

MUDFEST!

For maximum mud, we drive in the NW Outdoor Activity Vehicle of the Year face-off in the Great Northern Cascades

By Joe Sage
Photos: NWAPA / Armin Ausejo



To get the best idea how SUVs, crossovers and off-roaders can handle the wettest and worst of conditions, we could wait for a good August monsoon storm in Arizona. We do have our share of mud then, if only briefly. But it would be pretty unpredictable to actually schedule a competitive event, with a couple of dozen automakers bringing a couple of dozen prime contenders out for the challenge. For this, we joined our colleagues in the Pacific Northwest.

We flew to Washington state, where the Northwest Automotive Press Association (NWAPA) was holding Mudfest for its 19th time—it is held in Oregon or Washington, variously—and its third consecutive time at the DirtFish Rally School just outside Snoqualmie. The facility is at an elevation of about 600 feet, but is more dramatic than this suggests, tucked up against 4167-foot Mt Si and other peaks of the Northern Cascades.

The event was based out of the cliff-hanging, waterfall-hugging Salish Lodge and Spa—the same place we joined Goodyear last year for the introduction of their Eagle F1 Asymmetric All-Seasons (though that event held its track time at Pacific Raceways in Kent).

DirtFish is built on a 300-plus-acre site with a lengthy industrial past, centered today around abandoned historic sawmills, planers and its pioneer power station, and still surrounded by active timber operations. The facility includes gravel, mud and skidpad-ready paved areas, with open dirt trails and wooded regions ready for our event's dedicated pits and mud tracks. DirtFish has instructors with a full range of backgrounds, from World Rally Championship (WRC) to Formula One, but the emphasis here is normally on WRC,

using Subaru Impreza STI sedans and hatchbacks.

Not so today. We would be testing 23 different vehicles, grouped in five categories from off-road to luxury to compact. As the scope of vehicles has broadened so much in the actual marketplace, this year's subtext was changed from Sport Utility Vehicle of the Year to Outdoor Activity Vehicle of the Year. (You can find some parallel between this and the Phoenix-based Active Lifestyle Vehicle of the Year awards held in October.)

Some thirty automotive reviewers and testers participated, and the manufacturers provided key personnel to point out features or address any questions or concerns with each vehicle. Drivers scored each vehicle subjectively on a variety of attributes, including on-road and off-road characteristics; powertrain and braking; interior, exterior and technology features; fuel efficiency; and value.

On-road testing included a circuit along evergreen-lined two-lane mountain highways in the vicinity of DirtFish, plus a wet pavement autocross course on site. Every vehicle but the off-road class also ran a moderate off-road course, created with plenty of mud, ruts, gravel and dirt. The full-blown off-road category tackled a much tougher course with extreme conditions that challenged their locking differentials, maximum axle articulation, and approach, breakover and departure angles.

Competition was often very tight, but each category did produce a statistical winner. An overall Northwest Outdoor Activity Vehicle of the Year was also selected. Categories and entrants (alphabetically within groups) were as follows. Most were 2013 models, unless noted below as 2014 or in one case 2012.

COMPACT CLASS

.....\$ as tested	.....MPG	.....HP	.....Torque	
Ford Escape Titanium 4WD	.....\$35,630	.....21/28	.....240	.....270
Hyundai Santa Fe Sport (5p) AWD 2.0T	.....\$35,925	.....19/24	.....264	.....269
Mazda CX-5 Grand Touring AWD (2014)	.....\$31,890	.....24/30	.....184	.....185
MINI Cooper S Paceman ALL4	.....\$38,050	.....23/30	.....181	.....177
Subaru XV Crosstrek 2.0i Premium 5-dr Manual	.....\$22,790	.....25/33	.....148	.....145

This was a wildly diverse grouping, with some vehicles along fairly traditional CUV lines and others blurring the lines more (with all of this open to interpretation). Horsepower varies by more than 60 percent, and prices vary by almost 70 percent. Three have highway fuel mileage topping 30 MPG. The MINI surprised and delighted us, having off-road capabilities on a par with the biggest and

COMPACT CLASS Clockwise: Hyundai Santa Fe Sport AWD 2.0T; Mazda, MINI, Subaru, Ford



LUXURY COMPACT CLASS Clockwise: Acura RDX AWD Tech; BMW, Land Rover



OFF-ROAD CLASS Clockwise: Jeep Wrangler Unlimited Rubicon; Land Rover, Mercedes-Benz



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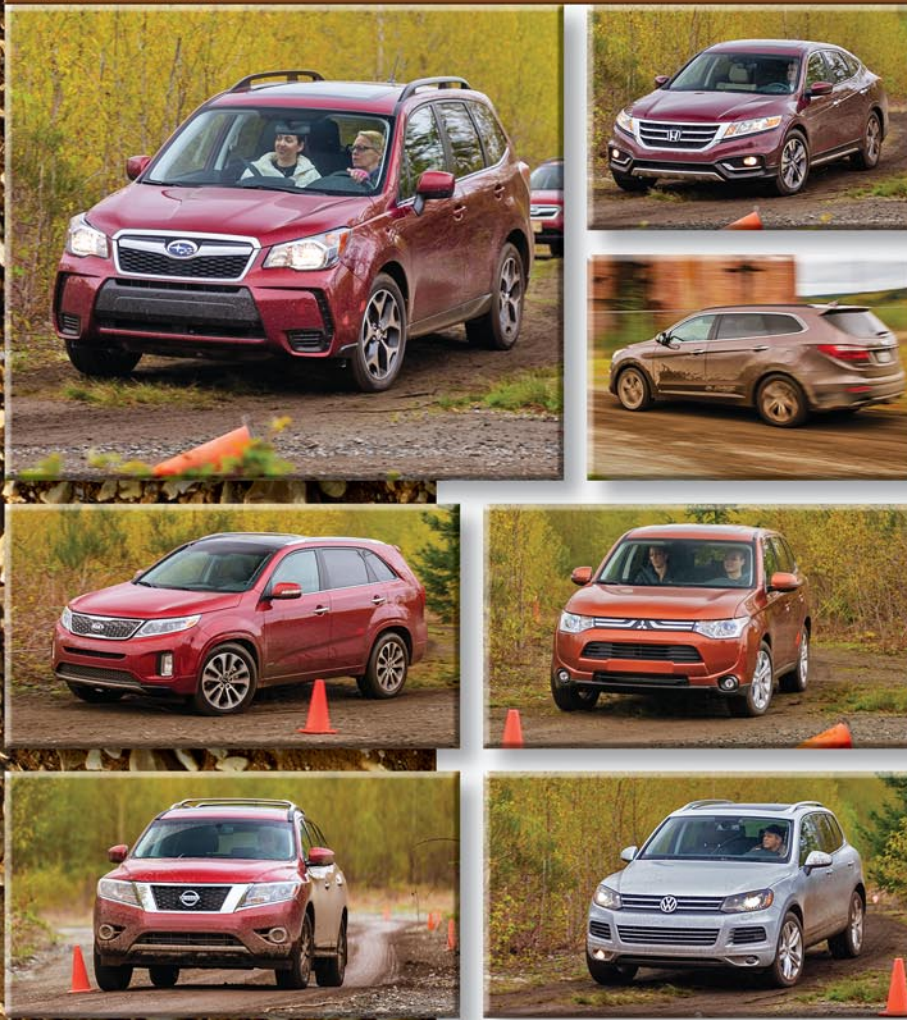
Photo: Joe Sage

Where the roads are dry and the cars are slick.



Arizona Driver Magazine
www.arizonadrivermagazine.com
 Advertising: sales@arizonadrivermagazine.com
 480-948-0200

FAMILY CLASS Clockwise: Subaru Forester 2.0XT, Honda, Hyundai, Mitsubishi, Volkswagen, Nissan, Kia



LUXURY CLASS Clockwise: Jeep Grand Cherokee, BMW, Buick, Volkswagen, Mercedes-Benz



best, but its price worked against it in the points tally. The Crosstrek delivers tremendous value and capability, but felt a little light and rough around the edges at times. The CX-5 is topped by Ford and Hyundai for power, but we didn't feel any lack. We made several notes about what a pleasure it was to drive, and for us it came in second. (You can read about the CX-5 further, elsewhere in this issue.) Despite the lowest fuel economy and a relatively high price (both of which were scoring factors), the Santa Fe Sport received all 5s on our own score sheet, and that matches the group's outcome. **Best Compact: Hyundai Santa Fe Sport AWD 2.0T.**

LUXURY COMPACT CLASS

.....\$ as testedMPGHPTorque

Acura RDX AWD Tech	.....\$40,315	.....19/27	.....273	.....251
BMW X1 xDrive 35i	.....\$48,095	.....18/27	.....300	.....300
Land Rover LR2	.....\$48,295	.....17/24	.....240	.....250

We drove the BMW X1 a few months ago and largely dismissed it as a station wagon wanting to claim the X name. Here, it scored just 55 percent of what the other two did on our sheet—despite its power advantage. Our logbook noted that we expected nothing in particular from the Acura but were highly impressed and “found no fault at all.” The LR2 was a fine machine that actually totaled a half point higher overall with us than the Acura did—despite knocking a point off for some yaw characteristics on the paved roads. In the group tally, the Acura got the nod, surely benefiting from its price, fuel mileage and power advantages over the Land Rover. **Best Luxury Compact: Acura RDX AWD Tech.**

OFF-ROAD CLASS

.....\$ as testedMPGHPTorque

Jeep® Wrangler Unlimited Rubicon 10th 4X4	.....\$43,400	.....16/20	.....285	.....260
Land Rover Range Rover Supercharged	.....\$111,120	.....13/19	.....510	.....461
Mercedes-Benz G550	.....\$118,155	.....12/15	.....382	.....391

Some of our course was tailor-made for a six-wheel-drive logging truck, but our vehicles in this category were much more civilized than that. At least two of them were. Really, what can you say to a couple of \$110-grand-plus off-roaders like the Geländewagen and a supercharged Range Rover? Through the oddities of grouping to assess maximum capabilities—which that posh and pricey pair both delivered in spades—these shared the category with the always, always capable Jeep Wrangler, which comes in at about a third the price of either of the others. It also hits 20 MPG. For distance cruising, you may want to blow the dough on those high-dollar, high-horsepower alternatives, but this was an off-road test, and in bang for the buck, the Jeep was tops with the judges. But it's a stellar category. Our own score sheet had the Jeep in second place by only a half-point—and this with the G-Wagen getting all 5s, across the board, other than in fuel economy and price (both of which scored 2s). And the Range Rover was barely a point and a half behind those.

Best Off-road: Jeep® Wrangler Unlimited Rubicon 10th Anniversary 4x4.

FAMILY CLASS

.....\$ as testedMPGHPTorque

Honda Crosstour 4WD EXLN V6	.....\$37,920	.....19/28	.....278	.....252
Hyundai Santa Fe (7p) LTD AWD	.....\$38,730	.....18/24	.....290	.....252
Kia Sorento SX AWD (2014)	.....\$38,550	.....18/24	.....290	.....252
Mitsubishi Outlander GT (2014)	.....\$32,720	.....24/29	.....166	.....162
Nissan Pathfinder SL FWD	.....\$40,470	.....19/25	.....260	.....240
Subaru Forester 2.0XT Premium CVT (2014)	.....\$28,820	.....23/28	.....250	.....258
Volkswagen Touareg TDI Executive	.....\$60,480	.....20/29	.....240	.....406

The price point on the Touareg diesel seems better suited to the Luxury group. In fact, in our scoring, it would have come in second if it had been applied to that group—and without a ding for cost in this group, it would have about tied for first. Its prodigious diesel torque is one reason.



The Outlander gets a nod from us as a “most improved” entry, and its fuel economy is tops here, but price could be a little better for the relatively low engine power it delivers. Compare these same qualities—cost, power, fuel economy—and it’s not hard to see how the Subaru Forester conquered this category with the judges overall. (In our own tally, however, the Hyundai came in first, and the Kia Sorento tied the Forester for second.) **Best Family: Subaru Forester 2.0XT Premium CVT.**

LUXURY CLASS

.....\$ as tested	MPG	HP	Torque
BMW X3 xDrive 28i			
.....\$52,345	21/28	240	260
Buick Enclave AWD Premium			
.....\$52,090	16/22	288	270
Jeep® Grand Cherokee Overland 4X4 (2014)			
.....\$51,875	14/20	360	390
Mercedes-Benz GL450 4Matic			
.....\$98,165	14/19	362	406
Volkswagen Touareg Hybrid (2012)			
.....\$63,790	20/24	333	325

The X5 has long been our preferred BMW X, but this day we had the X1 and the X3. Our X3 felt a bit like a stripper, but in fact was optioned up to \$52k-plus from a base of \$38,500. The Buick—a real beauty on the first day—unfortunately fell out of service before the second day and was not scored. The Mercedes-Benz GL is a perennial favorite of ours, as is the Grand Cherokee, but the Jeep surprisingly fell well ahead of the Benz in point-by-point scoring, partly because the GL costs almost twice what the others in this category do. The VW Hybrid (a 2012 model) came in second in our tally, knocked down a bit for its price relative to all but the GL. Overall, the Grand Cherokee was our winner in this category and also won with the overall group. **Best Luxury: Jeep® Grand Cherokee Overland 4X4.**

OVERALL WINNER

The Grand Cherokee had our highest score (by one point) of any vehicle in all categories of this event. Apparently our own score sheet outcome was reflected throughout the full group of judges, as they crowned one champion: the **Northwest Outdoor Activity Vehicle of the Year: Jeep® Grand Cherokee Overland 4X4. ■**

Well over halfway to max

The Nissan Maxima impressed us so well a couple of years ago—delivering a fine large sedan ride for a front-wheel-driver—that we looked forward to the all-new 2013 Altima with great anticipation. While in Washington state for Mudfest, we drove one on our airport-to-Snoqualmie run, plus a bonus day or two in the islands.

Our Altima was a top-trim SV. There are three models, the price spread is fairly close, and they all have the same powertrain—the distinctions could just as easily be option packages. The base model starts at just \$21,760, and this SV at \$24,080. We’d go for the top model. (We had a stripper Altima rental in Colorado a few weeks later, which confirmed this.) Add one generally useful but not essential (unless you want a moonroof) package, and ours was out the door for \$27,005.

Our drive time was limited, but it did include steep climbs, as well as the rough

road surfaces that Pacific Northwest weather creates. We noted plenty of passing power on uphill at highway speeds, and solid, smooth suspension on the roughest of patches, with no front-drive torque, same as the Maxima. The nav and audio interface was simple and effective, typical Nissan.

We appreciate the fit, finish, fixtures and style of the Maxima, and had hoped for a downsized version in the new Altima. And...? It has come much closer than before. In the rich Java Metallic finish and top SV trim of our tester, the gap closes significantly. Focus on this one and not the old stripper rental, and things really start to gel. ■

