

FROZEN MIX & A HOT LINEUP

By Joe Sage / Photos by Doug Berger for NWAPA

The Pacific Northwest has a fair amount of commonality with Arizona ... wild elevation changes, volcanos and rivers, lava fields, grassy plains ... cities, small towns, ranches and mines ... and both have a notable variety of weather. Our annual trek to the Northwest Automotive Press Association's (NWAPA's) Outdoor Vehicle of the Year Awards—better known as “Mudfest”—takes us to Washington State's lower Olympic Peninsula in springtime, all the better to deliver the kind of weather that gives Mudfest its name. And the weatherman did not let us down—lows in the 30s, highs in the 40s, rain and showers, snow not long before our arrival, and lots of that intriguingly vague forecast, “frozen mix.” With plenty of rain, occasional hints of blue, and even a fairly brief swath of borderline hail, everything was perfect for the task at hand.

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

NWAPA was founded in 1991 and started this annual event not long after, evolving in parallel to the vehicle marketplace, through

a handful of body-on-frame SUVs joining the pickups, to today's broad range of crossovers and utilities of every shape and size—all accompanied by tremendous growth in these vehicles as daily drivers, as well as related increases in outdoor activities, thanks to their go-anywhere abilities. Accordingly, Mudfest has for some years been expanded to include both on-pavement and off-pavement components, each of those now a full day.

Day one's paved circuit includes a coned chicane, a long stretch engineered for maximum acceleration and full force braking, more coned areas for turning circle and handling experiences, then on to the kart track for a full range of evaluation.

Day two is all off-road, with dirt and gravel straightaways, embankments, mild climbs and mud ruts—a full range of challenges for every entry. Vehicles designated for an Extreme Capability subcategory add more dramatic climbs and descents, water hazard fording, wheel articulation, log crawling, and other elements to push approach-breakover-departure angles toward their limits.

The event typically draws about two dozen vehicle entrants (and about the same number of media driver-analysts, or about half the group's membership). Every vehicle is driven on each of the two days, amounting to three or four vehicles per hour, with time to meet and greet, along with time to score and annotate, making this a good volume of vehicles, especially with NWAPA's firm diligence in ensuring that every driver drives every vehicle.

This year, we had 22 vehicles and 24 drivers—which might sound as though it would leave someone standing in the rain, but worked out just fine, giving flexibility for photos, coffee breaks or chit-chat in between.

With vehicles not only split into trucks and SUVs, but also potentially by size (which now hits a half-dozen or more from many brands, from smaller than subcompact to larger than full-size), then also by luxury subsets, perhaps electrification, perhaps price range, you could end up with more categories than vehicles, or categories with just one or two vehicles in them—as happens at some other comparos—and yet this is an awards event. NWAPA simplified it all this year, with just three SUV categories—two- or three-row and luxury (of mixed sizes)—plus one for pickups. This led to a solid six or seven SUVs per category and meaningful competition.

From those four categories, qualifying electrified and extreme capability vehicles were regrouped and evaluated again, and the entire stable was also evaluated for a separate ranking by value.

On all vehicles in all groupings, drivers used worksheets to score 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. (About the only thing not specifically tested is towing, which the vehicles all offered, over a wide range of capacities.)

Each judging driver votes a first and second choice in each of the vehicle categories and subsets—with one full set of tallies and votes on each of the two days. The results of both are incorporated into final category and specialty subset wins.

And ultimately, a best-of-the-best title winner is chosen.

This year's vehicles included four from two US automakers, three from Europe, ten from a full variety of Japanese brands, and five from Korea. Full information on entries and results follows, 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 2023 models except for one 2022 and one 2024 as noted.

(cont'd)



Geez, Dad, can we take them all home? Like a kid at the puppy store, we didn't find a bad one in the bunch, from the \$29,685 Subaru to the \$452,725 Rolls-Royce. From the paved slalom to the muddiest ruts, they all did superbly well. Whether engineered to be casual, dramatic or snappy, they all have notably high skills. Acceleration varies, as you would expect, while in near-panic stops from 60 to zero, this proves to be a golden era for brakes.



2023 NWAPA MUDFEST CATEGORY WINNERS

TWO-ROW FAMILY SUV

Honda CR-V Hybrid AWD Sport Touring
 Jeep Compass Trailhawk 4x4
 Jeep Wrangler 4xe 20th Anniversary Rubicon
 Kia Sportage X-Pro Prestige AWD
 Mazda CX-50 Meridian Edition
 Subaru Crosstrek Premium (2024)
 Volkswagen Tiguan 2.0T SEL R-Line

PRICE RANGE	\$29,685 Subaru	>	\$81,150 Jeep
POWER RANGE	HP...152 HP Subaru	>	375 HP Jeep
	TORQUE...145 LBFT Subaru	>	470 LBFT Jeep
TOW CAPACITY RANGE	1000 LB Honda	>	3500 LB Jeep/Mazda
COMB MPG RANGE	25 MPG Kia/Mazda	>	37 MPG Honda (49 MPGe Jeep)

WINNER: 2023 Jeep Wrangler 4xe 20th Anniversary Rubicon ▼

375 HP, 470 LBFT, 3500 LB towing, 20 MPG or 49 MPGe comb, \$81,150 as tested

Runner-up: 2023 Kia Sportage X-Pro Prestige AWD

ANALYSIS: Sometimes a middle-attributes Goldilocks factor emerges; other times a value equation dominates (especially in this category); but here the pricey and powerful Jeep won top prize, while runner-up Kia stands between the low end and middle on most attributes.

THREE-ROW FAMILY SUV

Honda Pilot TrailSport AWD
 Hyundai Palisade XRT AWD
 Kia Telluride SX-Prestige X-Pro V6 AWD
 Mitsubishi Outlander PHEV SEL S-AWC
 Nissan Pathfinder Rock Creek
 Toyota Sequoia TRD Pro

PRICE RANGE	\$44,060 Hyundai	>	\$80,291 Toyota
POWER RANGE	HP...221 HP Mitsubishi	>	437 HP Toyota
	TORQUE...262 LBFT Hyundai/Kia	>	583 LBFT Toyota
TOW CAPACITY RANGE	1500 LB Mitsubishi	>	9020 LB Toyota
COMB MPG RANGE	20 MPG Honda	>	52 MPG or 64 MPGe Mitsubishi

WINNER: 2023 Mitsubishi Outlander PHEV ▼

221 HP, 332 LBFT, 1500 LB towing, 52 MPG or 64 MPGe comb, \$50,880 as tested

Runner-up: 2023 Toyota Sequoia TRD Pro

ANALYSIS: Goldilocks showed up in this category's winner, while the priciest and most powerful Sequoia displayed its heft by pulling into second place, with the added twist that the Sequoia TRD Pro runs about \$25-35,000 higher than any of the others.

LUXURY SUV

Acura RDX SH-AWD A-Spec w/Advance (2022)
 BMW X7 M60i
 Genesis Electrified GV70 Prestige
 Lexus RX 500h F Sport
 Rolls-Royce Cullinan
 Wagoneer Series II 4x4

PRICE RANGE	\$52,845 Acura	>	\$452,725 Rolls-Royce
POWER RANGE	HP...272 HP Acura	>	563 HP Rolls-Royce
	TORQUE...280 LBFT Acura	>	627 LBFT Rolls-Royce
TOW CAPACITY RANGE	1230 LB BMW	>	9750 LB Wagoneer
COMB MPG RANGE	14 MPG Rolls-Royce	>	27 Lexus / 91 MPGe Genesis

WINNER: 2023 Genesis Electrified GV70 ▼

483 HP, 516 LBFT, 3500 LB towing, 91 MPGe comb, \$74,350 as tested

Runner-up: 2023 Wagoneer Series II 4x4

ANALYSIS: While the price range is dramatic, most were about \$70-80,000 (though BMW ran \$122,545). The winning full-EV Genesis is mainstream for price, and its high horsepower is surprisingly average in this potent group; but it knocks the socks off for fuel-equivalent economy.

PICKUP TRUCK

Ford F-150 Raptor 4x4 SuperCrew
 Hyundai Santa Cruz Limited AWD
 Toyota Tundra TRD Pro

PRICE RANGE	\$41,825 Hyundai	>	\$111,935 Ford
POWER RANGE	HP...281 HP Hyundai	>	700 HP Ford
	TORQUE...311 LBFT Hyundai	>	640 LBFT Ford
TOW CAPACITY RANGE	5000 LB Hyundai	>	11,175 LB Toyota
COMB MPG RANGE	12 MPG Ford	>	22 MPG Hyundai

WINNER: 2023 Ford F-150 Raptor 4x4 SuperCrew ▼

700 HP, 640 LBFT, 8,200 LB towing, 12 MPG comb, \$111,935 as tested

Runner-up: 2023 Hyundai Santa Cruz

ANALYSIS: These three were entered last year (though Tundra in a luxe trim), along with Nissan Frontier, and Santa Cruz (which Hyundai has entered in some comparos as an SUV) won. Votes here split away from Tundra, a fine truck in the middle, to the most potent, then most frugal.

2023 NWAPA MUDFEST SUBSET WINNERS

ELECTRIFIED UTILITY VEHICLE

These vehicles are from any of the four categories, as long as they had either a PHEV (plug-in hybrid) or full EV (a.k.a. BEV, battery electric) powertrain.

Genesis Electrified GV70 Prestige
 Jeep Wrangler 4xe 20th Anniversary Rubicon
 Mitsubishi Outlander PHEV SEL S-AWD

PRICE RANGE	\$50,880 Mitsubishi	>	\$81,150 Jeep
POWER RANGE	HP...221 HP Mitsubishi	>	483 HP Genesis
	TORQUE...332 LBFT Mitsubishi	>	516 LBFT Genesis
TOW CAPACITY RANGE	1500 LB Mitsubishi	>	3500 LB Jeep/Genesis
COMB MPG RANGE	49 MPGe Jeep	>	91 MPGe Genesis

WINNER: 2023 Genesis Electrified GV70 ▼

483 HP, 516 LBFT, 3500 LB towing, 91 MPGe comb, \$74,350 as tested

Runner-up: 2023 Mitsubishi Outlander PHEV

ANALYSIS: "Electrified" is used in various ways in an evolving industry, widely applied to hybrids and plug-in hybrids, while Genesis uses it to name their full BEVs. While this gives this small group great variety, it all makes sense as you parse the balance of power, price and economy.

EXTREME CAPABILITY VEHICLE

This subset comprising four contenders also comes from any category, as long as they qualified to be evaluated on an engineered extreme course with additional obstacles.

Ford F-150 Raptor
 Jeep Wrangler 4xe 20th Anniversary Rubicon
 Toyota Sequoia TRD Pro
 Toyota Tundra TRD Pro

WINNER: 2023 Jeep Wrangler 4xe 20th Anniversary Rubicon ▼

375 HP, 470 LBFT, 3500 LB towing, 20 MPG or 49 MPGe comb, \$81,150 as tested

Runner-up: 2023 Ford F-150 Raptor R

ANALYSIS: Buyers may get the most emotionally invested in this category, making vote winners generally well noted, but few people's final word. With two SUVs and two pickups here, this result could suggest a win for SUVs over pickups, as much as the four-up comparison itself.

BEST VALUE

This award is also a separate vote among all entries, based on that one very subjective attribute, value—generally an overall balance among price, performance and content.

WINNER: 2024 Subaru Crosstrek Premium ▼

152 HP, 145 LBFT, 1500 LB towing, 29 MPG comb, \$29,685 as tested

Runner-up: 2023 Mitsubishi Outlander PHEV

ANALYSIS: Despite the above definition of value—in which the Rolls-Royce at \$452,725 should have as fair a shot as any—human nature so often seems to lead toward equating value with low price, and thus we have the least expensive and lowest-powered vehicle taking top spot.

2023 NWAPA MUDFEST OVERALL TITLE WINNER

OUTDOOR ACTIVITY VEHICLE OF THE YEAR

The top trophy for this event is determined not by a formula involving each vehicle's point-by-point ratings, nor playoff brackets based on the category and subset winners, but rather by a simple, separate and more subjective vote for first and second choice.

WINNER: 2023 Mitsubishi Outlander PHEV ▼

221 HP, 332 LBFT, 1500 LB towing, 52 MPG or 64 MPGe comb, \$50,880 as tested

Runner-up: 2023 Genesis Electrified GV70

ANALYSIS: The analytical detail and spreadsheets developed in the course of putting each vehicle through its paces could be fed through a highly-engineered algorithm to produce what might seem like a mathematically pure final winner. But as with anyone's personal buying experience, at the end of much analysis often comes that moment alone with your thoughts, where you say, "All things considered, I just really liked that one." The winner and runner-up—both SUVs, both electrified (in different ways), both solid premium class vehicles around town yet far tougher than that may suggest off-road, and both in a reasonable price range that's equal parts accessible and aspirational—represent a snapshot of the market as a whole, just as they should.

We never reveal our own votes, but would note that we had a few favorites that didn't achieve majority vote victories, others we may have picked as second that came in first or vice versa. This was a fine selection, truly not a bad one in the bunch, for function, style, performance and value. Our special thanks go out to the hard-working fleet personnel, The Ridge Motorsports Park, the manufacturers, who sent their most capable vehicles and the smiling faces to support them, and to our friends and colleagues in NWAPA for one of the best-executed events in the business. ■

