

A DUSTY MUDFEST

Northwest Outdoor Activity Vehicle of the Year face-off in the North Cascade Mountains

By Joe Sage
Photos: NWAPA / Josh Mackey

The event was based out of the cliff-hanging, waterfall-hugging Salish Lodge and Spa in Snoqualmie, Washington. Photo: Joe Sage



One thing for certain: if you want mud, head to the North Cascade Mountains of central Washington state in springtime. Except for this particular couple of days.

In a spring noted for 70s one day and snow the next across much of the northern US, Washington had been plenty wet. (In fact, the tragic mudslide in nearby Oso had made news just a month prior.)

But things had dried out in time for Mudfest—the 20th run of a comparative event held variously in Oregon and Washington by the Northwest Automotive Press Association (NWAPA). Blue skies of course did not dampen anyone's enthusiasm, and some water strategically placed by our hosts at DirtFish Rally School would help out.

DirtFish is on a 300-plus-acre facility located on an old pioneering lumber mill site just outside Snoqualmie—the second all-electric lumber mill in the US, opened in 1917—at an elevation of about 600 feet, up against 4167-foot Mt Si and other peaks of the great northern Cascade Range. Much of the area is familiar to *Twin Peaks* fans.

The location gives us an unbeatable combination of dirt, gravel and paved roads, skidpad testing, dedicated water pits and mud tracks.

Also essential to the event are a couple of dozen automakers who bring a couple of dozen prime contenders up here for the challenge.

We would be testing 23 different vehicles from 16 manufacturers, grouped in five categories from compact to premium to extreme—or all of the above. (There was also a new truck category this year, but only as an exhibition class, no voting and with just two trucks—Chevrolet and Ram.)

More than 50 automotive reviewers and test-



COMPACT UTILITY

ers participated, while most manufacturers provided key personnel to point out features or address any questions with each vehicle. Another dozen or so event staff and vehicle wranglers kept the whole affair running smoothly, along with key organizers from NWAPA.

Drivers scored each vehicle subjectively on a chart of ten attributes, including on-road and off-road handling; off-road capability; powertrain; braking; exterior; interior; and technology features. Comparisons are more objective for fuel efficiency and value. Rated on a scale of 1 to 5, there are 50 total points possible for each.

Manufacturers have some key decisions to make for such an event. Bring in a top trim model to wow us with luxury and comfort? Or a base model to wow us with price? Choose a fuel-sipping engine? Or the big powerhouse? Do they perhaps opt for a diesel or hybrid? Have they outfitted it with great highway tires, for the paved component of the event? Or all-out off-road rubber? It is a given that there are tradeoffs here, that our conclusions could be different with different variables, and that your own comparisons and decisions will vary. What seems most appropriate to the vehicle is one way to look at it, but mostly you want to look at your intended use. It is a tool.

Pavement testing started with a coned autocross course on site, followed by a relatively short route along evergreen-lined mountain roads.

Every group ran a moderate off-road course,

with plenty of ruts, gravel, dirt and water traps. The Extreme category tackled a much tougher course, with conditions that challenged locking differentials, maximum axle articulation, approach, breakover and departure angles—while comfort and features were still also considered.

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 2014 models; others are noted here as 2015 or in one case 2013.

Compact Utility

.....\$ as tested	MPG	HP	Torque	
Ford Escape Titanium 4WD	\$35,470	21/28	240	270
Hyundai Tucson Limited AWD	\$28,700	20/25	182	177
Jeep® Cherokee Trailhawk 4x4	\$38,710	19/26	271	239
Mazda CX-5 Grand Touring AWD (2015)	\$31,760	24/30	184	185
Nissan Rogue SV AWD	\$29,215	25/32	170	175
Subaru XV Crosstrek Hybrid	\$30,120	29/33	160	163

Hyundai Tucson had the lowest price (as outfitted that day), but Nissan and Subaru were not far away, and their fuel mileage is better—45 percent better (highway) for the Subaru. Jeep Cherokee's



Top to bottom, starting with winner at top: Jeep Cherokee Trailhawk 4x4; Ford Escape Titanium; Hyundai Tucson; Mazda CX-5; Nissan Rogue; Subaru XV Crosstrek Hybrid.

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price was highest (in top Trailhawk trim here), but its horsepower leaves the rest behind, although Ford Escape pumps out more torque. This is a classically complex group, and it gets deep into the “different strokes” realm for shoppers.

Subaru on the skidpad was exemplary—superb in the slalom and stopping on a dime, though it outperformed its tires a bit (easily rectified). It was slower in final acceleration (departing the cones), but its nimble weight does offset its lower horsepower. It’s smaller, lighter, less expensive—but on the off-road course we found no shortfall whatsoever. The Crosstrek ultimately outscored everything else on our tally sheet.

We would have rated the Cherokee Trailhawk above 5 in off-road, if we could—it can compete with the Extreme class here. Fuel efficiency and price knocked it down a little, although 26 MPG highway is very healthy for an off-road beast like this. Escape did well on pavement and had 5-rated braking (as did Jeep and Subaru), but its price in Titanium trim also worked against it.

Our numbers came in best for Subaru Crosstrek, with 47.5 points versus 44.5 for Cherokee and 40 for Escape. The others ranged from 38 to 39.5—still competitive. We do love the Cherokee—especially the top model Trailhawk—and note that it starts at just \$22,490, or \$24,490 with 4WD. The group overall liked the Cherokee, too.

THE WINNER: Best Compact Utility:
2014 Jeep Cherokee Trailhawk 4x4.

Premium Compact Utility

.....\$ as tested	MPG	HP	Torque
Mercedes-Benz GLK 250 BlueTEC 4MATIC (2013)	.....24/33	200	369
Volvo XC60 T6 AWD	.....17/24	300	325

This was the smallest group, just two, and definitely an interesting pairing. We’ve driven both vehicles at launch and found much to admire in each. The GLK was priciest, but both were pricey, and the GLK had far better fuel mileage (with this BlueTEC diesel option) and higher torque (ditto).

Our logbook had high praise for the Volvo, calling it “startlingly competent” on the skidpad, from braking to slalom handling, with acceleration we could push as hard as any, and fine road manners, as well. The GLK scored all 5s on the skidpad, too,

although it lost a little on final acceleration—sometimes horsepower is still as important as torque. On the paved roads, we noted the GLK was “solid, sure-footed and powerful,” handling steep stop signs and restarts well, and with high-way-caliber handling on the curves and hills.

Off-road, we rated the GLK at 4.5, to Volvo’s surprising 5, but fuel mileage gave it an edge in our final tally. We knocked a little off for the 2013 GLK’s aging styling, though it has a refresh in the works. We scored the Volvo XC60 at 42 and the Mercedes-Benz GLK BlueTEC 43. With the group overall, they had the event’s only tie score.

THE WINNER: Best Premium Compact Utility:
(tie): 2015 Volvo XC60 T6 AWD and
2013 Mercedes-Benz GLK 250 BlueTEC.

Premium Standard Utility

.....\$ as tested	MPG	HP	Torque
Acura MDX ADV ENT AWD	.....18/27	290	267
BMW X5 xDrive 35d	.....23/31	255	413
Jeep Grand Cherokee Limited 4x4 ECODiesel	.....21/28	240	420
Lexus GX460	.....15/20	301	329
Volkswagen Touareg TDI Sport	.....20/29	240	406

This is another category with a lot of variety, although ultimately any one of these could appeal to the same buyer. Though it bears a strong resemblance to its forebears, the Grand Cherokee had a major refresh for 2014, while the others are more in the tried-and-true vein. The Jeep had the best price by far (only VW came close) and shared massive diesel torque with the BMW and VW. BMW beats Jeep on fuel mileage, but that’s not the primary reason people buy in this category.

We ranked the Grand Cherokee highest, at 45 points, with BMW next at 42. As with the smaller Cherokee, we wished we could tally more than 5 points for the Grand Cherokee’s off-road handling and capabilities. VW came in third, at 38, discounted for brakes that were wondrous on the pavement but gave us disquieting slides off-road.

The BMW had issues off-road, too, easily attributed to its wide, low-profile highway tires. The Lexus GX always looks top-heavy to us, and

on the skidpad, it seemed to actually be, generating more squealing than adhesion. Our vote in this category matched that of the overall group.

THE WINNER: Best Premium Standard Utility:
2014 Jeep Grand Cherokee
Limited 4x4 ECODiesel.

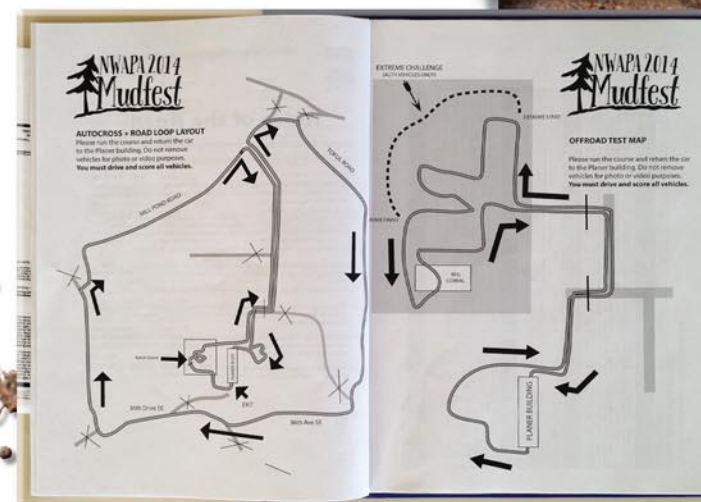
Family Utility

.....\$ as tested	MPG	HP	Torque
Chevrolet Tahoe 4WD LTZ (2015)	.....16/22	355	383
Dodge Durango Limited AWD	.....14/22	360	390
Dodge Journey Crossroad AWD	.....16/24	283	260
Honda Pilot 4WD	.....17/24	250	253
Kia Sorento SX AWD (2015)	.....18/24	290	252
Mitsubishi Outlander SE S-AWD	.....24/29	166	162
Nissan Pathfinder PLT 4x4	.....19/25	260	240

By the numbers, the Mitsubishi Outlander blows the rest away in its combination of price and fuel mileage. Its horsepower and torque are noticeably the lowest, though. But if you seek a bargain, the Outlander is very much in the game. Then again, Dodge Journey is even less expensive and has significantly more power—though you will pay for that at the pump. Figure your usage over time and do the math.

Tahoe is a perennial favorite in the marketplace, largely because it delivers so much size and capability at a Chevy price. So what do you say once Tahoe tops 70 grand? We rated the Tahoe lowest in the group, because of price, but also because of its failure to hold a track on the dirt at one point, its poor rear visibility, and a combination of ABS and shifting that just made

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PREMIUM COMPACT UTILITY



Tied in this group: Mercedes-Benz GLK 250 BlueTEC 4MATIC; Volvo XC60 T6 AWD.

PREMIUM STANDARD UTILITY



Clockwise (from winner at upper left): Jeep Grand Cherokee Limited 4x4 ECODiesel; Acura MDX AWD ADV ENT; BMW X5 xDrive35d; Lexus GX460 Luxury; Volkswagen Touareg TDI Sport.

DirtFish is built on a 300-plus-acre site with gravel roads, skidpad-ready paved areas, open dirt trails and woods—easily adapted for our event’s dedicated pits and mud tracks. Outside the school are hilly, curvy two-lane blacktop roads perfect for checking out the more civilized aspects of the same vehicles we would torture within. That road course is shown on the lefthand page, at left; the off-road course on the right. The dotted line indicates the Extreme course. DirtFish instructors have backgrounds from World Rally Championship (WRC) to Formula One, but the facility’s emphasis is normally on WRC, featuring the Subaru WRX STI.

(Facing page) A stretch of dry weather gave us a Mudfest this year that was more dirt than mud—conditions familiar to those of us from Arizona. DirtFish Rally School and event personnel created mud where needed, though, such as this stretch on the Extreme course—testing articulation and traction on the beasts, with water a foot or two deep through there.

Where the roads are dry and the cars are slick.



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us glad to be finished on the skidpad. It's unfortunate because, these observations aside, we fully understand the Tahoe's huge appeal.

Honda representatives were the first to concede that their Pilot has been around awhile. And it was relatively expensive in this group, considering. It lost points for styling and technology, but we noted that its somewhat old-school approach to things was actually refreshing in some ways—it just doesn't score well. Pilot was strong on power, climbing and acceleration. We found it highly capable off-road, though its road suspension needs an update.

The Durango and Sorento hit two of the sweetests spots in this group—Kia for its purchase price and fuel mileage, Durango for its power and 7-seat capacity (at a fraction of the Tahoe's cost). Dodge Journey achieved our top tally, at 44.5 points, with Durango right behind at 43 (it rated a hair lower on value, although it's really a difference in price, not value).

Mitsubishi was third, at 39.5, owing much to its price, but also to surprisingly top-flight off-road handling. For value and capability, Outlander scores high—but it gets edged in this category by vehicles judged according to attributes that come with more cost.

The overall winner is one of our favorites, and belongs on anybody's short list, though it didn't score as high on our sheet, off-road. If you deemphasize that need, it moves well up the list.

THE WINNER: Best Family Utility:
 2015 Kia Sorento SX AWD.

Extreme Capability

.....\$ as tested	.....MPG	.....HP	.....Torque
Jeep Wrangler Unlimited Sport	.....16/20	.....285	.....260
Range Rover HSE	.....17/23	.....340	.....332
Toyota 4Runner Trail Premium	.....17/21	.....270	.....278

This is a course that only the beefiest of the beefy could handle unscathed. If you like to see how far you can tilt sideways, or how well you can drive with only three—or maybe only two—wheels on the ground, this is it. A few others in the broader group might be able to give it a try, but these are the most purpose-built vehicles we drove. Everybody knows that about the Jeep Wrangler, and price also makes it a solid choice.

The 4Runner was not top-of-mind for us in this group, and our score sheet bore this out after running it. From a chassis that seemed to run out of play, to poor handling on the skidpad, we rated it low. Off-road, it got our lowest ratings of any.

As for the Range Rover, what can you say at almost a hundred grand? It delivers the most lux-

urious style and finish, has very advanced technologies that let anyone tackle extreme conditions—although they stress an emphasis on driver control—and has the most power by quite a bit, while also delivering the highest fuel mileage ratings of the threesome—the power of aluminum. Scoring rates high due to its body and features. Yet it also scored 5s for both paved and extreme off-road performance, tallying 43.5 points.

The Wrangler was second at 37.5, though any creature comfort or feature categories it fell short in are actually exactly as intended. 4Runner was a distant third. For anyone on a remotely mainstream budget, Jeep will still win the day, but our tally sheet agreed with the group's overall choice.

THE WINNER: Best Extreme Capability:
 2014 Land Rover Range Rover HSE.

Overall Vehicle of the Year

You don't buy a luxury vehicle if you concentrate on off-roading (unless you have the Range Rover's cost of entry). And you don't need a purpose-built off-roader if you only drive to the office and supermarket—though plenty of people buy them anyway and love them, of course. Think about your purpose and your budget, but ultimately of course feel free to let your emotions kick in. As they say in marketing, your heart will still always ask your head to grant permission for your decision.

Voting for the overall Northwest Outdoor Activity Vehicle of the Year ultimately does not have to follow everybody's score sheets—judges' own discretion and emotions are allowed to factor in. The winner is a vehicle we've been intrigued by since its earliest spy photos and have loved since we first drove it on a challenging off-road course and in the Santa Monica Mountains above Malibu, at its launch. And sales are already red hot.

THE WINNER: NWAPA Northwest Outdoor Activity Vehicle of the Year:
 2014 Jeep Cherokee Trailhawk 4X4.

Also throughout the year

NWAPA holds three vehicle comparative events per year. Mudfest, in spring, covers activity and off-road vehicles. Drive Revolution, in summer, covers alternative drivetrains (electric, hybrid, clean diesel). Run to the Sun, in fall, does sports cars, typically running from Portland high into the Cascade Mountains, with maybe some rafting included. ■



FAMILY UTILITY



Clockwise (from winner at upper left): Kia Sorento SX AWD; Chevrolet Tahoe LTZ; Dodge Durango Limited; Dodge Journey Crossroad; Honda Pilot; Mitsubishi Outlander SE; Nissan Pathfinder PLT.

EXTREME CAPABILITY



Clockwise (from winner at left): Range Rover HSE; Jeep Wrangler Unlimited Sport; Toyota 4Runner.

A final note: The group did not forget the nearby community of Oso, Washington, still struggling with recovery efforts from a horrifying mudslide, as we had to go about our mud business. NWAPA voted to make a significant financial donation out of event proceeds to the relentlessly hard-working K9 Search & Rescue operations involved, in support of their tremendous contribution to these efforts. Many NWAPA members reside in the Puget Sound region, not far from the disaster area.