

Dominant in the dirt

Jeep and Ram take five out of seven trophies in the Northwest Outdoor Activity Vehicle of the Year face-off on the Olympic Peninsula

By Joe Sage / Photos by NWAPA / Josh Mackey and Joe Sage



There are times and places in Arizona that are this wet and muddy. To assess the best vehicles for those conditions, we headed to the Pacific Northwest for the annual Northwest Outdoor Activity Vehicle of the Year competition. The Northwest Automotive Press Association (NWAPA) hosts this event, which everyone knows best as Mudfest.

This is one of our favorite drive events, and it provides very useful data back home. It may seem to rain all the time up there, but that just helps to ensure the kind of extreme conditions we get when a Sonoran Desert monsoon storm hits. Or when we head into the high country. Or when we traverse a river in the Northeast Valley. Or head to Mexico. Or the trails of the Sierra Nevada.

There is some truly fine machinery at Mudfest: capable, solid, good-looking, up to date in features and fuel economy. Each vehicle has been carefully chosen by its manufacturer as having the right stuff to conquer its category. There are six categories—five utility categories and a new category for pickup trucks, which have only been admitted for static display in prior years. A new twist is that the Extreme Capability class—long the realm of Wranglers, Range Rovers, 4Runners and such—could now also include pickups. And it most certainly did. (There is also an overall Northwest Outdoor Activity Vehicle of the Year award given, for which any and all qualify.)

In some of the other regional competitive drive events we attend, some manufacturers enter noticeably more vehicles than others, which may (but does not in and of itself) give them an edge, overall. That's not the case at Mudfest—the number of entries is strictly limited.

There were twenty-seven total vehicles in competition—nine from Detroit, seven from the Europeans and eleven from Asia (nine from six different Japanese manufacturers and one each from the two Korean brands, Kia and Hyundai).

There were also four vehicles for static display—one each from the US, Europe, Korea and Japan—including two big commercial vans, the Ford Transit and Mercedes-Benz Sprinter, and

two minivans, the Kia Sedona and Toyota Sienna.

The European entrants all fell into one of two Premium categories (Premium Utility or Premium Compact Utility), though each Premium category also contained one each American and Asian.

As you might expect, the Pickup Truck category was represented by the Detroit Three, along with Toyota. No doubt Nissan would have liked to have their new Titan ready, but that will have to wait.

The Detroit brands each had an angle. GM brought one of their new midsize pickups, specifically the GMC Canyon. Ford showed off the rugged aluminum construction of its new F-150. And Ram, making waves with towing capacity and fuel economy, entered their hot-selling and repeat award-winning 1500 EcoDiesel.

Ram had another angle, as well. The Extreme Capability class in the past has been occupied by heavy-duty SUVs. With pickups now on the slate, Ram chose to enter one in the Extreme category—their big 2500 Power Wagon Crew Cab 4x4. Toyota's 4Runner TRD Pro SUV was the only other entrant in Extreme, while they chose to run their Tundra TRD Pro in the Pickups category.

Twenty-five media members participated, and manufacturer support was near one-on-one, with 22 brand specialists on hand to point out features or answer any questions about the 27 vehicles competing or the four on display. Ready, set, go.

This was our third Mudfest. It has a varied history of venues—NWAPA has membership cores in both Washington State and Oregon—but the prior two we attended were held in the Northern Cascades near Snoqualmie, Washington, utilizing Dirtfish Rally School, a well-regarded WRC champion training ground. That high country location offered specialty dirt and rock tracks set up with water hazards; a quick autocross on the paved area outside their main buildings; and some open road time in the surrounding countryside.

This year, Mudfest stayed in Washington State, but moved down toward sea level, in the lower Hood Canal region of the Olympic Peninsula, a



COMPACT UTILITY VEHICLE : JEEP RENEGADE TRAILHAWK 4X4



PREMIUM COMPACT UTILITY : LAND ROVER DISCOVERY SPORT HSE



FAMILY UTILITY VEHICLE : JEEP CHEROKEE TRAILHAWK 4X4





For a change of pace, it's hard to beat the Pacific Northwest's wet weather, cooler temps, open water and lush greenery. These also make it nice to return to the desert.

Mudfest had a new location this year. It stayed in Washington State (NWAPA is a regional organization), but moved down to sea level, in Mason County, the lower Hood Canal region an hour or two west of Seattle or Tacoma. In the southern reaches of Puget Sound, it can sometimes be surprising or challenging to figure whether you are on an island or the mainland, including the Olympic Peninsula. We were in that neck of the woods for this event. Whereas it looks as though a kid with a shovel and a pail could turn the upper portion of Mason County and all of Kitsap County into an island before the tide comes back in, our venue was all strictly speaking mainland.

It's easy to fly to Seattle from Phoenix on a number of major carriers. You may want a window seat, as you'll likely see the Grand Canyon, the Sierra Nevada and one or more of the volcanic Cascade peaks up close.

Our event operated out of the Alderbrook Resort and Spa near Union WA, directly on the Hood Canal, a natural body of water in the westernmost reaches of greater Puget Sound. The small capital city of Olympia is at the southern tip of Puget Sound, and this is maybe 30 to 40 minutes up from there, or about twice that far from Tacoma, despite that also being farther north but on the eastern reaches of the Sound.

We drove down from Sea-Tac Airport and south across the Tacoma Narrows Bridge. We returned via Washington State Ferry from Bremerton to Seattle, spending a few hours there before returning to the airport.

hour or two outside Seattle or Tacoma. Our headquarters and lodging were along the Hood Canal waterfront.

The first day's paved events—expanded considerably from prior years—were at Sanderson Field, near Shelton, Washington, a former military base that is now half operating FBO and half abandoned and available to us. (The facility also adjoins the Washington State Patrol Training Academy—with any jokes about being on our best behavior unavoidably inserted here.) Our time on the tarmac included an acceleration test, followed by a coned rear camera and (as applicable) sensor test. Next came a long stretch of high-speed slalom cones followed by a braking grid. No matter how well a vehicle does in the mud and ruts, all of these things will be critically important to you the majority of the time you drive.

The second day was what makes Mudfest Mudfest—the off-road portion of the event. Much as we loved Dirtfish, relocating here was a good move. The Tahuya State Forest is a huge park area encompassing over 100 miles of off-road vehicle and mountain biking trails. We also lucked out this year with some bad weather that second day—cold and wet between vehicle swaps back at the staging area, but with water hazards topped off, trails muddy and conditions overall just plenty challenging. Some of our course was very steep, all of it was heavily wooded, and navigating those in pouring rain on fresh mud is a challenging (and potentially expensive, i.e. totally appropriate) way to conduct Mudfest.

Some comparative drive events—trophyed or otherwise—have a wallflower or two. Not this one. Every vehicle was very much up to its task, and they were all the latest and best representatives of their missions. Scoring was often very tight, but each category did produce a statistical winner. Categories and entrants (alphabetically within groups) were as follows. Most were 2015 models, unless noted below as 2016 or in one case 2015.5. A great many of the vehicles entered were all new this year or within the past year.

COMPACT UTILITY VEHICLE

.....\$ as tested	MPG	HP	Torque
Honda HR-V EXL Navi 4WD CVT (2016)	*tba	27/32	141
Hyundai Santa Fe Sport AWD 2.0T		18/24	264
Jeep® Renegade Trailhawk 4x4		21/29	180
Mazda CX-5 Grand Touring AWD(2016)		24/30	184
Mitsubishi Outlander Sport SE AWC		24/30	148

* Honda HR-V pricing to be announced. This category often shows wild diversity, although we can envision the same buyer finding their own best solution with any one of them. This year's list seems fairly uniform at first glance, but differences remain. Horsepower is one area, with a spread of 87 percent for Santa Fe Sport over the Honda. Ignoring the Hyundai, the range is just 30 percent. But why would you ignore that? Then there's price, with something in the 20s—barely—while another pushes \$40 grand. But that's actually only a 28 percent spread. Again, ignore the Hyundai and the spread is just 13 percent. But again, why would you do that?

Bang for the buck comes into focus here, with the Hyundai at \$145 per horse, to \$202/horse for the Mitsubishi. (With no pricing released yet, we don't know whether the Honda may be at an advantage or disadvantage here.) Mitsubishi generally comes to mind particularly for its purchase economy, but Jeep Renegade in maximum-capability Trailhawk 4x4 trim is only \$250 more.

Three out of five hit or beat 30 MPG highway, with the Jeep just one point off that. Spreads are a little wider on city mileage—one more reason to think carefully about how much utility to buy, if you honestly aren't headed into the hills. The Hyundai's lower fuel mileage is not surprising, given its significant horsepower. In all, the stats demonstrate the kind of balance you ultimately have to decide upon when shopping this group.

The new little Jeep's balance of attributes and next-to-lowest price gave it an edge in the group's final vote tally: **Best Compact Utility Vehicle: Jeep Renegade Trailhawk 4x4.**

PREMIUM COMPACT UTILITY

.....\$ as tested	MPG	HP	Torque
Buick Encore AWD Premium Group		23/30	138
Land Rover Discovery Sport HSE LUX		20/26	240
Lexus NX 200t F Sport		22/27	235
Mercedes-Benz GLA250 4MATIC		24/32	208
Volvo V60 T5 AWD Cross Country (2015.5)		20/28	250

You may notice there is more than one way to categorize things. For example, the Buick Encore in this group and the Jeep Renegade in the prior group often share the same hot new segment, Subcompact Utility—premium, trail-rated or otherwise. But categories based on size often overlap, and the Mudfest groupings work well from a buyer's standpoint. And while the new Land Rover Discovery was entered on this list, they happily ran it on the Extreme Capability course, to show just what it's made of—shaking off some of the urbane persona of its roughly equally capable sibling the Range Rover Evoque. This is an excellent set of vehicles: we would actively want at least four out of five. But after running it on the toughest course, knowing it would play equally well at a Valley country club, we can't fault the collective decision: **Best Premium Compact Utility: Land Rover Discovery Sport HSE.**

FAMILY UTILITY VEHICLE

.....\$ as tested	MPG	HP	Torque
Ford Edge Sport AWD		17/24	315
Jeep Cherokee Trailhawk 4x4		19/26	271
Kia Sorento SXL AWD (2016)		19/25	191
Nissan Murano Platinum AWD		31/28	260
Subaru Outback 2.5i Limited		25/33	175



PREMIUM UTILITY VEHICLE : ACURA MDX AWD



EXTREME CAPABILITY : RAM 2500 POWER WAGON CREW CAB 4X4



PICKUP TRUCK : RAM 1500 OUTDOORSMAN CREW CAB 4X4 ECODIESEL





The Family category is full of new hardware. The Ford Edge is a complete rework, just introduced this spring. The Cherokee, new last year, is still making a big impact. The Kia Sorento was just introduced this winter, all new. The Nissan Murano is all new, in its third generation for 2015. And the fifth-gen Subaru Outback was new last year. Everything is up to date on all—lightweight materials, efficient powertrains, electronic handling and safety features. The Subaru Outback delivers the best price and the best fuel mileage—by quite a margin—in this group. And its owner loyalty and reliability are famously tops.

But then there's the Jeep Cherokee. There are more fuel-economical flavors of the Cherokee, but this is Mudfest, where the Trailhawk is most appropriate. If your applications are even just sometimes extreme enough to require its trail-rated designation, it's the most capable of that lineup. Then again, this is the Family category, not the Rubicon Trail category. Nonetheless, Cherokee Trailhawk as outfitted costs just 10 percent more than the Outback, yet delivers 55 percent more horsepower, while consuming just 21 percent more fuel. Tackling an especially muddy day with Trailhawk trim surely gave the Jeep an edge, but the comparative math is surely another reason the judges' totals arrived at this: **Best Family Utility Vehicle: Jeep Cherokee Trailhawk 4x4.**

PREMIUM UTILITY VEHICLE

.....\$ as tested	MPG	HP	Torque
Acura MDX AWD ADV ENT (2016)	.....19/26	290	267
BMW X5 M	.....14/19	567	553
BMW X6 M	.....14/19	567	553
Cadillac Escalade 4WD Platinum	.....15/21	420	460
Mercedes-Benz ML400 4MATIC	.....18/22	329	354
Volkswagen Touareg TDI Sport w/Technology	.....20/29	240	406

Until two years ago, this and the Premium Compact class were known as Luxury. But in addition to the ways various manufacturers categorize

their higher-end vehicles as either premium or luxury—with a Premium category arguably bracketing both—luxury does not as well describe such vehicles as the almost-600-hp BMW M utilities entered in this category this year.

One thing remains the same—prices in this group range more than twofold. How does one choose? The diesel torque plus combined purchase and fuel economy of the VW? The extreme power (at an extreme price) of the BMWs? The top drawer domestic luxury of the Escalade? The German luxury of Mercedes-Benz's volume selling M-Class? When all was said and done, the vehicle with the next-to-lowest price, next-to-lowest horsepower, lowest torque and next-to-best fuel mileage somehow won the collective vote: **Best Premium Utility Vehicle: Acura MDX AWD.**

EXTREME CAPABILITY

.....\$ as tested	MPG	HP	Torque
Ram 2500 Power Wagon Crew Cab 4x4	.....na	410	429
Toyota 4Runner TRD Pro V6	.....17/21	270	278

One look at the off-road course, especially the amped-up new one at the core of our program this year, and you might expect this to be one of the biggest categories. Instead, it is by far the smallest, with a grand total of two official entries.

As noted, the Land Rover Discovery Sport ran this course, too, though just to make a point in its successful quest for the Premium Compact trophy.

We had driven both the Toyota 4Runner and Tacoma midsize pickup in TRD Pro trim at the Texas Truck Rodeo last fall, and although they appear somewhat long in the tooth, we found them exceptionally capable. In a way, that's to be expected, from a classic body-on-frame SUV.

What was not expected were the abilities of a full-size, heavy-duty Ram Power Wagon crew cab pickup on such a course as this—but it blew us away as we not only tackled the steep and the deep, but on command applied its articulation to unlikely steep sudden turns or a squeeze between trees you might hesitate to do with your dirt bike. No quibbles with this trophy: **Best Extreme Capability Vehicle: Ram Power Wagon.**

PICKUP TRUCKS

.....\$ as tested	MPG	HP	Torque
Ford F-150 4x4 SuperCab 2.7L V6 EcoBoost	.....18/23	325	375
GMC Canyon 4WD SLE Crew Short Box	.....17/24	305	269
Ram 1500 Outdoorsman Crew Cab 4x4 EcoDiesel	.....19/27	240	420
Toyota Tundra TRD Pro Crewmax 5.7L V8	.....13/17	381	401

Each manufacturer brought something special to this newest of Mudfest categories. The Ford F-150's aluminum build is its biggest news, though we found time to appreciate its stunning interior, too. GM has pleased a lot of people with two new midsize pickups—Chevrolet Colorado and GMC Canyon—though they are not really all that small. The Ram 1500 EcoDiesel is a serial award winner, bagging trophies just about everywhere it goes. For an Outdoor Activity Vehicle event, the Ram Outdoorsman was a natural, with tow hooks, skid plates, active-leveling air suspension, on/off road tires and a full complement of tech and creature comforts. Toyota brought a TRD Pro version of its Tundra, surely the toughest Tundra we've driven. It takes a lot to shake off the brilliant spotlight shining on the new F-150 and the glow of the GMC midsize, and Ram did just that once again, as it has at one event after another: **Best Pickup: Ram 1500 EcoDiesel.**

OVERALL WINNER

There is seldom any one right way to vote, although there are many useful ways to narrow things down. Ours agreed with the group's winner in four categories, and our second place choice won first in two others. On one, we were a clean miss. That suits us. (If we had a one hundred percent match, you'd know how we voted.) Mostly, it underscores the ultimately subjective nature of choice—as it will be when you head out to make your own purchase decision. Quite a few of the vehicles entered in this event have notably won other recent events with other criteria. One such repeat winner is this year's overall champ: the **Northwest Outdoor Activity Vehicle of the Year: Jeep Renegade Trailhawk 4x4.**

VEHICLE IMPRESSION : 2015 NISSAN ALTIMA 2.5 SL

The midsize sedan segment was long the biggest seller and is still one of the hottest there is—appropriate as our transport during Mudfest, creating a counterpoint to the event's crossovers, which have now become the biggest selling segment. We used to think the Nissan Altima seemed a little underdone compared to the full-size Maxima. But both have evolved, and through the miracles of relativity, the current Nissan Altima now looks just right.

Our time and miles in the car were limited, but showed off Nissan's usual clear instruments and interface, a comfortable cabin and solid handling in the driving rain, and quick performance as we had ferries and planes to catch (this was the 182-hp four; there is also a 270-hp V6). Its CVT provided smooth and transparent power.

This SL is the top of four trims. Included features are extensive, and its few options are favorably priced.

The base Altima starts

at just \$22,300; a top V6 model starts at \$32,350. The four-cylinder is rated at 38 MPG highway. Our sample as outfitted strikes a great balance point in the lineup. Nissan Altima is a solid entry in a very crowded and competitive segment. ■

2015 NISSAN ALTIMA 2.5 SL

INCLUDED: ABS, traction control, dynamic control, electronic brake force distribution, alarm/immobilizer, Zero Gravity front seats, advanced display, leather-appointed seats and wheel, heated front seats, 8-way power driver's seat w lumbar, 4-way power passenger, cruise, Bose 9-speaker audio w 5" color display, rear camera, USB, NissanConnect w apps, Bluetooth phone, streaming audio, dual zone auto climate, rear A/C vents, keyless entry and start, remote start, dual illuminated vanity visors w extensions, HomeLink, 60/40 split rear seat, seatback pockets, auto headlights, fog lights, LED tail lights, heated manual fold mirrors w turn signals, chrome exhaust tips.

BASE PRICE	\$28,150
MOONROOF PACKAGE (power/tilt)	800
CARPETED FLOOR & TRUNK MATS	210
TECHNOLOGY PACKAGE: Navigation with 7" touchscreen; blind spot, lane departure and moving object warning; SiriusXM Traffic and Travel Link	1090
DESTINATION CHARGE:	810
TOTAL	\$31,060

