

Toughin' it out in the rough stuff

Mudfest! A full mix of track, terrain, weather & wheels

By Joe Sage / Vehicle & event photos by Doug Berger (DBPics.com) for NWAPA



The Pacific Northwest has quite a bit in common with Arizona. Both have wild elevation changes, volcanos and lava fields, rivers and grassy plains, along with big modern cities, small towns, ranches, historic trails and mines. And although the climates are different, both have rapidly changing wild weather.

The Northwest Automotive Press Association's (NWAPA's) Outdoor Activity Vehicle of the Year Awards—better known as “Mudfest”—brought us once again to Washington State's lower Olympic Peninsula in April, a timeframe chosen for high likelihood of the kind of weather that gives Mudfest its name. Last year was wild indeed—temperatures in the 30s and 40s, pouring rain and frozen mix. This year was arguably even better—blue skies for the first day's paved courses, moderate rain for the dirt and mud of the second day. (And our departure day that followed? Absolute maximum rain. But all in all, this weather sequence worked well.)

NWAPA was formed in 1991 and launched this annual event not long after. Starting as largely a pickup comparo, it has evolved in parallel to the vehicle marketplace, from a handful of body-on-frame SUVs first joining the pickups, to today's broad range of crossovers and utilities of every shape, size and powertrain—the most popular vehicles available now for daily driving, as well as for outdoor activities and trails.

CATEGORIES AND JUDGING

With pickups sure to include midsize and full-size, and crossovers and SUVs currently coming in a good half-dozen sizes—all of the above likely to vary in more extreme off-road capabilities, as well as powertrains and even luxury level—as an awards event, NWAPA has wisely consolidated the entries into just four basic categories—all pickups in one, two-row and three-row counts for SUVs, and luxury broken out for SUVs, where luxury models are clear. (For pickups, any luxury levels within models are folded in.) This eliminates two-vehicle sets seen in more heavily categorized comparos, here with four to six per category for useful comparison.

While all were distributed into the main four groups, both electrified and extreme capability vehicles—pickups and SUVs together—were evaluated again as separate subsets, and the entire stable was also evaluated for a third subset ranking by value.

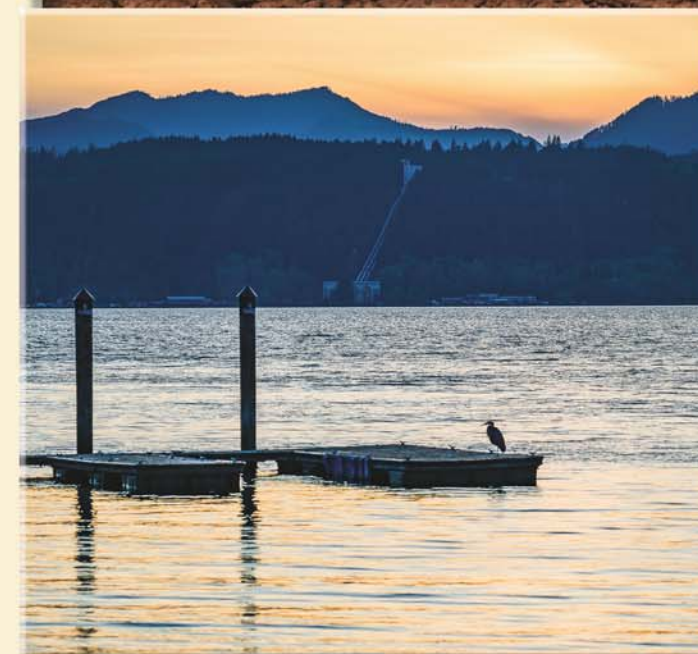
Drivers numerically score powertrain; paved ride and handling, acceleration and braking; off-road handling and capability; exterior styling; interior comfort and features; technology; and a subjective element of value. (Towing, which most but not all offered, is considered by specification, but not tested on course.)

Processes for this event are among the best in the business. Each driver votes a first and second choice in each category—with one full set of tallies and votes completed before dinner on day one (paved), the other before we leave on day two (off-road). From these, a best-of-the-best title winner is calculated, and results are provided to us within the next couple of days.

VENUE AND COURSES

While NWAPA's fall events—Run to the Sun and Drive Revolution—are usually held in Oregon (or just across the river in Washington State), Mudfest is held in Washington and has had a few different venues over our years of participating in it. When we started, it was held at DirtFish Rally School in Snoqualmie Pass, with off-road activities staged on site and paved drives on public roads

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Joe Sage (1)

surrounding the area. Lodging was nearby, immediately next to 268-foot Snoqualmie Falls. This was a top-notch setup, but a bit far for the Oregon contingent. Next, it moved to the lower Olympic Peninsula for a couple of years—the paved portion at a small airport and the off-road in a huge county park notable for challenging natural courses among hills, trees and water hazards. Now closer to Oregon and about the same distance from greater Seattle, this was a great test course, but driving each vehicle from the staging area to the off-road courses gobbled up considerable time.

This year, the event was held for the eighth time at The Ridge Motorsports Park, near Shelton, north of Olympia. (Meals, meetings and lodging are about 20 minutes away, on the Hood Canal waterfront.) The Ridge is a 170-acre club track facility featuring 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 replica of the big track (which we do use); and motocross acreage modified or specially built for our off-road purposes. An engineered course has the benefit of consistent comparison, as well as a chance to showcase specific features such as suspension articulation or hill descent and crawl modes.

Day one's paved circuit includes a coned chicane, a straightaway for maximum acceleration and full force braking impressions, 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 any entry. Vehicles designated for the Extreme Capability subcategory add more dramatic climbs and descents, water hazard fording, wheel articulation, log crawling, and other elements that push approach-breakover-departure angles toward their limits.

(FOUR) VEHICLE CATEGORIES

The event typically draws about 20 to 25 vehicle entrants and about the same number of media driver-analysts from among 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, greet, score and annotate. It's a good volume of vehicles, especially with NWAPA's firm diligence in ensuring that every driver drives every vehicle.

This year, we had 20 vehicles, including four from three US automakers, three from Europe, eight from a full variety of Japanese brands, and five from Korea. Full information on entries and results follows. Low and high end of the range are noted for price, horsepower, torque and combined fuel mileage rating within each category, to help you gauge where the winners fall. All are 2024 models except for one 2025 as noted.

PICKUP TRUCK

- Chevrolet Colorado 4WD ZR2 Bison
- Ford Ranger Supercrew 4x4 Raptor
- Honda Ridgeline TrailSport
- Nissan Frontier Pro-4X Crew Cab 4x4
- Ram 1500 Rebel (2025)
- Toyota Tacoma TRD Off-Road ** (base price and specs used on this one, not as-tested)

PRICE RANGE	\$41,800 Tacoma**	>	\$80,535 Ram
POWER RANGE	HP... 278 HP Tacoma	>	420 HP Ram
	TORQUE... 262 LBFT Ridgeline	>	469 LBFT Ram
TOW CAPACITY RANGE	5000 LB Ridgeline	>	11,580 LB Ram
COMB MPG RANGE	16 MPG Chevrolet	>	20 MPG Ridgeline, Tacoma

WINNER: 2024 Chevrolet Colorado 4WD ZR2 Bison

310 HP, 430 LBFT, 5,500 LB towing, 16 MPG comb, \$65,125 as tested

Runner-up: 2025 Ram 1500 Rebel

ANALYSIS: There is not one in this list you would not want in your driveway. Most are new generations, new trims or fully refreshed. With only one full-size, it might have won as midsize votes were diluted, but instead, midsize emphasis brought one out on top.

TWO-ROW FAMILY SUV

- Hyundai Kona Limited AWD
- Jeep Wrangler 2-Door Rubicon X
- Kia Sorento X-Pro SX-Prestige 2.5T AWD
- Mazda CX-50 Turbo Premium Plus AWD
- Subaru Crosstrek Wilderness
- Subaru Solterra (EV) * (also in contention for electrified subset)

PRICE RANGE	\$34,695 Kona	>	\$64,905 Jeep
POWER RANGE	HP... 182 HP Crosstrek	>	270 HP Jeep
	TORQUE... 178 LBFT Crosstrek	>	311 LBFT Kia
TOW CAPACITY RANGE	na LB Kona, Solterra	>	4500 LB Kia
COMB MPG RANGE	21 MPG Jeep	>	27 MPG Crosstrek (102 MPGe Solterra)

WINNER: 2024 Jeep Wrangler 2-Door Rubicon X

270 HP, 295 LBFT, 3500 LB towing, 21 MPG comb, \$64,905 as tested

Runner-up: 2024 Hyundai Kona Limited AWD

ANALYSIS: Sometimes a middle-attributes Goldilocks factor emerges; other times a lower price equation dominates (especially in this category); and yet other times (as in any category), the priciest and most powerful wins (perhaps since, even though price is one of the considerations, the people voting can fantasize without having to actually pull out their checkbooks). This year, the priciest and most powerful Jeep—embodying the core personality of the off-roading portion of this event, but surprising us with its power and handling in the cones and on the track—won top prize, while runner-up Kia brings the Goldilocks factor, standing between the low end and middle on most attributes.

THREE-ROW FAMILY SUV

- Hyundai Santa Fe XRT
- Kia EV9 GT-Line AWD (EV) * (also in contention for electrified subset)
- Mitsubishi Outlander PHEV SEL S-AWC (PHEV) * (also in contention for electrified subset)
- Volkswagen Atlas Peak Edition

PRICE RANGE	\$42,205 Hyundai	>	\$78,430 Kia
POWER RANGE	HP... 227 HP Hyundai	>	379 HP Kia
	TORQUE... 273 LBFT VW	>	516 LBFT Kia
TOW CAPACITY RANGE	1500 LB Mitsubishi	>	5000 LB Kia, VW
COMB MPG RANGE	20 MPG VW	>	22 MPG Hyundai (80 MPGe Kia)

WINNER: 2024 Kia EV9 GT-Line AWD (EV)

379 HP, 516 LBFT, 5000 LB towing, 80 MPGe comb, \$78,430 as tested

Runner-up: 2024 Hyundai Santa Fe XRT

ANALYSIS: This proved to not be a Goldilocks category, going to an entry at the top end of every key parameter—price, power, tow, fuel mileage. All the other variables aside, the Kia EV9 has another gotta-have-it factor for some: it's an all-new model (or an EV expansion model based on Telluride, but that only adds to its appeal for many).

LUXURY SUV

- Genesis GV70
- INEOS Grenadier Trailmaster
- Lexus GX 550 Overtrail
- Mercedes-Benz GLS 580 4MATIC

PRICE RANGE	\$69,350 Genesis	>	\$125,770 Mercedes-Benz
POWER RANGE	HP... 282 HP INEOS	>	510 HP Mercedes-Benz
	TORQUE... 332 LBFT INEOS	>	538 LBFT Mercedes-Benz
TOW CAPACITY RANGE	3500 LB Genesis	>	8000 LB Lexus
COMB MPG RANGE	14 MPG INEOS	>	20 Genesis

WINNER: 2024 Lexus GX 550 Overtrail

349 HP, 479 LBFT, 8000 LB towing, 17 MPG comb, \$71,270 as tested

Runner-up: 2024 Genesis GV70

ANALYSIS: While the price range is dramatic, three out of four run about \$70-85,000 (though the Mercedes-Benz is \$125,770). Japan's luxury brands have been with us for a long time now, but it still feels noteworthy when they conquer the Europeans in this category. The INEOS, new and somewhat rare and obscure, captivated everyone, but was not as well received by many on the paved portion of the event—largely due to an unusual steering feel, which they are reportedly aware of and are reengineering. The winning Genesis and runner-up Lexus are both about the same price (\$69k/71k), both with middle-of-the-pack power. One big difference is that while three out of four are large, with Lexus GX body styling creating a big, bold beast, the Genesis is small. Whether votes suggest a preference by size, runner-up Genesis GV70 does have higher fuel mileage (though the lowest tow capacity), and adds another trophy in its cabinet.



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(THREE) SUBSET CATEGORIES

ELECTRIFIED OUTDOOR UTILITY

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. There were three:

- Subaru Solterra (EV)*
- Kia EV9 GT-Line AWD (EV)*
- Mitsubishi Outlander PHEV SEL S-AWC (PHEV)*

▼ **WINNER: 2024 Kia EV9 GT-Line AWD (EV)**

379 HP, 516 LBFT, 5000 LB towing, 80 MPGe comb, \$78,430 as tested

Runner-up: 2024 Mitsubishi Outlander Plug-in Hybrid

ANALYSIS: Somewhat in line with the world at large, Kia EV9 has been winning a wide range of awards, Mitsubishi Outlander quite a few, and the Subaru is new and yet to rake them in. On the other hand, this event is where new things rake them in. Perhaps it's just that the Solterra is smaller and the bigger ones impressed more in the dirt.

EXTREME CAPABILITY

Last year, there were just four entered into this subgroup. This year, eleven—the entire pickup category plus five SUVs representing all three categories, including two luxury. These were all additionally evaluated on a more extreme course.

PICKUPS (ALL SIX), including midsize Colorado ZR2 Bison, Ranger Raptor, Ridgeline TrailSport, Frontier Pro-4X, Tacoma TRD Off-Road and the only full-size, the R 1500 Rebel.

SUVs (FIVE): Hyundai Santa Fe, INEOS Grenadier Trailmaster, Lexus GX, Wrangler 2-Door Rubicon, Crosstrek Wilderness.

▼ **WINNER: 2024 Jeep Wrangler 2-Door Rubicon X**

270 HP, 295 LBFT, 3500 LB towing, 21 MPG comb, \$64,905 as tested

Runner-up: 2024 Chevrolet Colorado ZR2 Bison

ANALYSIS: This is arguably the original heart of this event, and having eleven out of 20 vehicles entered in it underscores that. A day out in the mountains and woods with your ten best friends and ALL of these would be anybody's dream. Does the win indicate a preference for SUVs over pickups? Doubtful; could be a fraction of a point difference. Note that the winner and runner-up were both the winners of their core categories.

BEST VALUE

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

▼ **WINNER: 2024 Subaru Crosstrek Wilderness**

182 HP, 178 LBFT, 3500 LB towing, 27 MPG comb, \$35,560 as tested

Runner-up: 2024 Hyundai Kona Limited AWD

ANALYSIS: Despite the actual definition of value, which does NOT preclude pricier but high-content vehicles—and even “affordable” varies by individual wallets—the vote here often favors lower-priced choices, as was the case again this year.



(AND JUST ONE) OVERALL TITLE WINNER

OUTDOOR ACTIVITY VEHICLE OF THE YEAR

Even moreso than the categories, voting for the event's top trophy can follow whatever careful statistical analysis or whatever gut response or whim each driver finds best informs their choice. (Bear in mind, even if it were a pure recalculation, our numbers are subjective in the first place.) This ultimate playoff is simply its own simple, separate vote—a choice for first and second—with all vehicles in the event equally in play.

▼ **WINNER: 2024 Lexus GX 550 Overtrail**

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

Runner-up: 2024 Kia EV9 GT AWD

ANALYSIS: The winner of the overall title does not have to have won any of the four individual primary categories (Pickup, 2-Row, 3-Row or Luxury SUV), nor any subcategory. This phase is a lot like anyone's personal buying experience, where, 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.” Nonetheless, this year's title winner did win the Luxury SUV category—which could indicate an overall leaning toward luxury vehicles in this event this year. Or not. After all, it is not the most expensive. And the runner-up did win its 3-Row Family SUV category as well as the Electrified vote. As with the Extreme Capability subset, SUVs took the trophies, not pickups. Is there a connection here? Does this mean the event itself leans toward Extreme Capability, which is where its origins lie? Or is it just the inevitable result of applying essentially the same criteria and experiences? Perhaps notable is that an ICE vehicle still won over an EV.

Being a driver and judge at a vehicle compare event is surely akin to being a good schoolteacher—you love all the kids, inevitably develop a few favorites, but only one gets to be the valedictorian. It can be partly due to pure statistics, partly to emotion, even partly due to the influence of others with their own favorites. As we review the winners here, we can think of one after another where another could have just as easily won. We had a truly stellar class this year. But only one can.

Special thanks go out to the hard-working fleet personnel, to our hosting venue The Ridge Motorsports Park, to the manufacturers who sent their most capable vehicles and the smiling faces to explain and support them, and to our friends and colleagues in NWAPA for one of the best-executed events in the business. ■

