

BIG AND STRONG AND SURPRISINGLY QUIET, THE LATEST 350 ENDURO FROM KAWASAKI IS MUCH IMPROVED.

Kawasaki

350cc F9

■ In early 1970, Kawasaki introduced the first of what was to be their new line of trail machines. Originally designated the F5 Bighorn, this 350cc street/trail bike was completely different from any previous Kawasaki models, or any other manufacturer's models for that matter. It was not just an updated version of an older machine, but an all new model that reflected Kawasaki's design tendencies for the immediate future.

Unfortunately, the first Kawasaki 350 trail machines had some glaring shortcomings. This was doubly unfortunate because the looks and promise of the new model had eager customers hounding the Kawasaki dealers for a chance to buy one. The major problems were in the engine cases, kick starter and CDI ignition system. By the time the factory had corrected the design problems and repaired the faulty machines under their warranty program, the bike had acquired a bad reputation from which it is still slowly recovering. And that's a shame, because the 1972 version of the 350 enduro is a good machine. Over 100 changes were made on the 1972 model alone. In fact, Kawasaki feels so strongly that the new model is a completely different machine, that they gave it a new designation, the F9. The name Bighorn has been dropped.

The sheet metal on the 1972 F9, including the fenders and gas and oil tanks, are painted a bright green, with two darker stripes on each side of the gas tank. The paint is high quality enamel, but the color will probably not suit everyone's taste. It's a rather controversial shade that

takes some getting used to, but if you don't like it, don't let it keep you from trying the bike.

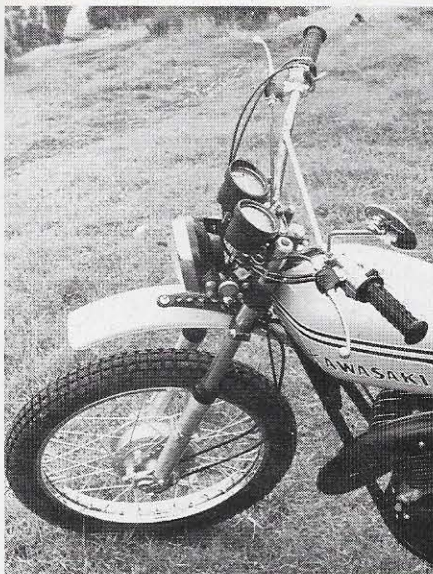
The 21-inch steel front wheel is mounted with stainless steel spokes to an aluminum brake hub. The single leading shoe front brake is light enough to allow the engine to loft the front end at will, but the stopping power is strong. The wheel mounts a 3.00x21 trials universal tire. The block tread pattern is probably the best compromise for dual street/trail usage. The aluminum front fender is high mounted, being attached to the underside of the lower triple clamp to prevent mud and brush from wedging between the tire and fender and bringing the bike to a sudden stop.

The original 1970 Kawasaki 350 Bighorn featured the first introduction of Kawasaki's famed Hatte forks, which are most unusual because of their great adjustability. By means of rotating the fork slider legs, the axle can be mounted in three different positions. Each position results in a different wheelbase and length of trail for the machine. The latter modification has far greater effects on the handling of the bike than the altered wheelbase does. The steering can be made neutral, very slow or pretty quick, depending on the rider's preference. Most riders seem to prefer the axle in the center position, for neutral steering. The stanchion tubes can be raised or lowered in the triple clamps, which alters the wheelbase, fork angle and length of trail. There is a screwdriver-slotted adjustment inside the top of each stanchion tube for three-way adjustment of the fork









The big green machine really gets it on over any kind of terrain. This 350cc Kawasaki has outstanding power for an enduro machine, possibly the strongest on the market, and the handling is excellent; the famous Hatta adjustable front forks work superbly over the roughest going, with the 21-inch front wheel giving the rider directional control when it counts most. Everything is well thought out and comfortable on the Kawasaki; handlebars, controls, saddle and foot pegs are in the right places to be handy when you need them.



spring tension. Finally, by varying the weight of the fork oil, the damping can be varied to suit the terrain and conditions. This versatility of the Hatta forks should not be dismissed as just a sales gimmick. It can be a tremendous advantage to the rider who wants to change the handling of the front end without going to the expense and hassle of buying a new set of forks.

The headlight gives brilliant illumination at night. The separate speedometer and tachometer are mounted above the headlight, with the ignition key switch between them. This is the best location for the key, and we think all machines should adopt it for the sake of standardization and rider convenience. The handlebars are 34 inches wide, with a nice shape for off road riding where the leverage factor can be an important feature in keeping the front wheel pointed

where you want it.

The gas tank has a pleasing shape without looking bulky, but it holds almost three gallons of fuel. That's enough to take you a long way, because the engine isn't very thirsty. The tank has a diaphragm-demand-type petcock that never has to be turned off, so fuel is always on tap as long as there is any in the tank. The engine has automatic oil injection, so no mixing of the gas and oil is required. The oil tank is on the right side, just under the saddle. It has a small plastic window to warn the rider when the supply is getting low. The saddle is wide and soft and big enough for two aboard, if you like riding double. The short rear fender mounts a bright tail light and license bracket.

The rear wheel is a steel 18-incher mounting a 4.00x18 trials universal tire. The big shoe gives it ample footprint off the road, and the steel

wheels are a great improvement over the soft alloy rims on the original Kawasaki 350 Bighorn. The rear brake works well. Stopping this 275-pound machine is no problem, even in panic situations. The rear shocks are perhaps the most deficient feature on the bike. The five-way adjustable springs are all right, but the damping is mediocre, greatly detracting from the rear end handling of the bike. It seems strange the Japanese will not manufacture first-class shocks for their first-class machines.

The F9 frame is a double cradle tubular steel unit with good quality welds at all joints. The finish is black paint and looks good. The engine is also finished in flat black, giving it a high performance, functional look. The 1972 exhaust pipe is one of the outstanding features on the machine. It's amazingly quiet for a trail machine, particularly a two-stroke,

yet it doesn't hamper the engine's power output. The pipe tucks in close to the left side of the frame under the saddle, with a large heat shield to protect the rider's leg. It never gets uncomfortable, no matter how hard you work the engine.

The position of the handlebars, saddle and foot pegs is just right for the average size rider, with the foot pegs having a certain amount of adjustment up and down and fore and aft. Although the big engine puts out plenty of power, the modest compression ratio and the long leverage of the primary kickstarter make it no problem to kick through. The advantage of the primary starter is that the transmission does not have to be in neutral before starting the engine. Just disengage the clutch and you can start it in any gear. This can be a big advantage if you stall the engine in an awkward place or in a competition event. The choke lever is a thumb-operated item on the right handlebar. With the engine cold, depress the choke, open the throttle a hair and kick. One or two kicks are always sure fire. The engine warms up quickly, and you're off. Once warm, the choke is no longer needed for restarts.

The constant mesh five-speed transmission has ratios well suited to the engine's power band, which is fairly wide, thanks to the rotary disc valve induction system. The throws of the shift lever are short and crisp, with no extra neutrals between gears. Neutral is between first and second gear, with first on the bottom and the rest up. The ratios of the gearbox are fairly wide, allowing the kind of high speed touring on the turnpike that will create no traffic obstruction. The indicated top speed is 80 plus, and if the speedometer is slightly off, cruising at 70 is still no sweat. At the same time, hill climbing power is available in the lower gears. The engine pulls very strongly from low RPM, and never seems to run out of power. Kawasaki's stubborn insistence in sticking with the CDI ignition system despite the disastrous early units in 1970 has paid off. Sparking is a never fail system on the 1972 F9.

Off the road, the 350 Kawasaki really comes into its own. This is a good handling machine for a trail bike, except for the shocks. The poor return damping makes the ride across



the rough more punishing to the rider's tailbone than is desirable. With the power on hard, the back end hops from side to side as the rebound of the springs jumps the rear wheel clear of the ground. Just the replacement of the standard shocks with a quality pair such as Koni or Girling does wonders for the handling of the F9. The original fork oil seems a little light for rough off road use, but a heavier weight is easily poured in. The forks work almost as well as any on the market, at least good enough that few off road riders could really justify the expense of replacing them with some competition brand. In fact, there are many enduro riders and desert racers in California who do nothing more to the F9 than to remove the lights and instruments and replace the shocks. Then they go racing. With the new muffler requirements for competition, the standard muffler will do

as good a job as any expansion chamber with a silencer on the stinger. It's almost eerie to ride fast across the rough terrain on the quiet machine, but it's a welcome change from the roaring of the usual racer.

The Kawasaki F9 is a well-designed machine with the added advantage of several model years for the engineers to sort out the bugs that usually plague a first year model. The result is an almost foolproof machine that has few serious faults. The most serious drawback is the shocks, but fortunately a replacement pair can usually be afforded by the rider who can afford the bike in the first place. The F9 is big, strong and attractive, with good handling and plenty of power for most off road uses. Best of all, it costs a lot less than the best European off roaders and will do almost anything as well, except for motocross, of course. ●



The F9 350 has a surprisingly narrow profile for a bike its size, handy for fitting between the trees on a woods run. The cable actuated rear brake is powerful and smooth, but the shocks are not the best on the market; replacing them would be our first recommendation. The kick start lever folds neatly out of the rider's way when not in use. Under the fold-up saddle is the battery and CDI electrics and foam rubber air cleaner. Note the plastic window on the oil tank for easy checking of the lubricant supply.



ENGINE

Type
single cylinder two stroke
Bore and stroke
3.17 x 2.68 inches
Displacement
346cc
Compression Ratio
6.8 to 1
Max. Horsepower
33 @ 6,500 rpm
Ignition
CDI
Carburetion
rotary valve induction
Lubrication
automatic oil injection

DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase
55 inches
Ground Clearance
9 inches
Dry weight
265 pounds

WHEELS AND BRAKES

Front tire size
3.00 x 21
Front brake type
drum type
Rear tire size
4.00 x 18
Rear brake type
drum type

TRANSMISSION

Type
five speed constant mesh

Clutch

wet multi disc

PERFORMANCE

Indicated highest one-way speed

84 mph

GENERAL

Air Filtration

washable foam element

Battery type

12 V

CAPACITIES

Fuel tank

2.9 gallons

Oil tank

2 quarts

FRAME AND SUSPENSION

Front suspension

telescopic forks

Rear suspension

Shock absorbers

Frame type

double cradle

COLORS

Green

PRICED AS TESTED

\$965.00

DISTRIBUTOR(S)

Kawasaki Motors

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