

BEAT OF A DIFFERENT DRUMMOND

IN MICHIGAN'S UPPER PENINSULA, WE COMPARE SIX FAMILY HAULERS AND, AMAZINGLY, DROWN NONE OF THEM.

BY JOHN PHILLIPS
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CHEVROLET
TRAVERSE
LT AWD

MAZDA CX-9
GRAND TOURING
AWD

TOYOTA
HIGHLANDER
SPORT 4X4

HYUNDAI
VERACRUZ
LIMITED AWD

HONDA PILOT
EX-L 4WD

FORD FLEX
SEL AWD

» When we last visited Michigan's Drummond Island ["Mud Puppies," February 2008], we compared nine Lilliput SUVs and quickly found ourselves in over our heads. Which is to say, we sank a Jeep Liberty. See, the island—a short ferry ride from the eastern tip of the state's Upper Peninsula—is a 25-mile-long series of limestone bowls (which hold water) and cedar swamps (ditto) surrounded by Lake Huron (ditto times a million). Drummond Island, though art thine own soggy enemy.

This time, we asked Drummond Island Resort's driving expert, Craig Hoffman, to sketch out a somewhat drier 16-mile loop, two-thirds of which comprised twisty, smooth pavement and one-third of which bumped through the resort's private off-road facility. On any off-roader's scale of difficulty, these private trails (notice we said "private" twice?) hover wholly in Wally Cox territory yet still represent pretty much the worst that any owner would throw at his investment. Along this route, we then ran the vehicles back-to-back

until the local bowling alley's neon "BEER" sign lit up.

Our goal was to compare six mid-size unibody crossovers with all-wheel drive, third-row seats, and the sort of interior volumes that would ensure family-hauling nirvana.

The Honda Pilot and the Toyota Highlander have recently been comprehensively refurbished, inside and out. Chevy's Traverse is the latest flavor of the platform shared with Buick's Enclave, GMC's Acadia, and Saturn's Outlook. The Traverse is the first we've tested with the direct-injection V-6, but the other three also get it for '09. Hyundai's Veracruz isn't brand-new but has never competed in a *C/D* comparo. Having secured a position on our '08 5Best Trucks list, Mazda's CX-9 simply *had* to be in the mix. And although a Ford Taurus X might have looked a better fit in this group, we opted for the brand-new Flex. Both rely on the same drivetrain, and the Taurus X is soon to be discontinued.

Unibodies were the order of the day, so body-on-frames, such as Nissan's Pathfinder, were excluded. Dit-

to a couple of crossovers with notably smaller interior volumes—Subaru's Tribeca, for instance.

We had hoped that with AWD and a nice load of options our vehicles would all max out at about \$38,000. Alas, the only Highlander that Toyota could offer, at least with a third-row seat, was a loaded \$42,799 Limited, so we used it for back-seat tests only. The Highlander Sport we drove to the island had no third-row seat and was sparsely outfitted—cloth seats, for instance—but was a whale of a bargain at \$33,648. Adding a third row to our car would bump its price to \$34,433, which is the number we used in the chart and for scoring purposes.

We were disappointed that our six crossovers managed an observed average of only 19 mpg. Sign of the times: On the way north, we observed a man riding a Schwinn. With a bag of golf clubs slung over his shoulder and a full-size Igloo cooler in his left hand, he was a candidate for a closed head injury. "What you got there," observed associate editor Tony Quiroga, "is a guy with an SUV parked in his garage."

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HONDA PILOT EX-L 4WD

THE HIGHS

A veritable woodsman off-road, torsional rigidity of an I-beam.

THE LOWS

Cluttered center stack, a firm ride, could use another 20 horses.

THE VERDICT

A civilized crossover that feels as unbreakable as a truck.

» Since its 2002 introduction, Honda's Pilot has bagged six of C/D's 5Best Trucks trophies. This latest gen—longer, wider, riding on 2.9 inches of newfound wheelbase—may well land it in the SUV Hall o' Fame.

We previously possessed a long-term Honda Ridgeline whose flat, tall, bulldog nose always felt like it was moving 20 tons of air. Beyond 70 mph or so, the Pilot—the tallest crossover in this group—felt the same. Lift off the throttle for a sec, and *whoa* is me. Honda's V-6 may be gloriously smooth, but it produces less power than

any of its competitors. Combine that with the aero load, and the Pilot returned the lowest quarter-mile trap speed and was the most dilatory to 110 mph by *5.8 seconds*. What's more, its V-6 was the noisiest at WOT and at 70 mph. What saved the day was that peak horsepower manifests at 5700 rpm, the fewest revs of any V-6 invited. In fact, there was terrific grunt as low as 2500 rpm.

We hoped Honda's cylinder-deactivation system—now able to vary between three and four slugs under light loads—would boost fuel economy. Alas, the Pilot was still

more fuelish than the Highlander in all measured categories. Both, curiously, offer five gears versus everybody else's six.

Still, none of our crossovers surpassed the Pilot's off-road prowess. It can wade through 19 inches of water and offers both hill-start assist and "VTM-4 Lock," which can send maximum torque to the rear wheels at speeds up to 18 mph. Where some aiming was required with the others, the Pilot just bulldozed over the larger impediments.

The Pilot is an eight-seater, and it nearly matches the larger Chevy for third-row



space. Legroom is up 1.1 inches in the second row, 1.9 inches in the third. More important, the front seats are gently bolstered and cushy without relying on padding that swallows the sides of your hips.

In the end, the MDX-based Pilot won—by just two points, mind you—because it felt more solid than its rivals. Part of that perception derives from the slightly heavy but accurate steering, and part accrues from the taut, totally tied-down chassis. But the new Pilot may also feel unbend-

able because of its higher-strength steel, its sturdier gusseting, and its platform's more robust rear structure.

Add to that a zillion storage bins, a backlight that lifts separately from the hatch, steering with no wasted motion, a dollop of lift-throttle oversteer, the second-best as-tested price, and you've got a crossover scoring bonus points like a fawning son on Mother's Day. Plus, there's this: The company now builds its own jet, so you can be a Honda pilot and own one, too. ●



*OBJECTIVE	BEST IN TEST	VEHICLE														POWERTRAIN				CHASSIS				EXPERIENCE		GRAND TOTAL						
		DRIVER COMFORT	ERGONOMICS	2ND-ROW COMFORT	2ND-ROW SPACE*	3RD-ROW COMFORT	3RD-ROW SPACE*	CARGO SPACE*	TOWING CAPACITY*	FEATURES/AMENITIES*	FIT AND FINISH	EXTERIOR STYLING	INTERIOR STYLING	REBATES/EXTRAS*	AS-TESTED PRICE*	SUBTOTAL	1/4-MI ACCELERATION*	FLEXIBILITY*	FUEL ECONOMY*	ENGINE NVH	TRANSMISSION	SUBTOTAL	PERFORMANCE*	STEERING FEEL	BRAKE FEEL		OFF-ROAD CAPABILITY	HANDLING	RIDE	SUBTOTAL	GOTTA HAVE IT	FUN TO DRIVE
RANK	MAXIMUM POINTS AVAILABLE	10	10	5	5	5	5	5	5	10	10	10	10	5	20	115	20	5	5	10	10	50	20	5	5	5	10	10	55	25	25	270
1	HONDA PILOT	9	9	5	3	4	5	4	5	7	9	7	8	1	19	95	16	4	4	9	9	42	17	4	5	5	9	9	49	19	20	225
2	MAZDA CX-9	9	9	4	3	3	2	3	2	8	9	9	9	1	17	88	18	4	3	9	9	43	19	5	5	4	9	9	51	19	22	223
3	TOYOTA HIGHLANDER	9	9	5	3	4	1	2	5	5	8	7	8	2	20	88	20	4	5	9	8	46	18	3	4	4	8	8	45	17	17	213
4	FORD FLEX	7	8	5	5	5	3	4	5	10	9	9	8	0	17	95	16	5	4	7	7	39	18	3	3	2	7	8	41	18	14	207
5	CHEVROLET TRAVERSE	8	8	3	2	2	5	5	2	8	7	6	6	0	16	78	19	4	2	7	7	39	17	3	4	4	7	8	43	14	16	190
6	HYUNDAI VERACRUZ	8	8	4	3	3	2	1	4	10	8	6	7	2	18	84	17	4	2	8	8	39	18	3	4	3	6	8	42	11	11	187

*These objective scores are calculated from the vehicles' dimensions, capacities, rebates and extras, and/or test results.