

Karen Telleen-Lawton: Stepping on the Gas

Driving habits hold the key to fuel savings and efficiency

By [Karen Telleen-Lawton](#), [Noozhawk Columnist](#) | Published on 06.26.2010

Gas economy should be a darling issue for every political party, since it addresses everyone's hot-button concerns. Fuel-efficient cars save money for private individuals, reduce climate change effects, mitigate oil dependency and increase energy sustainability. Other than grouching about fuel cost, though, it's not a popular conversation topic.

One way of changing your personal grouse to a gloat is to adjust your personal driving habits. [Edmunds](#), the folks famous for unbiased car-buying information, recently tested fuel-saving driving tips to find the ones that can save you real money while saving the environment.

The verifiable tips in order of fuel efficiency are:

- » Drive moderately, not aggressively
- » Avoid excessive idling
- » Drive slower
- » Use cruise control

By Edmunds' reckoning, moderate driving saves up to 37 percent on fuel; the average savings was 31 percent. What's more, the drivers probably felt more relaxed after the "moderate driving" test than the aggressive test.

Avoiding excessive idling can save up to 19 percent in fuel use. The researchers used an idle time of two minutes. Many signals are longer than that! My brother used to turn off his green [Volkswagen](#) bug when he approached a newly red signal. It seemed over the top in the 1970s, but I may try it.

Keeping to the speed limit saved as much as 14 percent with an average of 12 percent.

Cruise control is a bit of a surprise savings: up to 14 percent savings (average 7 percent). Apparently the automated control smooths out the accelerator input and helps the driver take a long view. Cruise is less efficient on hills, however, so it's better to turn it off on a significant incline.

Two other common tips were tested and found not to be significant. Checking tire pressure is a good idea for many reasons, but for mileage the difference wasn't measurable, at least by the Edmunds guys. Gas mileage was about the same with open windows vs. air conditioning and closed windows, so enjoy your preference.

If you implement these, you may become so enamored with fuel efficiency that you choose a fuel-efficient car on your next purchase. The [Environmental Protection Agency](#) recently assembled a list of the most fuel-efficient vehicles in the past 25 years. Not surprising giving weak standards (U.S. fleet-average fuel economy standards are 25 mpg vs. the European Union's 45 mpg), we haven't made progress in this area. Most of the efficient cars are older models.

The EPA's top five:

- » 1. 2000 [Honda Insight](#): 49/61/53 mpg city/highway/combined
- » 2. [2010 Toyota Prius](#): 51/48/50 mpg city/highway/combined
- » 3. 1986 [Chevrolet Sprint](#): 44/53/48 mpg city/highway/combined
- » 4. 1990-94 [Geo Metro](#): 43/52/47 mpg city/highway/combined
- » 5. 1986-87 [Honda Civic CR-X](#): 42/51/46 mpg city/highway/combined

I'm a Prius lover. I go so long between fill-ups that I forget which side my little 10-gallon tank is on. (OK, maybe it's also because my memory's getting worse.) But I sold my 2003 Prius to my son, who is giddy with his savings in a job that requires a lot of Bay Area driving.

Our 2007 Prius now shares the garage with an aging [Lexus](#) I bought from my dad. I am enjoying the bells and whistles, but compared with the Prius it drives like a tank and requires a tankful much more frequently.

Which is why I'm looking to the Edmunds tips to edge me closer to a respectable range.

— *Karen Telleen-Lawton's column is a mélange of observations supporting sustainability. Graze her writing and excerpts from Canyon Voices: The Nature of Rattlesnake Canyon at www.CanyonVoices.com.*