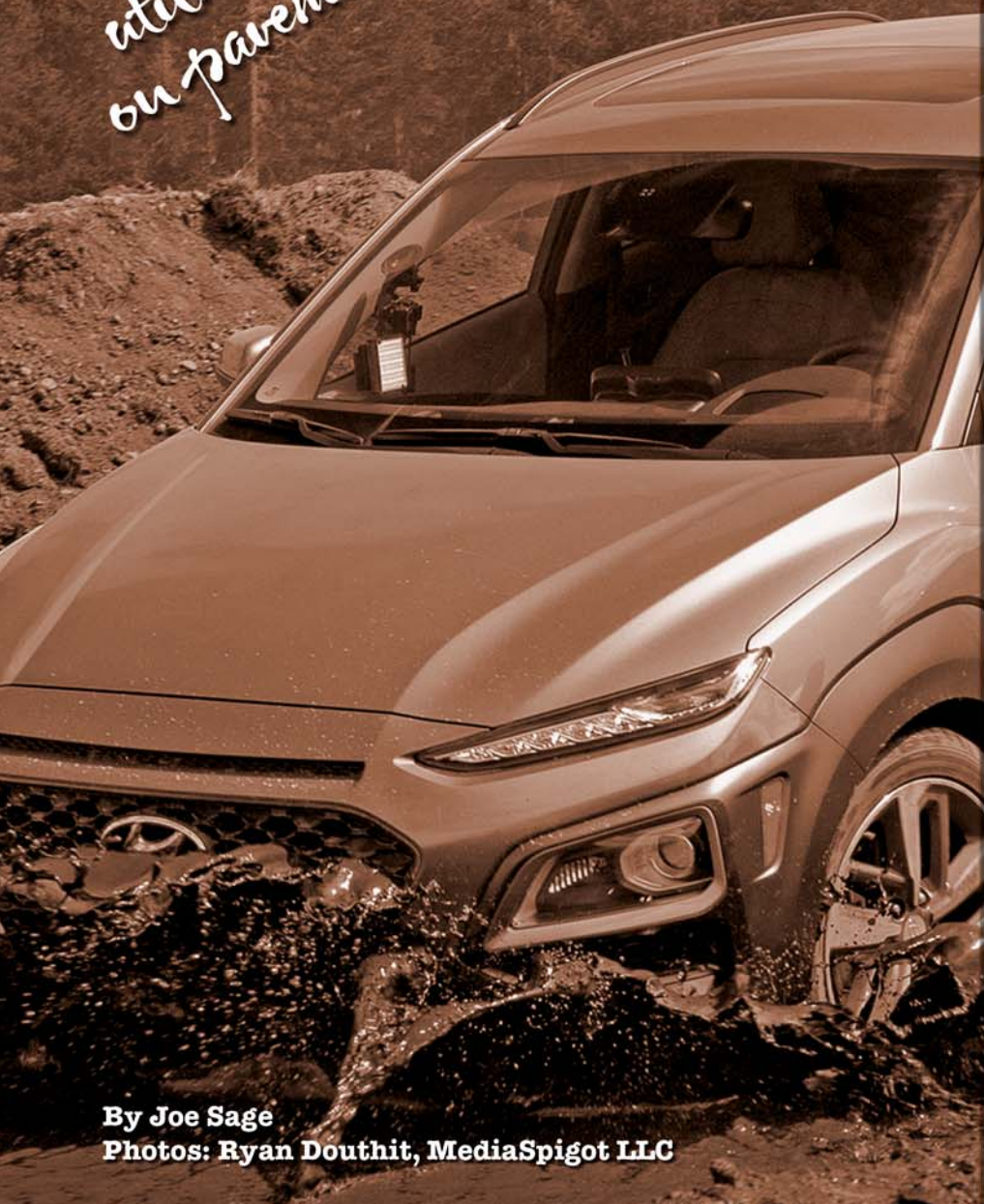


Mudfest!
utilities and pickups compete
on pavement and off-road



By Joe Sage
 Photos: Ryan Douthit, MediaSpigot LLC

We belong to a number of regional media associations, and we've attended drive events with several, but the ones we try to never miss are road and off-road comparos in Texas and the Pacific Northwest, because both are great places to spend a few days, and both great people in their groups, but also because they have a lot of in common with Arizona.

The Pacific Northwest has a combination of open lands and forest, wild weather, city streets, freeways (sort of) and Interstates, beautiful two-lane blue highways, and significant climbs into the snow country, much like here.

The buying markets have subtle differences—and we judge in line with those—but overall, they have a very high level of similarities.

One big difference: the Olympic Peninsula averages 140 inches of rainfall per year, compared to eight inches in Phoenix, hence the likelihood of enough mud at the Northwest Automotive Press Association (NWAPA) Outdoor Activity Vehicle of the Year Awards event—this time around celebrating its 25th year—to earn it the longstanding (and better known) nickname, Mudfest.

But the weather is never guaranteed. Just as the Texas Truck Rodeo last year was deluged by a hundred-year flood, Mudfest this year was largely dry. It had rained for several days leading up to the event, but percolation rates are much higher there than in the desert—the rain gets soaked into the ground pretty quickly.

Not to worry—big tankers make up the difference, keeping courses at least a bit muddy and creating a few full-on water hazards for the event.

This year's event was held for the fourth time at The Ridge Motorsports Park, northwest of Shelton, with overnights along Hood Canal (a natural body of water) near Union, Washington. The 170-acre facility features a 2.47-mile, 16-turn track with 300-foot elevation changes (which we don't use); a one-sixth-scale version of that as a kart track (which we do use); and off-road acreage modified or specially built for our purposes.

Day one, paved testing, uses the kart track for acceleration, braking, steering and handling evaluation. Day two is all off-road, with a primary course of dirt, mud, ascent, descent and embankments, plus this year a new separate Extreme Capability course with logs, rock-crawling and generally more challenging conditions.

Vehicles are judged both days by all drivers, with scores assigned to drivetrain and performance; comfort, function and technology; styling; off-roading; fuel efficiency; and value. These tallies are very specific, but are used just as reference, as each judge then simply votes a 1st-2nd-3rd choice in each category. Algorithms used in vote tabulation apply balancing factors between the collective votes for paved and off-road days.

Vehicles are designated by their manufacturers to compete in any of five categories—four for utilities and one for pickups—which apply for both the on-road and off-road days.

A sixth category, Extreme Capability—on the off-road day only—is populated by vehicles from the original five categories, as designated by manufacturers who want to compete in this realm.

Finally, an Outdoor Activity Vehicle of the Year winner is voted from the overall slate of entries, separately from individual category voting.

Fifteen manufacturers entered 22 vehicles—six from the Detroit Three, six from Europe, seven from Japan and three from Korea. Family utilities were a pretty even mix of all of the above, while Europe dominated the two luxury utility categories (with four out of five entries) and Detroit dominated pickups (also with four out of five). There were a number of brand-new-to-market vehicles, as well as many refreshed models.

Brand specialists are on hand to point out features and answer questions. And an indispensable team of hard-working press fleet representatives prep the vehicles and run the courses.

We learn all we can about all vehicles' features and capabilities within parameters of this event's particular outdoor activity theme, but also in general, all of which proves valuable on an ongoing basis, well after the event is a wrap, whether a particular vehicle receives a trophy here or not.

Twenty-five media members drove and voted. Results can be tight, with casual favorites not always statistical winners or vice versa.

Results follow, with the low and high noted for the range of price, horsepower, torque and highway fuel mileage within each category, to help you gauge where the winners fall.

All are 2019 models unless noted otherwise.

KEEP RIGHT >>





SUBCOMPACT/COMPACT FAMILY UTILITY

Hyundai Kona Ultimate AWD
Hyundai Tucson Ultimate AWD
Jeep Renegade Trailhawk 4x4
Mazda CX-5 Signature AWD
Subaru Forester Sport AWD
Toyota RAV4 Adventure AWD
Volkswagen Tiguan 2.0T SEL Prem R-Line w/4MOTION

PRICE RANGE\$30,080 Kona > \$40,485 VW Tiguan
POWER RANGE ...HP175 HP Kona > 227 HP Mazda
.....TORQUE.....175 LBFT Tucson > 310 LBFT Mazda

HWY MPG RANGE26 MPG Tucson > 33 MPG Subaru/Toyota

ANALYSIS: The biggest category this year combined two market categories (or more), as those categorizations become more complex and increasingly overlap, anyway. This group includes several notable standouts, with recent refreshes, new generations and all-new models, each bearing its successive significance versus elapsed time quotient, all of which pretty much evened out and brought the comparisons back to basics. Off-road capability has a range in this set, but price may have been more of a factor among judges. Hyundai Kona cost the least, but Subaru Forester was close and had a slight edge in horsepower (though not torque) and a notable edge on highway fuel mileage (though not city). When the votes were tallied, Forester took the win.

WINNER: 2019 Subaru Forester Sport AWD
182 HP, 176 LBFT, 33 MPG hwy, \$31,815 as tested
Runnerup: 2019 Jeep Renegade Trailhawk 4x4

MIDSIZE/FULL-SIZE FAMILY UTILITY

Ford Edge Titanium AWD
Honda Passport AWD Elite
Kia Telluride SX V6 AWD (2020)
Toyota 4Runner TRD Pro V6
Volkswagen Atlas V6 SEL Premium w/4MOTION

PRICE RANGE\$44,725 Honda > \$49,625 VW Atlas
POWER RANGE ...HP250 HP VW Ford > 291 HP Kia Telluride
.....TORQUE.....262 LBFT Honda/Kia > 280 LBFT Ford

HWY MPG RANGE20 MPG Toyota > 28 MPG Ford Edge

ANALYSIS: Another utility regrouping combined midsize and full-size (previously, midsize had been grouped with compact, while full-size stood alone in a category that previously alone bore just a family title). It's a good grouping by size. By function, it includes one of the off-roadiest and some premium borderline luxury units that chose to compete with more modest trims. What's perhaps surprising is that this group has by far the tightest range of price within any event category (and if you drop out 4Runner's tough-duty fuel mileage, there's another tight range for that among the rest). This left comparisons largely to the core performance, features and general experience—with one exception: there was one entirely new vehicle, the new three-row Kia Telluride, a notable evolution within the brand, as well. Top horsepower and second-to-lowest price (again, within a narrow range) helped the Kia, but its shiny and new factor, as is so often the case in these comparos, proved hard to beat.

WINNER: 2020 Kia Telluride SX V6 AWD
291 HP, 262 LBFT, 24 MPG hwy, \$46,860 as tested
Runnerup: 2019 Toyota 4Runner TRD Pro V6

COMPACT/MIDSIZE LUXURY UTILITY

Acura RDX SH-AWD A-Spec
BMW X5 xDrive40i
Mercedes-Benz GLE450 4MATIC SUV (2020)

PRICE RANGE\$46,995 Acura > \$98,725 MBenz
POWER RANGE ...HP272 HP Acura > 362 HP MBenz
.....TORQUE.....280 LBFT Acura > 369 LBFT MBenz

HWY MPG RANGE24 MPG MBenz > 26 MPG Acura/BMW

ANALYSIS: Last year, there was just one Premium Utility category, noteworthy for having a threefold price range and twofold power and fuel mileage ranges. This year, the high-

end models (now termed Luxury, with either term open to some interpretation) were split by size, to a point, with two smaller sizes in this group. The new grouping still had an over-twofold price range, partly but not wholly due to still comprising two size categories. BMW (\$73,980) had middle ground in price (though closer to the upper end), power and torque ditto and ditto, for the potential of a Goldilocks factor for the X5. Value is one of many considerations in judges' analytical charts, but since the ultimate 1-2-3 vote is more subjective, and price is not value, anyway, it's not hard to have the priciest model in a wide-ranging group take the win.

WINNER: 2020 Mercedes-Benz GLE450 4MATIC SUV
362 HP, 369 LBFT, 24 MPG hwy, \$98,725 as tested
Runnerup: 2019 Acura RDX SH-AWD A-Spec

FULL-SIZE LUXURY UTILITY

BMW X7 xDrive50i
Mercedes-Benz G550

PRICE RANGE\$120,645 BMW > \$134,715 MBenz
POWER RANGE ...HP416 HP MBenz > 456 HP BMW
.....TORQUE.....450 LBFT MBenz > 479 LBFT BMW

HWY MPG RANGE13 MPG MBenz > 15 MPG BMW

ANALYSIS: The new split of Luxury Utilities by size created this group of just two, both fairly closely matched in key specifications. The Mercedes-Benz G-Class, widely known as the Geländewagen, has decades of history and dominance, along with the chops to take on an army outside while cushioning its occupants in luxury inside, and (spoiler alert) it would take second in the extremely competitive Extreme Capability category this year. But the BMW X7 had something that so often tips the scales at comparo drives—it's an entirely new model, and some judges can't resist that.

WINNER: 2019 BMW X7 xDrive50i
456 HP, 479 LBFT, 21 MPG hwy, \$120,645 as tested
Runnerup: 2019 Mercedes-Benz G550

PICKUP TRUCKS

Ford Ranger SuperCrew 4x4 XLT
GMC Sierra 1500 4WD Crew Cab AT4
Jeep Gladiator Rubicon 4x4 (2020)
Nissan Titan 5.6L Endurance V8 PRO-4X 4x4 Crew Cab
Ram 2500 Power Wagon Crew Cab 4x4

PRICE RANGE\$41,675 Ranger > \$67,220 Ram PW
POWER RANGE ...HP270 HP Ranger > 420 HP GMC
.....TORQUE.....260 LBFT Gladiator > 460 LBFT GMC

HWY MPG RANGE*19 MPG GMC > 24 MPG Ranger
*(Ram 2500 Power Wagon as an HD pickup is not EPA-rated)

ANALYSIS: At the Texas Truck Rodeo, which has a similar overall character and in which we also drive and judge, there are (most recently and typically) fully five pickup truck categories (midsize, full-size, heavy duty, off-road and luxury), plus a commercial category also dominated by pickups. Not so at Mudfest, with just one group of pickups, but it's a strong group, with two all-new trucks and three others with either new or top level trims. There was a big power gap between the midsize entries and the full-size; there was a big price gap between the two midsize entries; and fuel mileage varies, though it's seldom a prime driver for pickup buyers (though probably considered a bit more in the growing midsize market). No matter how they grow in style and features, pickups are still function-first machines, so trucks with established records of dominance have good odds even against the new and shiny. But the newest truck won again.

WINNER: 2020 Jeep Gladiator Rubicon 4x4
285 HP, 260 LBFT, 22 MPG hwy, \$59,680 as tested
Runnerup: 2019 Ram 2500 Power Wagon Crew Cab 4x4



Best Subcompact/Compact Family Utility



Best Midsize/Full-size Family Utility



Best Compact/Midsize Luxury Utility



Best Full-size Luxury Utility



Best Pickup Truck



Best Extreme Capability



Best Overall : NWAPA Outdoor Activity Vehicle of the Year



EXTREME CAPABILITY

Ford Ranger SuperCrew 4x4 XLT
 Jeep Gladiator Rubicon 4x4 (2020)
 Jeep Renegade Trailhawk 4x4
 Mercedes-Benz G550
 Ram 2500 Power Wagon Crew Cab 4x4
 Toyota 4Runner TRD Pro V6

PRICE RANGE\$36,005 Renegade > \$134,715 G550
 POWER RANGE...HP.....177 HP Renegade > 416 HP G550
TORQUE.....200 LBFT Renegade > 450 LBFT G550

HWY MPG RANGE*17 MPG G550 > 22 MPG Gladiator
 *(Ram 2500 Power Wagon as an HD pickup is not EPA-rated)

ANALYSIS: It's up to the manufacturers whether they want to enter a vehicle on the extreme course—in the past a set of more challenging side routes in lieu of portions of the primary course, but this year a dedicated very harsh course of its own. There was a bit of drama, as two vehicles became stuck on one of the trickiest stretches (where it was possible to slide off the edge while navigating rocks atop elevated logs) and had to be rescued by one of the biggest vehicles. It'd be somewhat unfair to name the stuck vehicles, as there were drivers involved, but some irony sits in the fact that the rescue vehicle did not turn out to be the category winner. The winner came to the game, however, with two credentials—it had won one of the above five categories, and it was the all-newest and shiniest entry in the group.

WINNER: 2020 Jeep Gladiator Rubicon 4x4

285 HP, 260 LBFT, 22 MPG hwy, \$59,680 as tested

Runnerup: 2019 Mercedes-Benz G550

OVERALL WINNER

NWAPA Outdoor Activity Vehicle of the Year

ANALYSIS: Six categories arranged by size, luxury level, vehicle type and, in one collective sub-case, extreme capability are judged by a matrix of criteria, though the final vote in each takes the more subjective 1-2-3 approach. It's theoretically possible that all the data at that point could just be combined and recalculated for an overall event winner. But it's also possible this could be unrepresentative or skewed any number of ways. Instead, the overall winner is determined by its own 1-2-3 vote by each judge. Every vehicle is in play, and the overall winner does not even need to have won an individual category—though that's always likely. This year's overall winner was also winner of both the Pickup Trucks and Extreme Capability categories. Of note, in the seven years we've been involved with the event, this is the first time a pickup has taken the top honors.

WINNER: 2020 Jeep Gladiator Rubicon 4x4

285 HP, 260 LBFT, 22 MPG hwy, \$59,680 as tested

Runnerup: 2020 Kia Telluride SX V6 AWD

Last year's overall champ, the new-that-year Jeep Wrangler JL, had also won one segment category plus Extreme Capability, a total of three out of seven trophies, as the new-this-year Jeep Gladiator has done this year. Being a Jeep at such an event may seem like an obvious plus, and it often is, but Land Rover had taken top prize the year prior. We have an ongoing curiosity about which category might define the event's spiritual core, especially with pavement increasingly considered. The big news this year isn't so much Jeep's winning again, as the shift to a pickup winning—itsself representing a booming market segment. ■



TACOMA TRD OFF-ROAD

SPECIFICATIONS (2019)

CAB / BED / SEATSDouble Cab / 5-ft bed / 5
 ENGINE3.5L DOHC 24v dual VVT-iW V6
 DRIVETRAIN4WD
 HP/TORQUE278 hp / 265 lb-ft
 TRANSMISSION6-spd ECT automatic
 TRANSFER CASE(hi/low) 1.00:1 / 2.57:1
 SUSPENSION : F: coils, dbl w/bone, stblzr bar;
 R: leafs w staggered outboard gas shocks;
 STEERING.....power rack & pinion
 BRAKES.....F: 10.75 vented / R: 10.0 drum
 WHEELS/TIRES18" mach alloy / P265/70R16
 LENGTH/WB/GRND CLEAR ..212.3" / 127.4" / 9.4"
 APPR / DEP / BREAKOVER32 / 23.5 / 21°
 TURNING CIRCLE.....44.1 ft
 HEADROOM (F/R)39.7 / 38.3 in
 LEGROOM (F/R).....42.9 / 32.6 in
 WEIGHT / GVWR4425 / 5600 lb
 PAYLOAD / TOW CAPACITY1175 / 6400 lb
 FUEL / CAPAC 87 octane reg / 21.1 gal
 MPG18/22/20 (city/hwy/comb)

INCLUDES: 4WDemand part-time 4x4 w 2-spd
 electr contr transfer case; locking rear diff;
 multi-terrain select; crawl control; hill-start
 assist; engine oil & power steering coolers;
 130A alternator; off-road tuned suspension,
 Bilstein shocks; tow receiver hitch, 4/7-pin,
 trailer sway control; 120V bed outlet; deck
 rail system w tie-down cleats; easy lower
 lockable removable tailgate; keyless entry &
 start; power hzntl rear window; and more.

BASE PRICE\$36,465

TRD PREMIUM OFF-ROAD PKG (DOUBLE CAB A/T):
 Dual zone auto climate, leather-trimmed
 seats, heated front seats, Entune premium
 JBL audio w integrated nav & app suite,
 auto-headlights, moonroof2890

TONNEAU COVER.....650

TECHNOLOGY PKG: Rear park assis sonar, blind
 spot monitor, rear cross-traffic alert770

DESTINATION CHARGE1045

TOTAL\$41,820



TACOMA in TACOMA

It has a renaissance underway, but timber, railroad and port city Tacoma, Washington is long known for a sleeves-rolled-up frontier grit and can-do attitude. The **Toyota Tacoma TRD Off-Road 4x4 Double Cab** was itself appealing for the miles between the Seattle airport, lodging and our Mudfest event on the Olympic Peninsula, and a ferry ride back to the airport. Since we'd be passing through Tacoma en route, this Toyota Tacoma, with its own grit and can-do attitude, was irresistible.

Tacoma's 33 models run \$25,850 to \$45,665, with the **TRD Off-Road** about in the middle on price, though well up the scale on capability.

The line-topping **TRD Pro** (pricier than even Limited luxe trim) runs about \$8000 more than TRD Off-Road. TRD Pro lights, wheels, shift knob, mats and seats are largely cosmetic. Auto-dim mirror and Homelink echo Limited trim. Functional off-road differences on TRD Pro include its front skid plate and more aggressive suspension (with much tighter turns).

Tradeoffs are easy to grasp, with the Off-Road's capability for price value clear. You can even knock another \$1600 or so off with a 6-speed manual (win-win!), though that deletes Entune JBL audio. (Ours brought back the Entune system, along with similar-to-Pro leather seats, all in one \$2890 package).

Our sample's Concrete paint suits the truck's fundamental personality and reasonably extreme function. It also looked sharp in Bremerton next to a few aircraft carriers. ■