13-inch MacBook Air (M5) review: Fast and steady wins the race

Summary

The 13-inch MacBook Air (M5) offers impressive performance improvements with the new M5 chip, doubling storage capacity and performance. While the design remains largely unchanged, the updated wireless chip, faster SSD, and included 40W Dynamic Power Adapter enhance the overall experience. Despite lacking HDR and variable refresh rate, the MacBook Air remains a reliable and durable choice for most users, offering excellent battery life and a premium build.

Another year, another chip update. There isn't much new this year, but it's still a great laptop for most users.

By Jason Cross Senior Editor, Macworld MAR 13, 2026 4:15 am PDT

Image: Foundry

At a Glance

Expert's Rating

★★★★½

Macworld EDITORS' CHOICE

Pros

- Fantastic performance for this laptop class
- Double the storage capacity and performance
- All-day battery life and then some

Cons

- Still no HDR or variable refresh rate
- Not much has changed in four years

Our Verdict

The more things change, the more the MacBook Air stays the same. It may not be much different from the model from last year or from 2022, but this is still a winning formula that works just right for most users.

Price When Reviewed

From $1,099

…

If you've used a MacBook Air in the last four years, you know exactly what to expect of the new M5-equipped model. Apple's most popular laptop has changed very little. It's really all about the M5 chip, which delivers impressive year-on-year performance improvements.

However, the MacBook Air is no longer the entry-level option. With the launch of the $599 MacBook Neo, the MacBook Air, which now starts at $1,099, is firmly in the mid-range of Apple's laptop lineup. That doesn't necessarily mean the Air is targeting a different audience, but its positioning puts it in a different light.

Unfortunately, you won't find anything surprising or especially noteworthy about the new M5 version of the MacBook Air. It continues to be a stable workhorse in Apple's lineup, and a great laptop for most, but it's hard to get excited about somewhat longer benchmark bars on a benchmark chart year after year.

M5 MacBook Air: Design, display, and specs

A pair of Thunderbolt 4 ports and MagSafe charging. Just like last year.
Foundry

Apple has changed precious little about the MacBook Air since the M2 model was introduced four years ago. With the M4 model last year, it swapped out the Space Gray color option for Sky Blue and added the newer 12MP Center Stage camera with Desk View, updated the USB-C ports to Thunderbolt 4, and improved the Wi-Fi support to Wi-FI 6E.

This year, Apple updated the wireless chip to its own N1 (with Wi-Fi 7 support and Bluetooth 6) and doubled the starting storage to 512GB (while raising the price by $100). The SSD is a lot faster, too. A minor detail: The keyboard now has glyphs on the Tab, Caps Lock, Return, and Shift keys instead of words like the rest of Apple's MacBook lineup. Unfortunately, it has the same four colors, which seem even more subdued next to the MacBook Neo.

These keys used to have words instead of glyphs. Other than that, the keyboard is unchanged.
Foundry

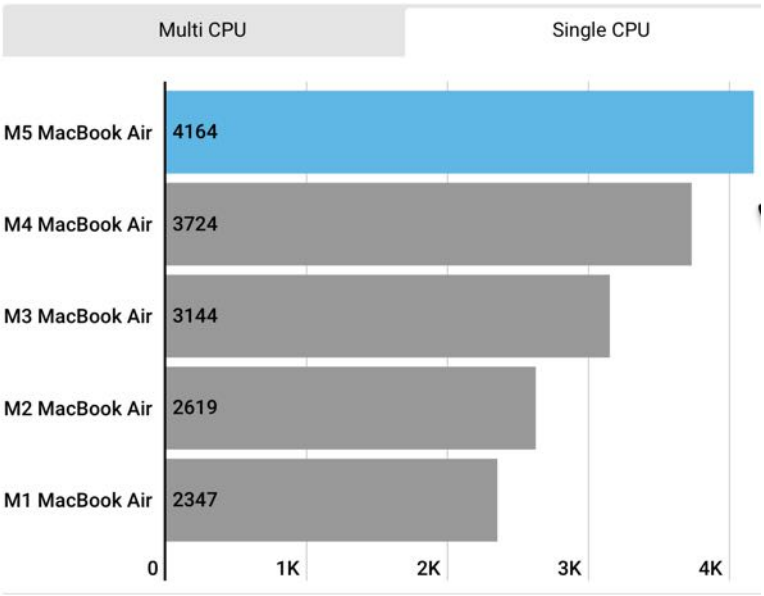
MacBook Air pricing has bounced back and forth for years. The M1 model started at $999. That shot up to $1,199 with the M2 model, which was then reduced to $1,099 when the 15-inch model arrived. The M4 model cut the price again to $999, and now we're back to $1,099 for the 13-inch model or $1,299 for the 15-inch model.

That entry-level model gets you the reduced-spec M5 with 10 CPU cores and 8 GPU cores. Our review unit has the full M5 with 10 CPU and 10 GPU cores, 16GB of RAM, and a 1TB SSD, bringing the price to $1,299. In the U.S., Apple now includes the new 40W Dynamic Power Adapter with 60W Max with the MacBook Air rather than the 30W USB-C Power Adapter (13-inch base model only) or the 35W Dual USB-C Port Power Adapter.

M5 MacBook Air: Performance

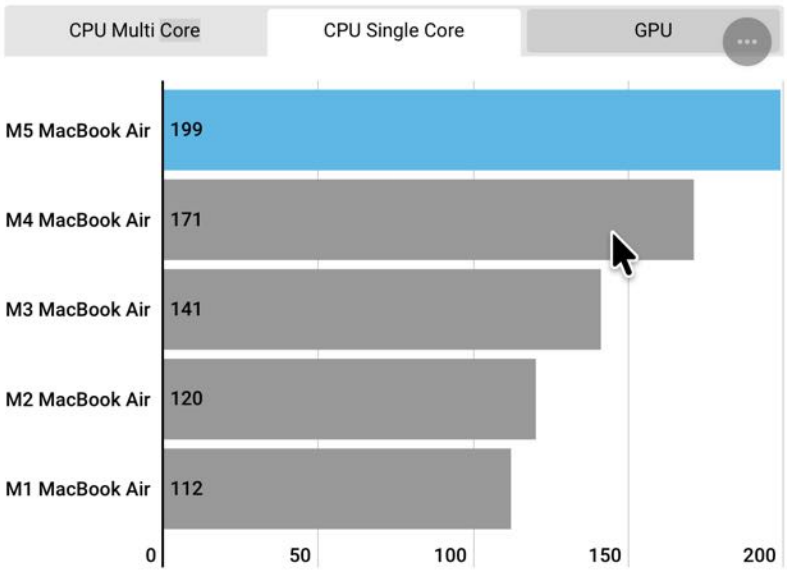
We already viewed the M5-based MacBook Pro, and as expected, the performance of the M5 in the MacBook Air is very similar. As is always the case, the MacBook Pro will run certain tasks a bit faster since it has active cooling for sustained peak performance, while the MacBook Air delivers quiet performance with no fan at all. This causes the processor to slow down when things get too hot, lowering performance.

Geekbench 6 CPU



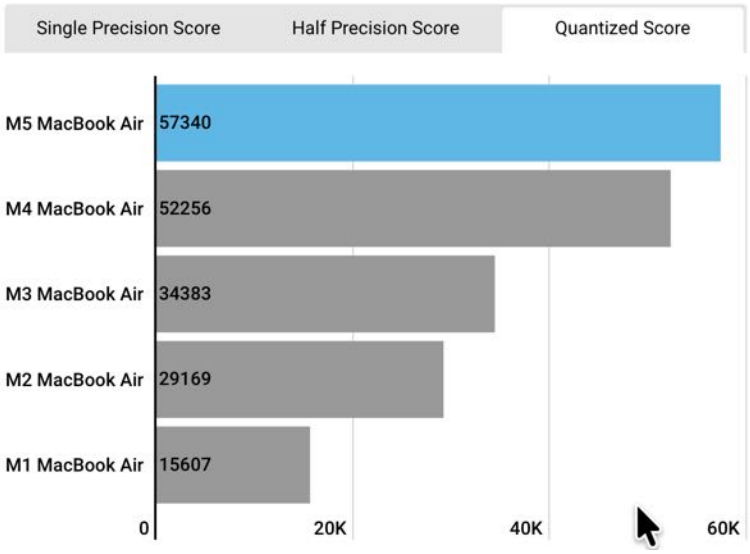
Starting with the old standby Geekbench 6, we see the same CPU performance uplift we did in the M5 MacBook Pro. World-leading single-thread performance, and very good multi-core performance for a chip that uses this little power. It's amazing how steady and predictable Apple silicon CPU performance improvements are year over year.

Cinebench 2024



There's a new 2026 edition of Cinebench, but we'll present the 2024 version here to give you historical context to previous models. Again, CPU performance shows steady, predictable, and impressive year-over-year gains.

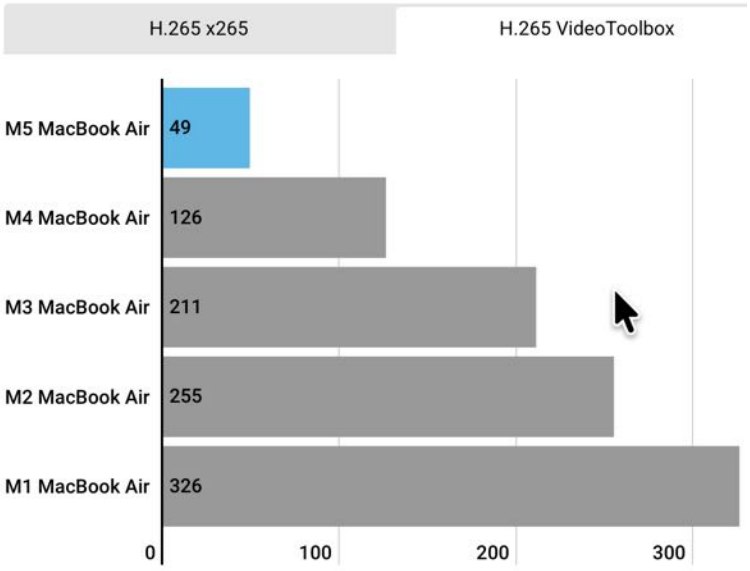
Geekbench AI



A newer test, the Geekbench AI benchmark runs through a serious of common AI workloads, from image classification and face detection to machine translation. It uses Apple's CoreML framework and can be forced to run on the CPU, GPU, or Neural Engine.

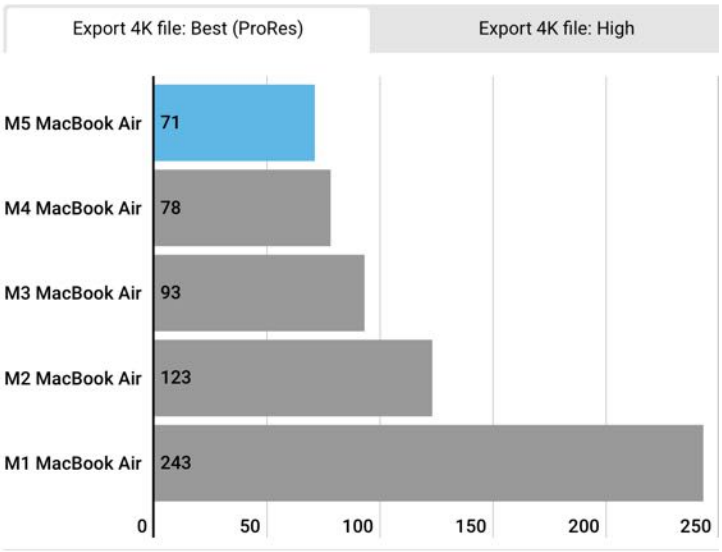
Here, we present the Neural Engine scores. It's interesting to have a test that can isolate its performance, where we can see that when running real AI workloads, the Neural Engine in Apple's M-series chips have gotten 2-3x faster over the last several years.

Handbrake video encoding



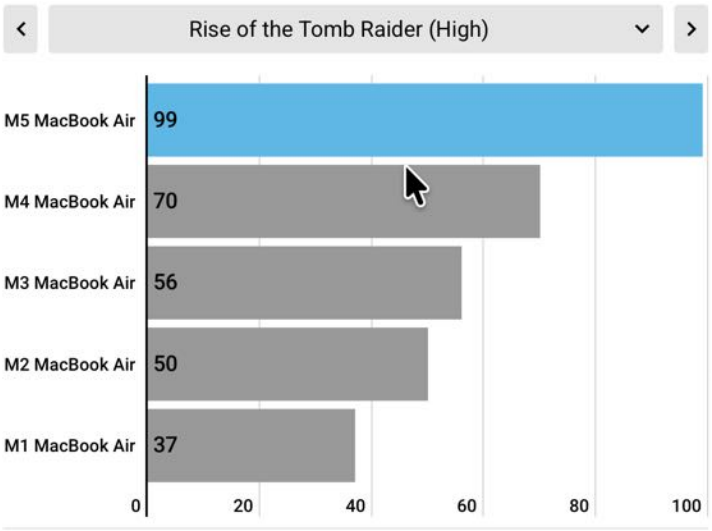
In our video encoding test, we use the popular HandBrake utility to convert the 4K Tears of Steel video to a 1080p H.265 file, measuring how many seconds it takes. Shorter bars are better, and while the regular CPU encoding shows impressive year-over-year gains, the "VideoToolbox" encode, which uses Apple's hardware video encoder, is the really interesting result. Apple's video encoder is a lot faster in the M5 than the M4.

iMovie video export



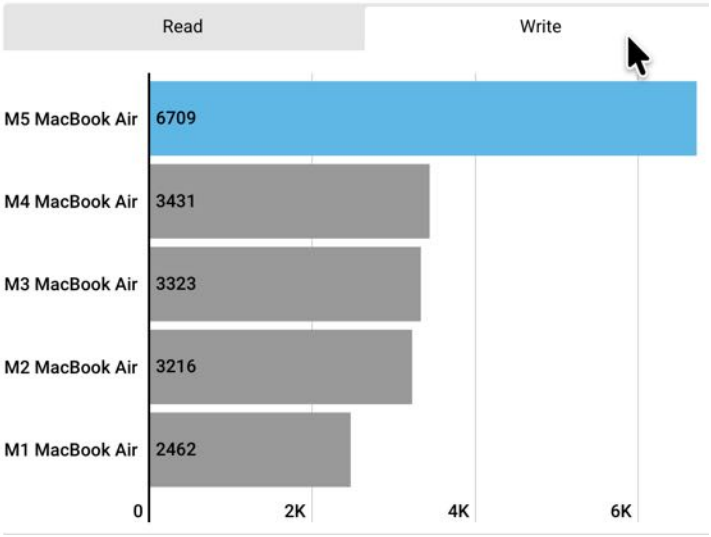
When exporting a 4K iMovie video at the High setting, the M5 is only marginally faster than the M4. With the exception of Apple adding ProRes encoding to their video encoder in the M2 generation, performance in this particular test has only shown minimal improvement year after year.

Video game benchmarks



Looking at frame rates in high-end video games, even those that are a few years old, shows that you're not going to buy an M5 MacBook Air for gaming. The lack of active cooling causes performance to dip after playing for 10 minutes or so. You can play casual games just fine, but for a variety of reasons, if you're into AAA gaming, the Air isn't the best choice.

Blackmagic Disk Test



One area where the M5 MacBook Air really shines is in SSD performance. Like other Macs of the M5 generation, Apple has drastically improved storage performance. After years of more or less 3GB/sec speeds, Apple has doubled throughput in just one year.

M5 MacBook Air: Battery life

The battery life of 13-inch MacBook Airs hasn't really changed much in years. You're still looking at a 53.8 watt-hour battery, and Apple claims 15 hours of wireless web browsing and 18 hours of video streaming.

We used a downloaded movie on repeat to run down the battery from full, with the display brightness fixed at 150 nits—bright enough for a well-lit office. 18 hours and 24 minutes later, the battery finally died. It's a few minutes longer than older M-series MacBook Air models, but the difference is small enough not to notice.

In hands-on testing, we were able to work for hours and barely see the battery dip. With basic tasks like web browsing, email, or writing, we could work all day and still have half the battery remaining. Tapping away on a transatlantic flight? You'll land with so much battery life left you could turn around and go back. You won't come close to needing to find a plug in a typical 8-hour work day.

The new Air comes with Apple's new Dynamic Power Adapter.
Foundry

The M5 MacBook Air ships with the new 40W Dynamic Power Adapter, which generally charges the laptop at a rate near 60 watts, at least until you get over 80%. This isn't enough to qualify for what Apple calls "fast-charging," which is charging from 0% to 50% in 30 minutes or less, but it's close. The M5

MacBook Air does support fast charging, but you'll need a 70W or greater power adapter for it.

Should you buy an M5 MacBook Air

The MacBook Air is the workhorse of the MacBook lineup. The MacBook Pro is the expensive, premium, high-speed offering, beyond the needs (and means) of most users. The new MacBook Neo is the inexpensive laptop for new users, students, and those with lesser computing needs.

Which puts the MacBook Air in the middle. Premium and performant enough to please almost everyone in the crowd. As always, I feel compelled to complain that Apple's 60Hz SDR display technology is a bit dated for this price range, but the color accuracy and brightness uniformity are still top-notch. I'd like better speakers, too.

But this silent, durable, reliable laptop will get the job done for all but the most demanding users for years to come. There may be little to get excited about, but there's little to complaint about, too.

…

Author: Jason Cross, Senior Editor, Macworld

Jason has written about technology for more than 25 years - first in the gaming press, then focusing on enthusiast PCs and general technology. He enjoys learning how complicated technology works and explaining it in a way anyone can understand.