

Clever beast

By Joe Sage
Photos: Kevin McCauley
/ capturingthemachine

We promised we'd try to find time during the TAWA Texas Truck Rodeo for a spin in the ZeroNox Tuatara EV, which we did, at the very end—and we're glad we did. Tuatara is a name well chosen for this highly durable, adaptive and capable utility vehicle from New Zealand. Media there has described it as a mini Humvee, a great summation. In fact, it may well be more user friendly and more capable than that in most situations.

NAMESAKE CRITTER: The Tuatara is a one-of-a-kind creature with a vestigial third eye, inhabiting islands surrounding the North Island of New Zealand. Though easily confused as a lizard, it's a distinct species. Many call it a baby dragon, and who knows, it just may be. Its lineage has diverged from lizards, snakes and birds long since, but goes back to the Triassic Period, 250 million years ago, making it a direct descendant, or many would say surviving example, of the dinosaur. It's tough. It's kinda cute. And yes, it's real.

THE UTILITY: Also from New Zealand, also real and also fantastical is the Tuatara UTV, a light expedition truck for tackling rough coun-

try, nasty weather and the toughest terrain. The Tuatara is purpose-built with standard features not found elsewhere, including the largest bed of any side-by-side. A gasoline-powered version has already been available in New Zealand.

ELECTRIC TECH: ZeroNox, founded in 2017, focuses in three areas: battery and powertrain development, EV design and conversion, and new EV manufacturing, with an emphasis on off-highway vehicles. Headquartered in Porterville, in California's Central Valley north of Bakersfield and southwest of Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks, ZeroNox is in a great location to understand and build a vehicle equally happy in agricultural

and recreational settings. And roots in Silicon Valley are the basis for a particular emphasis on battery optimization and powertrain system software.

THE DRIVING FORCE: In Texas, we met up with ZeroNox CEO Vonn Christenson, a Porterville native with a mathematics degree from BYU and a law degree from Harvard. He cofounded the company with serial entrepreneur Robert Cruess, and they assembled a top tier team who know an opportunity when they see it.

ZeroNox already builds the Ion Caesar 14-person electric shuttle and the Icon EC4, a half-ton-load workhorse, as well as complete battery solutions including an Iron Vault rechargeable Lithium-Iron residential battery storage system. They recognized the Tuatara as an ideal basis for a new EV.

DETAILS: ZeroNox forecasts great durability for this machine—after all, its namesake reptile lives to well over 100 years of age and has even been known to father off-

spring at over 110.

The Tuatara is built with enough capacity and power to take on any of its comparable gas-powered peers. Aiming for a lifespan measured in decades, its all-steel body gets an electrophoresis anti-rust treatment and sits atop a purpose-built frame capable of taking the constant abuse of unforgiving terrain and weather.

To show it off, they brought it to the Texas Truck Rodeo, where we took it on the same maximum-challenge course and obstacles as the most capable trucks and SUVs in the most extreme off-road class. We knew right away that this rig is special.

Engineers had benchmarked "tires, shocks and four-wheel drive that would drive the Tuatara up a wall," and they have succeeded. One of our most lasting impressions was scaling a feels-near-vertical dirt and rock climb that caps off the extreme course. The rubber hits the dirt with beefy CST all-terrain tires and a shaft-drive 4WD system with individually lockable differentials front and rear.

Features include a 3000-lb front winch with 100 feet of cable; a rear dump bed for up to 1500 lbs of ranching, building or hunting loads; and additional strap-down cargo space atop the front and

the roof. The differentials, winch, dump bed and a range of lights are operated from the driver's seat.

Another bonus for hunting, livestock or remote outdoors use is the Tuatara's silent EV operation.

ZeroNox Lithium Iron industrial vehicle battery technology with highly advanced battery management software is specifically designed for the high performance power and torque required to haul the Tuatara EV's multiple passengers and ample loads—for 100 miles or more with available range extension. Full recharge take 3.5 hours on 220v.

The Tuatara EV can take on a wide range of tasks you might consider a pricey 4x4 pickup or an ATV for. Whether removing the purchase cost of those, or simply making them last longer when you use this tough guy for the most abusive missions, you can come out well ahead with one of these in the stable. It's so much fun and such a beast, you may well end up using it for everything.

Tuatara battery systems are compiled and the vehicles are assembled at ZeroNox headquarters in Porterville. Sales outlets are currently more likely a tractor supplier than a powersports dealer. The closest now is in Indio, east of Palm Springs.

For more information: www.zeronox.com. ■



TUATARA 1500E (EV)

MOTOR	ZeroNox 15kW / 108V, liquid-cooled
BATTERY	13 kWh ZeroNox, lithium iron phosphate
TORQUE	max 90 Nm
DRIVETRAIN	shaft drive, 2WD & 4WD selectable, differential lock front and rear, individually selectable
TRANSMISSION	automatic
RANGE	100 miles
CHARGE TIME	110v 6+ hrs; 220v 3.5 hrs

BASE PRICE\$27,995

TUATARA 1000-EFI (GASOLINE)

ENGINE	Chery in-line vertical 3-cylinder liquid-cooled DOHC, 12-valve
HP/TORQUE	69 hp / 93 Nm
DRIVETRAIN	2WD or 4WD, selectable rear and front differential locks
CLUTCH	hydraulic
TRANSMISSION	manual (5 fwd, 1 reverse)
OIL CAPACITY	(w filter) 3.5L
FUEL CAPACITY	13.21 gal
FUEL	high octane 91 or better

BASE PRICE\$24,195

BUILD SPECIFICATIONS (BOTH)

CONSTRUCTION	steel
SEATS	three w seatbelts
SUSPENSION	F: independent wishbone w preload adjustable; R: indep double wishbone w preload adjustable
BRAKES	dual indep hydraulic disk brakes
TIRES	26x11-12 CST all-terrain
LENGTH / WHEELBASE	128 in / 97 in
OVERALL HEIGHT	6 ft 9 in
OVERALL WIDTH	5 ft 1 in
GROUND CLEARANCE	12 in
BED WIDTH	5 ft 1 in
BED LENGTH	5 ft 6 in
BED HEIGHT	11 in

WEIGHT / CAPACITIES (BOTH)

WEIGHT EMPTY	2380 lb
TOTAL LOAD CAPACITY	2170 lb
GVWR	4550 lb
CARGO BED LOAD CAPACITY	1200 lb
FRONT RACK	330 lb
ROOF RACK	110 lb
HITCH CAPACITY	2000 lb
WINCH PULLING CAPACITY	3000 lb
TOWING CAPACITY	2200 lb

