

THE MUD IS BACK!

UTILITIES AND PICKUPS ARE PUT TO THE TEST AT THE NWAPA NORTHWEST OUTDOOR ACTIVITY VEHICLE OF THE YEAR AWARDS

By Joe Sage / Vehicle photos by Doug Berger for NWAPA

There was no Mudfest in spring 2020, as pandemic lockdowns kicked in. And in 2021, it was moved to fall. But even for a few years prior, the event had slipped just a little later into the spring calendar, with the unintended consequence of less mud. This year, Mudfest was moved a bit earlier again, into April—and it worked! The forecast couldn't have been better, from a mud standpoint—rain and possibly even snow every day. Turns out, though, it could be better, and it was—though there was plenty of rain (and temperatures were cool) throughout, much of the heaviest precipitation came overnight, leaving the days more people-friendly, while keeping the test courses less vehicle-friendly, which is exactly what the event calls for.

The Northwest Automotive Press Association's (NWAPA) Outdoor Activity Vehicle of the Year Awards, popularly known as Mudfest, is generally a don't-miss item on our calendar. Differences between rainforest and desert aside, the Pacific Northwest driving community shares many commonalities with Arizona, from terrain to vehicle preferences, to sometimes even weather.

The event was held for the sixth time at The Ridge Motorsports Park, near Shelton, Washington, with overnights on the waterfront 20 minutes to the north. The 170-acre facility features a 2.47-mile, 16-turn track with 300-foot elevation changes (which we don't use); a kart track that's a one-sixth-scale version of the big track (which we do use); and motocross acreage modified or specially built for our off-road purposes.

Vehicles are designated by their manufacturers to compete in any of five categories that apply for both the on-road and off-road

days. SUVs and crossover utilities are organized by a family or luxury split and by size, with pickups as the fifth group.

Day one is the "that's how most people use them most of the time" day—paved testing—with a large area engineered for dedicated acceleration and braking, followed by a coned turning circle and chicane, then on to the kart track for a full range of subjective acceleration, braking, steering and handling evaluation.

Day two is all off-road, with a significantly expanded course this year, comprising straightaways, pond fording, ascent and descent, wheel articulation, log crawling, approach-breakover-departure angle features, embankments—a full range of challenges for every vehicle, with Extreme Capability areas available to some. As a bonus, the rain returned in earnest as this day progressed.

Vehicles are judged both days by all drivers, with attention paid to powertrain; paved ride, handling and braking; off-road handling and capability; exterior styling; interior comfort and functionality; application of technology; and a subjective value consideration.

Each judging driver votes a first, second and third choice in each of five vehicle categories. The above factors are tallied by each driver on a numerically specific chart and can be used as each one's final word for concluding the top three in each group. Or, just as often, they are free to use that as reference and a memory jog, as final decisions can be made with a new layer of subjectivity. We've studied this many times, many ways, out of curiosity, and—as these are no-one's first rodeo—the results turn out to be surprisingly similar whether pure math or final opinion.

There is also a sixth award category for Extreme Capability, a

subset or parallel tally from among the above vehicles, certain of which can be entered by any manufacturer who chooses to run one of their vehicles through sections of the course with more challenging features and conditions.

With the rapidly growing application of EV, plug-in hybrid and other electrification technologies to off-roaders over the past couple of years, a seventh award was added to Mudfest this year for Electrified Utility Vehicle, also a subset or parallel tally of such builds, though not with any specialized testing. NWAPA has held a separate Drive Revolution event for alternative powertrains for a number of years, so this is very familiar turf for the group.

The biggest trophy goes to the Outdoor Activity Vehicle of the Year, a winner chosen from the overall slate of entries, voted separately via the same processes.

Twenty vehicles from seventeen brands included just four from the Detroit Three, eight from Japan, five from Korea and three from Europe. To some degree, Asian brands dominated smaller size categories, but not as clearly as in past years, a nod to each manufacturer's lineup expansion, as well as to increasingly complex categorization of vehicles by size, industrywide.

Traditionally, this spring event—following the Detroit and New York auto shows, as well as Barrett-Jackson reveals and such—has had a few of the next year's models. With lingering supply chain issues affecting new model cycles, this year's event had just one 2023 model (an all-new vehicle) and still a few 2021s.

(cont'd)





Results follow, with low and high end of the range noted for price, horsepower, torque and highway fuel mileage within each category, to help you gauge where the winners fall. All are 2022 model year vehicles unless otherwise noted.

SUBCOMPACT/COMPACT FAMILY UTILITY

Mazda CX-50 Turbo Premium Plus (2023)

Subaru Forester Wilderness

Toyota RAV4 TRD Off-Road

PRICE RANGE.....	\$34,165 Subaru	>	\$43,170 Mazda
POWER RANGE.....HP.....	182 HP Subaru	>	227 HP Mazda
.....TORQUE.....	176 LBFT Subaru	>	320 LBFT Mazda
TOW CAPACITY RANGE.....	3000 LB Subaru	>	3500 LB Mazda/Toyota
COMB MPG RANGE.....	25 MPG Mazda	>	28 MPG Subaru

WINNER: 2023 Mazda CX-50 Turbo Premium Plus

227 HP, 320 LBFT, 3500 LB towing, 25 MPG comb, \$43,170 as tested

Runnerup: 2022 Toyota RAV4 TRD Off-Road

ANALYSIS: The pricier end in this top-selling segment attracted the most votes, with the winning Mazda also having top power, but lowest fuel economy. The number two spot went to Toyota, which bore mid specs other than the only fuel mileage in the 30s (highway).

MIDSIZE/FULL-SIZE FAMILY UTILITY

GMC Yukon AT4

Honda Passport TrailSport

Hyundai Santa Fe XRT 2.5L AWD

Jeep Grand Cherokee 4xe

Kia Sorento PHEV

PRICE RANGE.....	\$35,380 Hyundai	>	\$79,175 GMC
POWER RANGE.....HP.....	191 HP Hyundai	>	420 HP GMC
.....TORQUE.....	181 LBFT Hyundai	>	470 LBFT Jeep
TOW CAPACITY RANGE.....	1650 LB Hyundai	>	8000 LB GMC
COMB MPG RANGE.....	16 MPGe GMC	>	79 MPGe / 34 MPG Jeep

WINNER: Jeep Grand Cherokee 4xe

375 net hybrid HP, 470 LBFT, 3500 LB towing, 70 MPGe / 34 MPG comb, \$55,865 base (as tested n/a)

Runnerup: Kia Sorento PHEV

ANALYSIS: The thinking of the prior category was turned on its head here. Low-end prices and power were similar to the compacts, so it seems that perhaps more value was thus perceived. Towing has never been part of the event, but these numbers might suggest that it should be.

COMPACT/MIDSIZE LUXURY UTILITY

Acura MDX Type S

Genesis GV70 AWD 3.5T Sport Prestige

Mercedes-AMG GLE 35 (2021)

Volvo V90 B6 Cross Country

PRICE RANGE.....	\$60,135 M-AMG	>	\$68,440 Volvo
POWER RANGE.....HP.....	295 HP Volvo	>	375 HP Genesis
.....TORQUE.....	295 LBFT M-AMG	>	391 LBFT Genesis
TOW CAPACITY RANGE.....	n/a LB M-AMG	>	5000 LB Acura
COMB MPG RANGE.....	19 MPG Acura	>	25 MPG Volvo

WINNER: Genesis GV70 3.5T Sport Prestige

375 HP, 391 LBFT, 3500 LB towing, 21 MPG comb, \$65,045 as tested

Runnerup: Acura MDX Type S

ANALYSIS: Prices were all in the \$60s. Power had a bit of range, but all good. As with Mid/Full Family, towing had wide range but was not field tested. Styling, general format and size varied considerably. GV70 is a repeat win for this category (and was last year's overall champ).

FULL-SIZE LUXURY UTILITY

Genesis GV80 AWD 3.5T Prestige (2021)

Lexus LX 600 Ultra Lux

Rolls-Royce Cullinan

Wagoneer Series III 4x4

PRICE RANGE.....	\$73,510 Genesis	>	\$428,850 Rolls-Royce
POWER RANGE.....HP.....	375 HP Genesis	>	563 HP Rolls-Royce
.....TORQUE.....	391 LBFT Genesis	>	627 LBFT Rolls-Royce
TOW CAPACITY RANGE.....	6000 LB Genesis	>	10,000 LB Wagoneer
COMB MPG RANGE.....	14 MPG Rolls-Royce	>	20 MPG Genesis

WINNER: Genesis GV80 AWD 3.5T Prestige (2021)

375 HP, 391 LBFT, 6000 LB towing, 20 MPG comb, \$73,510 as tested

Runnerup: Wagoneer Series III 4x4

ANALYSIS: Rolls-Royce aside, Lexus was priciest at \$128,030 while power was all pretty close. Genesis had the lowest power and towing, but also lowest price and best fuel mileage. Hence, another Genesis win. A hefty tow spec hints at attributes that gave Wagoneer second place.

PICKUP TRUCKS

Ford F-150 Raptor 4x4 SuperCrew

with 37 Performance Package (2021)

Hyundai Santa Cruz Limited AWD

Nissan Frontier Pro-4X

Toyota Tundra 4x4 Platinum CrewMax

PRICE RANGE.....\$41,100 Hyundai > \$82,475 Ford

POWER RANGE.....HP.....281 HP Hyundai > 450 HP Ford

.....TORQUE.....281 LBFT Nissan > 510 LBFT Ford

TOW CAPAC RANGE.....1650* LB Hyundai > 10,890 LB Toyota

COMB MPG RANGE.....15 MPG Ford > 22 MPG Hyundai

WINNER: Hyundai Santa Cruz Limited AWD

281 HP, 311 LBFT, *1650-5000 LB tow (w/wo brake), 22 MPG comb, \$41,100 as tested

Runnerup: Nissan Frontier Pro-4X

ANALYSIS: This is a conversation-prompting repeat win. The other three trucks have prodigious conventional specs. Hyundai themselves call Santa Cruz a Sport Activity Vehicle; they enter it as a pickup in the Northwest but a crossover in Texas—and it wins, either way. Though unconventional, it's versatile, a ton of fun and delivers a lot of bang for the buck.

EXTREME CAPABILITY

From any class, as long as they were evaluated on the extreme course, which drew quite a few contenders.

WINNER: Ford F-150 Raptor 4x4 SuperCrew 37 Performance Package (2021)

450 HP, 510 LBFT, 8200 LB towing, 15 MPG comb, \$82,475 as tested

Runnerup (tie): Jeep Grand Cherokee 4xe Wagoneer Series III 4x4

ANALYSIS: Two new vehicles—the electrified Grand Cherokee and Wagoneer—may or may not have split the vote, but the long reigning crowd-pleasing Raptor, though a 2021 but with a remarkable new big-wheel build package, prevailed.

ELECTRIFIED UTILITY

This new award did not have special courses or testing, but rather was a summation of the subset.

WINNER: Jeep Grand Cherokee 4xe

375 net hybrid HP, 470 LBFT, 3500 LB towing, 70 MPGe / 34 MPG comb, \$55,865 base (as tested n/a)

Runnerup: Kia Sorento PHEV

ANALYSIS: The winner also won the Midsize/Full-Size Family Utility category. It probably draws extra attention to itself here by virtue of still being a Mudfest-conquering 4x4 Jeep.

OVERALL WINNER

NWAPA Outdoor Activity Vehicle of the Year

The ultimate trophy for this event is determined by a tally of separate preference votes for first, second and third (not a re-tally of various category votes).

WINNER: Jeep Grand Cherokee 4xe

375 net hybrid HP, 470 LBFT, 3500 LB towing, 70 MPGe / 34 MPG comb, \$55,865 base (as tested n/a)

Runnerup: Genesis GV70 AWD 3.5T Sport Prestige

ANALYSIS: There were far fewer Stellantis (Dodge, Jeep and Ram) entries this year than usual, but they obviously chose well. The third win for this vehicle at this event is the biggest.

It was great to have a muddy Mudfest again this year, thanks to the weather. Special thanks to the hard-working fleet personel, to The Ridge Motorsports Park for expanded and enhanced facilities, and to all the manufacturers who sent their most capable wares and the smiling faces behind them. As NWAPA president and event chair John Vincent notes, "There was broad consensus that 2022 brought us the most diverse—and most competitive—field in the history of the event." ■

