a fire. The Blue Sea 285-series breakers are great because they act as a master disconnect too. I can manually trip the one on the trailer to cut power to the DC-DC charger when the trailer is stored, for example. They're weather-resistant and safe in engine bays. Alternative: Some may use mega-fuses instead; those work too but aren't as easy to reset.
- **Quality Crimps on Lugs:** Invest in or borrow a proper crimping tool for those big cable lugs. My hydraulic crimper (a ~\$60 Harbor Freight tool) made professional-grade crimps that won't come loose. After crimping, I sealed each lug connection with adhesive-lined heat shrink to keep moisture out. A good crimp will hold the lug so tight that the wire will break before it ever pulls out – this is crucial for system reliability. If you don't have a hydraulic crimper, some auto parts stores or marine shops might crimp your cables for a small fee if you ask.
- **Quick Disconnect Placement:** Mount the Anderson plug securely so it's easy to use. I mounted mine on a bracket near the hitch, which works well. Another approach is a flush mount in the bumper with a kit or 3D printed panel, which can look slick. Make sure the connector when plugged in won't drag or catch the ground even if the trailer tongue goes high/low relative to the tow vehicle. And when not in use, keep the cover on – these connectors are durable (rated up to 10,000 mating cycles and 50A continuous, but the contacts can corrode if exposed constantly. A bit of dielectric grease on the terminals isn't a bad idea either.
- **Ventilation and Heat:** The Orion XS charger can put out 700W; it will get warm. Victron designed it with high efficiency (~98%) and it's passively cooled via its aluminum case. In my install inside a metal box, it hasn't overheated – but if

you notice the charger cutting out due to temperature (you'd see it in the app), you might need to provide more airflow or a different mounting location. So far, even in summer, mine stayed within limits. I did avoid mounting it right above the battery, as Victron warns against battery gasses possibly corroding it if the battery vents, with lithium this is less of an issue, but a lead-acid battery in a closed box could vent hydrogen.

- **Engine Detection vs. Ignition Wire:**

Using the Orion's built-in voltage sensing to auto-start/stop is convenient (no need to run an extra wire). After tweaking, it worked well for me. But if you prefer a sure thing, you can run a keyed ignition source to the Orion's remote terminal so it only turns on when the ignition is on. The Gladiator has aux switches and fuse taps that could be used for this. I opted not to complicate it, but it's something to consider if you find the voltage-sensing unreliable in your vehicle.

- **Testing and Monitoring:** After installation, test thoroughly before a long trip. Measure voltages to ensure you don't have excessive drop. For instance, at 50A, a 6 AWG over ~15 feet should drop only ~0.3-0.4V – if you see something much higher, check your connections or grounds. The VictronConnect app is your friend: use it to monitor the charge current and see if the charger is engaging when it should. It even logs historical data and any error codes.

- **What I'd Do Differently:** Honestly, the setup has been solid. If I were to do it again or expand, I might add a second

quick-disconnect in parallel dedicated for a portable power pack, but that's not directly related to the DC-DC charger. One thing perhaps: I might secure the wires more robustly from the battery box to the Anderson plug. I'd also find larger diameter corrugated cable covers so the positive and negative cables can fit in the same cover. Mine are separate currently and zip tied together. For my next install, I'd also make sure that I have a few different lengths of battery terminal studs. When I added two more connections to the camper battery, the original terminal stud wasn't long enough to screw in securely.

Lastly, if you're reading this and planning your own install – take your time and don't hesitate to ask questions on forums or consult the manuals. Every vehicle and camper is a bit different. But the principles of a good DC-DC charger install are the same: use appropriately sized cables, protect them with proper fusing, make solid connections, and configure the charger to match your system. Doing it right will give you a reliable charging system for years, letting you focus on the adventure instead of worrying about dead batteries.

Happy camping, and may your off-grid power be ever plentiful! ■

Note: The instructions in this article detail my personal experience installing a DC-DC charger and are for informational purposes only. I am not a licensed electrician, and this guide should not be considered professional electrical advice.



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US National Park Update

Closures and reduced hours amid staffing shortages as of March 29th **BY COOL TEARS STAFF**

MANY US NATIONAL PARK SITES have recently closed facilities or reduced hours due to severe staffing shortages. In mid-February 2025, the National Park Service (NPS) laid off roughly 1,000 employees – mostly newer hires – as part of a federal workforce downsizing. This came after years of understaffing (15% drop in full-time staff since 2011) that had already forced some parks to limit operations. The cuts, combined with a hiring freeze on seasonal workers, left many parks without enough rangers to keep all visitor services running. As of late February, the NPS received permission to hire up to 7,700 seasonal employees to help “fill crucial roles” before summer, but it will take time to get those staff onboard. The result has been temporary closures of visitor centers,

reduced tour schedules, and other access restrictions at parks across the country. The article focuses on the major NPS sites that are impacted. There are over 430 sites managed by the National Park Service, and we did not check all for this article.

Western and Southwestern Parks

Western and Southwestern Parks: Several major parks in the West have had to limit visitor access due to a lack of staff.

- **Utah’s Arches National Park** closed its famous Fiery Furnace hiking area entirely starting March 23, with “no ranger-led

tours nor self-guided permits” being issued until further notice. An Arches staff member confirmed this closure is due to staffing shortages and will likely be lifted once seasonal workers arrive.

- **Arizona’s Saguaro National Park** announced that effective Feb. 24, both Visitor Centers will be closed on Mondays until further notice. These visitor centers, one in each district of the park, are where guests normally get water, maps, and talk to rangers – now they’re unavailable one day a week.
- **Yosemite National Park (California)** – The park delayed opening reservations

for five popular campgrounds (Upper Pines, Lower Pines, North Pines, Wawona, Hodgdon Meadow) that would normally become available for summer dates. Those campsite bookings for June and July were put on hold and are being released in smaller batches at later dates. Yosemite officials also suspended the park’s peak-hours entry reservation system for summer 2025 until further notice, citing limited operational capacity. These steps were taken because there aren’t enough staff in place yet to manage the usual volume of visitors and campground operations.

- **Sequoia & Kings Canyon NPs (California)** – Of all 63 national parks, these twin parks



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appear hit the hardest by the staff cuts. They closed multiple visitor centers and a museum several days a week and canceled all ranger-led programs until further notice. For example, Sequoia's Foothills Visitor

Center is now closed Monday – Tuesday and Kings Canyon's visitor center is closed Monday – Wednesday. The Giant Forest Museum is shuttered Wednesday – Thursday. This means a visitor who wants to see all facilities must come on a Friday, Saturday or Sunday – the only days when all centers are open.



- **Carlsbad Caverns National Park (New Mexico)** – A lack of qualified rangers forced Carlsbad Caverns to cancel all guided cave tours, including popular tours of Lower Cave, King's Palace, and Slaughter Canyon. Even some self-guided cave access has been curtailed – the first morning timed entry (8:30 a.m.) was eliminated – and the park's visitor center hours were trimmed (now open 9 a.m. to

on reduced hours (only 9 a.m.–3 p.m. daily). These measures follow the loss of five employees at Great Basin as of Feb. 14, leaving the park with substantially fewer staff to run cave tours and visitor services.

- **Denali National Park (Alaska)** – In Alaska, all Denali youth summer camps for 2025 have been canceled because the park no longer has staff to run them. The NPS education program manager at Denali (who helped oversee the camps) was one of the employees terminated on Feb. 14. The Denali Education Center, a non-profit partner, said the "sudden termination of key...staff has left critical supervisory gaps, preventing the full staffing necessary to run these programs safely." With those

- **Great Basin National Park (Nevada)** – Great Basin has stopped taking advance reservations for its Lehman Caves tours due to staffing gaps. All cave tours are now first-come, first-served onsite, and visitors are warned tours might be "cancelled due to staff shortages." In addition, the park's main visitor center, normally open five days a week, is completely closed until further notice, and the secondary Lehman Caves Visitor Center is operating

supervisory rangers gone, the park and its partner felt they could not ensure camper safety or uphold the program's mission, leading to the difficult decision to cancel the camps.

- **Black Canyon of the Gunnison NP (Colorado)** – This Rocky Mountain park will keep two of its three campgrounds closed until further notice, extending what would normally be seasonal winter closures. Both the remote North Rim Campground and the riverside East Portal Campground are staying closed for now. Only the main South Rim Campground is expected to open in spring as usual. The park is also facing basic operational challenges: Black Canyon has no on-site water source and typically trucks in water, but currently “there’s no one to do that” because a key position is vacant. This underscores how even essential tasks are hindered by the staffing shortfall.

Midwest and Plains Parks

Midwest and Plains Parks: In the Great Plains and Midwest, park sites are also cutting back services.

- **North Dakota's Theodore Roosevelt National Park** has sharply reduced the hours at its North Unit Visitor Center. This facility, which used to be open seven days a week, is now open only Friday through Monday (9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.) and closed Tuesday – Thursday due to insufficient staffing. Mid-week visitors to the North Unit will find no staffed visitor center or restrooms there as a result.
- **Effigy Mounds National Monument (Iowa)** – The park's only visitor center is now closed on Tuesdays and Wednesdays “until approximately May 4th” due to staffing limitations. On the other five days of the week, it remains open on a normal schedule (9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.) Visitors are encouraged to plan around these mid-week closures when visiting this Iowa monument.
- **Fort Scott National Historic Site (Kansas)** – Fort Scott NHS is down to less than 50% of its normal staffing level, which has forced “multiple-day closures of the park” and a drastic reduction in programs. Until further notice, the park's Visitor Center is closed on Wednesdays and Thursdays, though the grounds remain open daily from sunrise to sunset. All interpretive ranger programs and staff-led tours have been canceled for now – a significant cutback at a site where tours and educational events are central to its appeal.
- **Pullman National Historical Park (Illinois)** – Even the newly established Pullman NHP in Chicago has reduced operations. The Pullman visitor center, which used to be open daily, is now open only Wednesday through Sunday (10 a.m. to 4 p.m.). All other educational programs at the site are suspended indefinitely due to the staffing crunch.
- **Sand Creek Massacre NHS (Colorado)** – This historic site on the plains of eastern Colorado had to close its visitor and education center in Eads entirely until further notice. The park's staff recently dropped from 8 employees to just 7, and three other positions, including the site

manager, are vacant but cannot be filled under the federal hiring freeze. With such a small team remaining, they cannot keep the visitor center open. Research appointments for the Sand Creek Massacre archives are still available by special arrangement, even though the public center is closed.

Eastern and Southern Parks

Eastern and Southern Parks: The East and South have not been spared from staff-related cutbacks.

- **Hot Springs National Park (Arkansas)** has reduced the schedule of its main visitor facility, the historic Fordyce Bathhouse.



The Fordyce Visitor Center and Museum is now closed every Tuesday and Wednesday, remaining open Thursday through Monday (9 a.m. to 5 p.m.). This change, effective March 4, 2025, is directly “due to a lack of staffing,” according to the park’s announcement.

- **Maggie L. Walker National Historic Site (Virginia)** - This NHS has cut its public house tours down to two days a week. Tours of Maggie Walker’s historic home, which used to be offered five days a week, are now only available on Fridays and Saturdays until further notice.
- **Buffalo National River (Arkansas)** – At this popular river park, the Buffalo Point Ranger Station is now closed indefinitely because of staffing shortages. Previously, that station was only closed two days a week, but now it’s shut “until further notice” and the park apologizes for the inconvenience. Other ranger stations in the park may still operate, but visitors should be prepared for limited services in some areas.

- **Acadia National Park (Maine)** – On the East Coast, Acadia is facing uncertainty for the upcoming summer season after losing several staff. The park’s friends group reported that eight probationary staff members at Acadia were laid off recently. With seasonal hiring delayed, Acadia’s management is “not sure” how fully they can operate this summer – they “can’t tell... if the campgrounds are going to be open” or if popular services like the Cadillac

Mountain sunrise reservation system will be running as usual. This uncertainty in Maine’s flagship park highlights that even in the Northeast, parks are bracing for possible reduced access due to the staffing crisis.

- **Great Smoky Mountains National Park (Tennessee/North Carolina)** – Even one of the country’s most-visited parks isn’t immune to the current staffing crisis. As of March 2025, 6 of the park’s 10 frontcountry campgrounds are closed due to staffing shortages, according to park officials. This includes popular spots like Abrams Creek, Balsam Mountain, and Look Rock, which



typically open in spring but will now remain closed until further notice. Park managers noted that without sufficient maintenance and law enforcement personnel on staff, it’s not possible to safely operate all campground facilities. The park is prioritizing resources to keep a smaller number of sites open and has advised visitors to book early and check the park website for the most current campground availability.

Park officials across regions attribute these closures and hour reductions squarely to staffing shortages resulting from budget-driven cuts. On February 14, 2025, the Trump administration fired around 1,000 NPS employees, many still in their probationary period, in an effort to shrink the federal workforce. This sudden cut, on top of a

longstanding hiring freeze that left many jobs unfilled, hollowed out park staffing just as the spring season began. In congressional testimony, NPS officials noted the agency was already understaffed before these layoffs, and that years of inadequate funding had forced some parks to curtail visitor services even prior to 2025.

In response to public outcry and concerns from state leaders, the Interior Department partially reversed course on hiring. A late-February memo gave NPS permission to hire up to 7700 seasonal, summer workers. This number of seasonals is actually higher than the recent average, though officials warn that hiring and training so many people on short notice will be challenging. The official NPS stance is that there are “no systemwide alerts or closures” and that the agency is focused on hiring staff to improve the visitor experience and ensure everyone can still enjoy the parks’ iconic places. As one Interior spokesperson put it, NPS teams are dedicated to meeting visitors’ needs and “ensuring memorable and meaningful experiences for all,” even amid

Reasons and Official Responses

these workforce adjustments.

That said, many park advocates and local officials have voiced concern about the impact of the cuts. Arizona's governor, Katie Hobbs, reacted sharply when Grand Canyon National Park experienced hours-long visitor waits due to understaffing, calling it "a slap in the face for Arizonans and all who love to come here." She argued that "removal of essential workers undermines our economy and our ability to showcase one of the greatest natural wonders of the world." Conservation groups note the irony that parks are seeing record visitation at the same time staffing is being slashed – a trend they say risks degrading both visitor experience and resource protection. The nonpartisan National Parks Conservation Association warned that the "ongoing dismantling" of park staff and resources is at extreme odds with the high demand from visitors. For now, the National Park Service is urging visitors to plan ahead and remain patient and flexible, as parks adjust operations until more staff can be brought on board. It is suggested before visiting any site, that you call or check their website for hours. ■

Sources: Recent news reports from NPR.ORG, official NPS statements, park notices detailing staff-related closures and reductions, travel-experience-live.com, and other updates from individual parks and partner organizations across the country.



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A New Chapter in Tiny Campers

Bontrager Outdoors acquires Bushwacker **BY COOL TEARS STAFF**

BONTRAGER OUTDOORS, led by RV industry veterans Jason and Austin Bontrager, made headlines when it acquired the Bushwacker camper brand from Braxton Creek in early 2023. The Bontrager brothers – grandsons of Jayco founder Lloyd Bontrager – purchased Braxton Creek RV (manufacturer of the Bushwacker line) with a clear mission: to apply their family’s legacy of quality and innovation to the popular

Bushwacker teardrop camper. After a year of evaluation and dealer/customer feedback, they rebranded Braxton Creek as “Bontrager Outdoors” in mid-2024. This rebranding not only capitalizes on the well-respected Bontrager name, but also signals a fresh start with an expanded product lineup and renewed focus on quality. In Jason Bontrager’s words, the goal is to provide “the best value in the industry from a name that is known and

respected,” without losing sight of “quality, affordability and support.”

Revamping the Bushwhacker Brand and Lineup

Under Braxton Creek, the Bushwhacker series had earned a reputation as affordable, adventure-ready tiny trailers. Bontrager Outdoors has not only adopted these beloved mini-campers but also renamed and expanded the lines to better reflect their vision. As part of the 2024 rebrand, the former Bushwhacker and Bushwhacker Plus models were reorganized into new categories:

- Compact Line – formerly Bushwhacker (10–12 ft trailers), now positioned as ultra-light teardrop-style campers for off-grid explorers.
- Standard Line – formerly Bushwhacker Plus (15–17 ft trailers), slightly larger micro travel trailers with added comforts.
- Comfort Line – an all-new 21 ft travel trailer series introduced in 2025, bridging the gap between tiny teardrops and family campers. We will not cover the Comfort Line further in this article.
- Radical Line – the Bushwhacker “Radical” off-road edition remains, spun off as its

own specialized line for rugged adventure.

Let’s take a closer look at each segment of Bontrager Outdoors’ product lineup, including their features, sizes, and ideal audiences.

Compact Line: Tiny Teardrops for Off-Grid Adventurers

Bontrager Outdoors’ Compact Line of teardrop trailers is all about keeping things simple, light, and ready for the backcountry. These tiny campers range from about 11 to 13 feet long and weigh in at under 1,700 lbs dry—some models even dip below 500 lbs. That makes them some of the lightest true teardrop trailers on the market.

Designed for one or two campers, the Compact trailers are basically cozy bedrooms on wheels. Inside, you’ll find just the essentials: a comfortable sleeping area, a bit of storage (overhead or under the bed), and a roof vent with a fan for airflow. There’s no standing room inside—interior height tops out around 3 to 4 feet—so they’re made for sleeping and shelter, not hanging out.

Despite their small size, these trailers are built tough. Each one rides on off-road tires with high-clearance suspension and a welded aluminum frame, making them capable of handling rugged terrain and forest roads. Dual doors on most models make it easy to climb in



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or out from either side.

Cooking and cleanup happen outside. The larger models—like the 10ROK and 12ROK—come with a built-in rear outdoor kitchen. You'll typically get a slide-out propane griddle, a 12V fridge or cooler, and even an outdoor shower hookup. On the smallest model, the ultra-light 7ROD (just 500 lbs dry!), Bontrager



skips the full kitchen and instead includes a DIY kitchen storage area where you can stash your own stove and cooler. It's perfect for those who prefer ultra-simple, off-grid camping without the need for water hookups.

Standard features across the line include LED lighting inside and out, USB and 12V charging ports, and—on most models—a Truma Combi system for heat and hot water, making them

comfortable for three-season trips.

Whether you're looking for a minimalist trailer to get off the beaten path or a lightweight setup with a bit of outdoor cooking convenience, Bontrager's Compact Line keeps things simple, capable, and adventure-ready.

Target audience: The Compact Line is aimed squarely at outdoor adventurers and off-grid campers who want to get far off the beaten path. Their tiny size means they can be towed by small SUVs or even some cars, and maneuvered into remote campsites or trailheads that larger trailers can't reach. Overlanders, solo travelers, and couples who value simplicity and mobility over luxury will find

these teardrops appealing. As one dealer puts it, the Bontrager Compact campers are "camping done right – all of the awesomeness of camping without having to mess with a tent!" With prices starting around \$9–10k for the bare-bones models, the Compact Line also attracts budget-conscious buyers entering the RV lifestyle.

Standard Line: Micro Trailers with

Big Features

Stepping up in size, the Standard Line (formerly Bushwhacker Plus) caters to campers wanting a bit more room and comfort while still staying compact. These units are 15 to 17 feet long, around 2,000–2,800 lbs dry – still very lightweight, but tall enough to stand up inside (about 6+ feet interior height). Bontrager's Standard models (15RE, 15FK, 17FD, 17BH, 17MB, etc.) are often called "teardrop trailers" but they're more like traditional small travel trailers with extra capabilities.

Despite their modest footprint, the Standard trailers pack in many features typically found on larger RVs. For example, every floorplan manages to include a compact wet bath (a combined shower/toilet) – a rarity in units this small. A tiny galley kitchen provides a two-burner cooktop, a sink, microwave, and a 3.3 cu.ft. 12V fridge. Clever convertible furniture maximizes utility: a dinette or sofa by day converts to a bed at night, and certain layouts even add bunk beds or a Murphy bed to sleep up to 3–4 people in a pinch. For example, the 17BH model has a front bunkhouse for two kids and a rear U-dinette that becomes a queen bed, allowing a small family of four to camp in a trailer only 18 feet long.

Importantly, Bontrager has upgraded the build quality and equipment on these micro trailers to address prior shortcomings. The Standard Line rides on a robust 3000 lb independent torsion axle and over-sized off-road tires, giving it ground clearance and stability on rough terrain. The frame is a Norco/BAL stamped steel chassis that's huck-bolted (not simply welded) for durability. To ensure year-round comfort, Bontrager now outfits

all Standard models with a high-performance Truma Combi Eco furnace/water heater system – a significant upgrade in efficiency and reliability over the basic heaters in older units. They've also begun using Azdel composite wall panels in place of wood in the walls, which reduces weight and eliminates the risk of rot or delamination from water leaks. Other nice touches include all-LED lighting, alloy wheels, electric brakes, and dual rear stabilizer jacks for steady camping.

Target audience: Standard Line trailers appeal to campers who want a bit more comfort and capacity than a teardrop without jumping to a full-size RV. This includes small families, couples on extended road trips, or older adventurers who appreciate having a toilet/shower and indoor cooking capabilities in a small package. These units remain light enough to tow with many midsize SUVs (and even some crossovers), making them accessible to those without a big truck. With MSRPs in the low-to-mid \$20,000s (e.g. around \$25K for a fully loaded 17MB, they hit a sweet spot for value – considerably cheaper than larger travel trailers or high-end teardrops, yet equipped for comfortable glamping on or off the grid.

Radical Line: Off-Road "Adventure Edition" Teardrops

Bontrager's Radical Line is essentially the Bushwhacker on steroids for serious off-road enthusiasts. The flagship model is the 12RAD – a beefed-up 12-foot teardrop that takes the Compact series and adds a host of trail-ready upgrades. As Bontrager describes it, the Radical line is for those who "crave the call of the wild," offering unique features to "elevate

your escape” in the backcountry.

What makes a Radical different? For starters, it gets a high-clearance independent suspension (torsion axle) with even chunkier mud-terrain tires and an articulating 360° swivel hitch – all geared toward tackling rough, uneven terrain without trouble. The exterior is clad in bright white gel-coat fiberglass with bold graphics, and topped with a deluxe roof rack that’s roof-tent compatible for extra sleeping space. An electric tongue jack and heavy-duty stabilizer jacks come standard for convenience when setup at camp. Perhaps the highlight is the expanded outdoor kitchen: the 12RAD’s rear hatch houses a large slide-out Blackstone griddle, sink, and fridge – essentially a full kitchen under the stars. There’s even a 9,000 BTU A/C unit fitted (which is plenty to chill such a small interior) and a “J-cube” convertible sofa bed inside for lounging. In short, the Radical is purpose-built for boondockers and overlanders who want the most capable version of a teardrop camper.

Despite all the extras, the 12RAD remains light (~2,100 lbs dry) and compact (15’9” overall length), so it’s still very easy to tow deep into the wilderness. It commands a price premium for those capabilities – typically around \$20K on sale (MSRP mid-\$20Ks) for a new Radical edition – but for off-road RVers eyeing pricier alternatives (like fully custom off-road trailers), the Bushwhacker Radical offers a compelling value.

Target audience: Off-road and overlanding enthusiasts who don’t want to DIY a camper from scratch. The Radical line targets buyers who might otherwise look at specialty off-road teardrops or expedition trailers (often costing \$30K+), by giving them a turnkey solution

under the Bontrager Outdoors banner. If your idea of camping is remote BLM land or national forest roads far from hookups, the Radical is built for you. It provides peace of mind with its reinforced construction and trail-rated accessories – as one dealer notes, it truly has “everything you need in a package you can take virtually anywhere.”

Where to Buy: Dealer Network and Online Options

One of the strengths Bontrager Outdoors inherited from Braxton Creek is a widespread dealer network. Bushwhacker campers have always been sold through independent RV dealerships across the country, and that continues under the Bontrager Outdoors name. In fact, Braxton Creek had a strong base of around 100+ dealers prior to the acquisition, and the Bontragers have signaled they want to maintain and grow those relationships. The company’s website features a “Find A Dealer” tool for customers to locate their nearest showroom. From the Midwest (where the campers are built in Indiana) to the coasts, you can likely find a Bontrager Outdoors dealer within a reasonable drive in most states.

Some examples illustrate the availability: In the Northeast, Seven O’s RV in New York lists new Bontrager Compact teardrops (a 2025 7ROD for about \$10K MSRP) on their lot. Out West, Bish’s RV in Idaho and Utah carries the lineup – for instance, a dealer in Utah recently advertised a 17MB Standard trailer for \$21,995. Major nationwide chains are on board too; Blue Compass RV (one of America’s largest dealership groups) has multiple Bontrager Outdoors units in

inventory, often still co-listed under the Braxton Creek/Bushwhacker name. This means whether you're in the market in Michigan or Texas, Florida or California, chances are a local RV dealer can order or deliver a Bontrager camper for you.

In addition to traditional brick-and-mortar dealers, online purchasing options exist. Many dealerships list Bontrager Outdoors campers on RV trading platforms and their own websites, sometimes even with "Buy Now" online checkout. For example, one retailer (ABC Motors) offers the Compact 10ROK teardrop for direct purchase online, showing an MSRP of about \$18,266 and a sale price of \$14,885, ready to "Add to cart" for checkout. Likewise, inventory aggregators like RVTrader.com have dozens of listings for new Bontrager Outdoors units, complete with pricing and delivery quotes. While Bontrager Outdoors themselves do not sell direct to consumers (they rely on dealers), the digital marketplace for RVs makes it easy to shop around and even have a tiny camper shipped to you if a local option isn't available.

Tip: Because these trailers are in high demand, it's wise to call ahead or use the "Request Quote" features online – popular models sometimes sell out early in the season. The Bontrager team has noted that the Braxton Creek website will eventually redirect to the new Bontrager Outdoors site, consolidating information. But for now, whether you search under Braxton Creek Bushwhacker or Bontrager Outdoors, you'll find the same campers – just under new management.

How Much Do They Cost?

Pricing Breakdown by Model Line

One of the big draws of the Bushwhacker (now Bontrager Outdoors) campers has always been their affordability. These are among the most budget-friendly RVs, allowing newcomers to get into camping trailers without breaking the bank. Bontrager Outdoors has largely kept that value proposition, even with the added features. Here's a breakdown of price ranges for each line (all prices in USD):

- **Compact Line (Teardrops):** The smallest models start well under \$12,000. In fact, the no-frills 7ROD has a sticker price around \$9,840 for the 2025 model – making it one of the cheapest new RVs available. Mid-level Compact units like the 10HD and 10ROK tend to list around \$14,000–\$17,000 MSRP, and often sell for a few thousand less (around \$12K–\$15K). The fully equipped 12ROK, at the top of the Compact range, has an MSRP near \$19,995 and commonly a sale price around \$16K–\$17K.
- **Standard Line:** Smaller 15-foot layouts might be a couple thousand less. Bontrager advertises "prices starting at just \$15,965" for the Standard line, likely referring to a base 15RE model. In practice, most buyers will pay around \$18K–\$22K for a brand new Standard Line unit nicely equipped (before taxes and fees). This undercuts many competing small trailers – for context, a similar-sized nuCamp or Little Guy trailer often runs well above \$25K. Bontrager's strategy seems to be offering more bang for the buck, even as they improve construction.

- **Radical Line (Off-road editions):** The Bushwhacker Radical 12RAD comes with a price premium for its off-road gear, but Bontrager keeps it reasonable. A typical MSRP is around \$27,000 (as seen at one MO dealer), but dealers often list them on sale for \$19,000–\$22,000. Essentially, you might pay ~\$5K more for a Radical compared to an equivalent Compact model with fewer options. Given the expensive components (roof rack, suspension, etc.) included in the Radical package, many off-road camping fans find this upcharge worth it. It's still dramatically cheaper than niche off-road trailers from specialized manufacturers. In summary, the Radical 12RAD will likely run about \$20K out the door.

It's worth noting that these prices are for new units – used Bushwhackers can be found for less, and some dealers might have leftover Braxton Creek-branded inventory at a discount as the transition to Bontrager Outdoors branding happens. Also, keep in mind regional differences and seasonal sales; for instance, western dealers may have slightly higher transport costs, and winter pricing might be lower than peak spring. Overall, though, Bontrager Outdoors trailers remain one of the most affordable camper options in each of their respective categories. As a dealer mantra goes: "We will beat any price... just ask!" This competition helps keep pricing attractive for consumers.



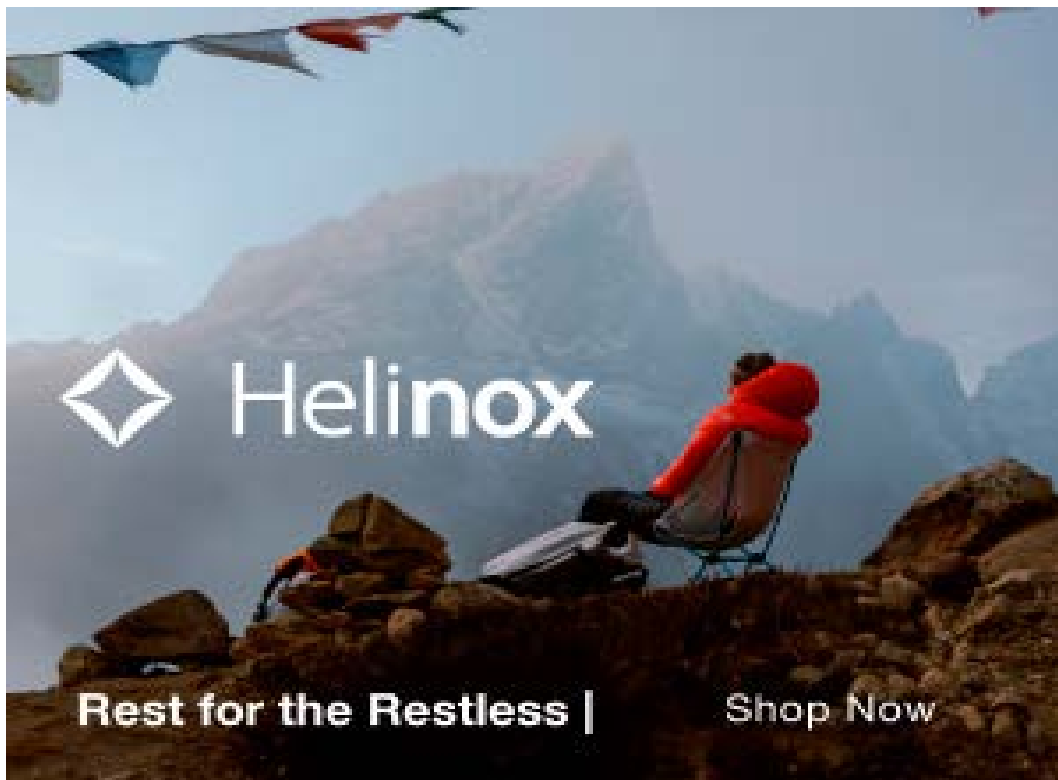
Quality Woes Under Braxton Creek: What Needed Fixing

While Bushwhacker campers have been popular, it's no secret that under Braxton Creek's tenure (2019–2022) they suffered from a number of quality control issues. Owners on forums and review sites frequently reported maintenance challenges and construction problems – some minor, some quite severe. A running joke in the community was that these trailers were great “if you don't mind being your own handyman” due to the fixes needed. Let's explore some of the specific complaints that emerged:

Poor QC and Workmanship: Many owners complained of shoddy assembly. One detailed 2022 owner review warned others

to “please search other options,” then listed a litany of issues: the entry door latch was misaligned from the factory (requiring the owner to Dremel the frame to make it lock), the fridge door wouldn't stay shut because it was installed crooked, interior 12V lights failed after short use, and even the speakers fell out of the ceiling because they couldn't secure to the thin material. Another common gripe was sawdust and debris left behind walls and under furniture – whenever owners towed, wood shavings would spill out from under cabinets, showing that the manufacturer hadn't bothered to clean up after construction. Such oversights gave the trailers a “home-built in a hurry” feel.

Leaky Plumbing and Water Intrusion: Several reports mention plumbing connections leaking soon after purchase (e.g. a



water line to the toilet loosening and flooding the floor). Some owners also found that driving in rain led to water seeping into storage compartments or around the A/C unit gasket. One owner discovered a section of the ceiling sagging mysteriously, possibly from moisture or poor support, within the first year. These issues point to inconsistent sealing and inspection at the factory. (On the flip side, a few owners noted their units did hold up watertight – one Floridian proudly noted his Bushwhacker Plus “went through Hurricane Ian and did not leak or have any issues!!” – but this positive experience seems to have been the exception rather than the rule.)

Incorrect Specs & Documentation: Even basic information wasn’t always reliable. A frustrated buyer on Reddit called Braxton Creek “as much of a hot mess as they seem,” citing examples like the company providing wrong dimensions for the camper and owners manuals with completely incorrect information, which made it hard for customers to know what they were actually buying. Dealers sometimes received units that didn’t match the published specs or options. This inconsistency erodes trust – it’s hard to plan a camping rig when you’re not sure if the advertised weight or length is accurate.

Serious Mechanical Failures: In a few alarming cases, critical components failed early. Perhaps the most egregious story was an owner who reported a wheel literally falling off the trailer 45 miles after leaving the dealer’s lot. This implies the lug nuts were not properly torqued at the factory or PDI (pre-delivery inspection) – a basic safety step that was apparently missed. Other owners have mentioned axle alignment problems and tire wear issues on early models, suggesting some

chassis QA problems in the initial production runs. And in an online community, an RV technician commented that “they are a quality nightmare,” referencing Braxton Creek’s broader track record (one Good Sam Club forum post even pointed people to a website called braxtoncreekproblems.com that catalogued issues).

“You get what you pay for”: The overarching theme from veteran RVers was that Bushwhackers were inexpensive for a reason. As one iRV2 forum user bluntly put it, “They are inexpensive, and you get what you pay for in terms of build quality.” Fit and finish issues were common; insulation was minimal (several owners said the trailers were hard to keep cool or warm due to thin walls and gaps); and many buyers had to tighten screws, add weatherstripping, or even reinforce furniture on their own. It wasn’t unique to Braxton Creek – many entry-level RVs have similar complaints – but the Bushwhacker’s reputation by 2022 was that robust owner DIY was part of the ownership experience.

The accumulation of these issues resulted in some negative press and word-of-mouth. For example, RVTravel.com’s review of the Bushwhacker Plus 17BH pulled no punches: “The build quality is poor” and even referenced the wheel incident, advising readers to “Just Google ‘Braxton Creek problems’.” The most extreme owner review ended with “Would I buy another product from this manufacturer? Not even if they held me at gunpoint!” Clearly, there was room (and need) for improvement.

Turning the Corner: How Bontrager Outdoors Is Addressing These Issues

Jason and Austin Bontrager were well aware of Bushwhacker's spotty quality record when they acquired Braxton Creek. Improving product quality and customer experience has been a top priority in their rebranding strategy. The duo spent much of 2023 analyzing the company's operations and gathering input from dealers and owners on what needed fixing. The result is a series of design and process changes aimed at elevating the reliability of these campers without losing their affordability.

1. Upgraded Materials and Construction:

Bontrager Outdoors has implemented tangible build improvements. A big one is the switch to Azdel composite panels in the walls (in lieu of wood luan) across the lineup. Azdel is impervious to water damage and also improves insulation – a direct answer to previous issues with wall rot and poor climate control. They've also reinforced the frames and running gear: all models now use huck-bolted steel chassis (which won't loosen like old welds) and torsion independent suspensions for better durability on the road. The off-road oriented models get beefier axles and standard electric brakes for safety. Even small hardware details have been refined; for example, the new 10ROK model features a redesigned rear hatch door with flush-mount slam latches and integrated locks, providing a more secure and weatherproof seal than the old hinged latch. These kinds of tweaks show that Bontrager is sweating the details that were

previously overlooked.

2. Enhanced Features (Less DIY Required):

Another approach Bontrager has taken is to include more standard features from the factory, so owners don't have to jury-rig solutions later. For instance, every trailer now comes solar panel ready or with a solar port – acknowledging that many buyers will add solar for off-grid use. They've partnered with reputable suppliers like Truma not only for heaters but also for high-efficiency A/C units and tankless water systems on some models. By using top-tier components, they reduce the likelihood of failures like those cheap water heaters that frustrated owners before. The Comfort Line even has a heated and enclosed underbelly thanks to the Truma Combi, addressing the cold-floor complaint from earlier units. And on the off-road side, including essentials like a roof rack, spare tire carrier, LP quick-connect, and outdoor shower as standard means buyers don't have to retrofit these common needs (whereas under Braxton, some of those were missing or optional). All units also now ship with a full 1-year roadside assistance plan – a nice customer care touch in case issues do arise on the road.

3. Improved Quality Control and Manufacturing:

The Bontragers have instilled a culture shift at the Indiana factory. They often cite the "Golden Rule" – treating customers the way they'd want to be treated – as their guiding principle. In practice, this means more rigorous quality control checks before units leave the plant and closer attention to dealer feedback. Leadership is very hands-on:

“When leadership is available in person every day on the factory floor, everybody wins,” is a Bontrager creed. Reports from dealers indicate that warranty claims are being taken seriously and resolved faster now. The company’s small size allows them to be nimble – they reportedly paused production on a model briefly in 2023 to fix a recurring issue once it was identified, rather than continuing to ship faulty units.

4. Better Warranty and Support: Perhaps one of the most immediate changes is the warranty. Bontrager Outdoors now offers a “superior 1-year limited bumper-to-bumper warranty”, which they note is double the coverage of competitors in this class. Many small trailer makers offer only 6-month warranties, so a full year is indeed above average. This 12-month comprehensive warranty covers defects in materials and workmanship, and is backed by the manufacturer directly. What this means for customers is more peace of mind – if that door is misaligned or a leak appears in month 10, Bontrager will take care of it at no cost. They’ve been emphasizing support and customer service, encouraging owners to reach out directly if needed. This is a stark contrast to some past owner experiences who felt ignored by Braxton Creek corporate. By “standing by your RV,” the Bontragers aim to rebuild trust. As one dealer blog put it: “Bontrager’s 1-Year Warranty... doesn’t come from us and it’s not an extended warranty – it’s the manufacturer saying we believe in our product.”

Early indications show these efforts are paying off. Dealers at RV shows have commented on the noticeable uptick in finish quality in the

2024–2025 Bontrager-built units – cleaner cabinetry installs, better caulking, and more thorough pre-delivery inspections. Jason Bontrager said it best: “Austin and I are on a mission to continue the reputation our grandpa... established with Jayco: taking care of our dealer network and the end customers will be a priority, combined with some much needed innovation in the RV industry.” In other words, they know that happy customers and dealers are the key to long-term success, and they’re actively working to turn the Bushwhacker’s past weaknesses into new strengths.

Customer Reactions and Expert Insights

So, how is the market responding to Bontrager Outdoors’ stewardship of the Bushwhacker brand? It’s still early, but there are positive signs and some cautious optimism among the RV community.

Owners and campers: Those who loved the idea of the Bushwhacker (small, versatile, inexpensive) but were wary of its quality are taking a second look. On forums like r/TeardropTrailers, you’ll find discussions noting that the Bontrager name brings credibility. One commenter pointed out that while a nuCamp TAG teardrop might cost \$10k more than a Bushwhacker, “NuCamps use premium lumber and materials... but the basics are essentially the same” – suggesting that if Bontrager can iron out the kinks, the Bushwhacker (Compact) becomes a tremendous value alternative to pricier teardrops. Some owners who swore off Braxton Creek are tentatively acknowledging the improvements; a few have posted that the

2024 models they inspected had “far fewer issues” visible than previous years, though they are waiting to see long-term reliability.

Reviews: Formal reviews of the Bontrager-era units are just beginning to come in. Initial industry reviews have noted the upgraded features favorably. RV Pro magazine highlighted the addition of the Truma Combi Eco heater in the Standard Line, calling it a smart move for customer satisfaction. When the Comfort Line debuted, industry writers praised the partnership with Truma and the inclusion of a full shower and larger fridge in such a lightweight trailer, calling the models “game-changing” for that segment. Of course, the proof will be in real-world use: we’ll know more as 2024 and 2025 owners log miles and share experiences.

Dealer perspective: Dealers, who were sometimes stuck handling the fallout of Braxton Creek’s warranty claims, have been some of the biggest cheerleaders of the Bontrager takeover. Jim Jacobs, Braxton Creek’s former president, expressed that the brand was “going to an ownership team that grew up in and knows this industry... we couldn’t have picked better owners to take this company to the next level.” That sentiment is echoed by many dealers who carry the line – they feel the Bontragers understand their concerns and are willing to make things right. One Midwest dealer noted that parts availability has improved and that the factory is responsive when a service issue arises, which “makes it a lot easier for us to stand behind the product and keep customers happy.”

Comparisons in the tiny camper space: The Bushwhacker series has a number of

competitors – from the aforementioned nuCamp TAG/TAB and Little Guy trailers to other budget-friendly options like the Sunset Park Sunray or Forest River Geo Pro. In terms of pricing, Bontrager Outdoors undercuts most of the well-known rivals, often by a significant margin. For example, a nuCamp TAB 320 teardrop with a wet bath can cost ~\$30K, whereas a similarly equipped Bushwhacker Plus 17FD (Standard Line) is around ~\$20K. However, nuCamp has a stellar quality reputation, so historically many buyers would stretch their budget for it. Now, with Bontrager’s quality focus, the value equation is shifting. As one prospective buyer put it on a forum, “I was leaning towards a [nuCamp] TAB, but I’m also considering a Little Guy Max... and now maybe the Bushwhacker Plus again since Bontrager took over” – meaning consumers are adding Bushwhacker back to their consideration set. Experts note that if Bontrager Outdoors can demonstrably eliminate the past reliability issues, the brand could capture a much larger share of the lightweight camper market, given its price and feature advantages.

Already, head-to-head, a Bushwhacker Plus (Standard) holds its own on paper against, say, an inTech Luna or Little Guy Mini Max, but at thousands less in cost. A Men’s Health article on “best teardrop trailers” even included the Bushwhacker, citing its low price and complete amenities, though it cautioned that build quality wasn’t on par with the top-tier brands. That caution may soon be revised if owner reports remain positive under Bontrager’s watch.

In summary, early customer reviews and expert opinions suggest a cautiously positive outlook. Many longtime RVers acknowledge

the Bontrager family's expertise and are hopeful: the company's combined 30+ years in RV and overlanding circles "bring an unmatched passion for the products," as Austin Bontrager has said. The true test will be in the field – but if forums and feedback from 2024 buyers are any indication, Bontrager Outdoors' Bushwhacker lineup is shedding its old problems and delivering on its promise of affordable adventure. It's a unique and encouraging story in the RV world: a troubled young brand adopted by industry pros with the know-how to turn it around. For tiny camper enthusiasts, that means more choices and better products on the market – and ultimately, more people empowered to "discover the incredible country we've been blessed with" in these little campers. Bontrager Outdoors seems committed to writing a new chapter for Bushwhacker, one where "quality, affordability and support" go hand-in-hand, and early signs indicate this tiny camper brand's future is brighter than ever. ■

Sources: Bontrager Outdoors Press Releases, numerous RV dealerships, RV-Pro.com, RV Insider, owner reviews, Reddit (teardrop trailers). Photos from Bontrager Outdoors website.





Kitchen on Wheels

Hot Toddy **BY ANNE COX**

A **CLASSIC HOT TODDY** is a warm, comforting cocktail perfect for chilly, spring evenings or when you're feeling under the weather. This simple recipe combines whiskey, hot water, lemon, and honey for a soothing and flavorful drink. The soothing warmth, the stimulating spices, the throat coating honey combined with the calming nip of spirit can be just what the doctor ordered on a cold, spring night, especially if sitting by the campfire. Skip the spirits for a zero proof version and use your favorite tea or apple cider in place of the hot water.

Ingredients

- 2 ounces whiskey (bourbon, rye, or scotch)
- 1 Tablespoon honey
- ½ lemon, juiced
- 4 - 6 ounces boiling water

Instructions

1. **Combine Ingredients:** In a mug, combine the whiskey, honey, and lemon juice.
2. **Add Hot Water:** Pour the boiling water into the mug and stir until the honey dissolves.
3. **Garnish and Serve:** Garnish with a lemon wedge or cinnamon stick, if desired. Serve immediately and enjoy!

Variations

- **Spiced Hot Toddy:** Add a pinch of ground cinnamon or nutmeg to the mug for a warm, spiced flavor.
- **Herbal Hot Toddy:** Steep a chamomile or ginger tea bag in the boiling water for a calming and soothing twist.
- **Non-Alcoholic Hot Toddy:** Replace the whiskey with hot apple cider or herbal tea for a comforting, alcohol-free version.

Tips

- **Use Good Quality Whiskey:** The flavor of the whiskey will shine through in this simple cocktail, so use a whiskey you enjoy drinking.
- **Adjust Sweetness:** Taste and adjust the amount of honey to your liking.
- **Experiment with Garnishes:** Try adding a slice of ginger, a star anise pod, or a sprig of rosemary for additional flavor and aroma.
- **Make it Ahead:** Combine the whiskey, honey, and lemon juice in a jar and store in the refrigerator. When ready to serve, add hot water and stir. ■



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