

by Dan Lyons • *Special to The Daily Gazette*

## 2022 Toyota Highlander Hybrid

**MSRP: \$39,555 (LE, FWD) AS TESTED: \$52,918 (PLATINUM L4 AWD)**



This week's test drive is in the Toyota Highlander Hybrid. The three row SUV is offered in five trim levels: LE (MSRP: \$39,555), XLE (\$42,555), Bronze (\$44,580), Limited (\$46,510) and Platinum (\$49,510). Those prices are for Front Wheel Drive; All Wheel Drive can be added for an additional \$1,175 - \$1,525, depending on trim level.

Three row Utes/Crossovers like Highlander have gained popularity as fine, family haulers. A bench, second row seat provides seating for up to eight. It's standard on LE, optional on XLE. Otherwise, it's captain's chairs in row two. Both provide comfortable, adult-size room. The third row is suitable for kids, and here (as with most three row vehicles), max people mode leaves a modest amount left over for rear stowage. In Highlander Hybrid's case, that amounts to 16 cu.-ft., rising to 48.4, with the third row seatback folded flat, and 84.3 cu.-ft., in max cargo (front passengers only) mode.

Highlander's front cabin layout includes a wireless charging pad, atop the center console (on all trims but LE). If you have a larger phone, it may not fit in the cradle, unless you take it out of its case. Limited and Platinum trim models trade the 8.0" infotainment display for a 12.3" touchscreen; both are compatible with Apple CarPlay and Android Auto. An 11-speaker JBL sound system is optional. There are four USB charge ports and one USB media port for the rows one and two; none in row three. The layout of controls



*Photos courtesy of the manufacturer*

is average in terms of learning curve and ease of access. Driver visibility is good for the breed. Toyota offers a full complement of standard and optional safety and driver assistance features.

The available AWD has minimal impact on mileage (1 mpg, in combined mode, per the EPA), but maximal effect on winter driving peace of mind – especially in a family transporter. Highlander is a very capable highway cruiser, with a comfortable, trip-worthy ride quality. It isn't designed to be a sporty crossover, but it handles confidently. And where the braking in some hybrids leaves something to be desired (grabby at first bite), Highlander Hybrid showed no such tendencies.

Though 7-passenger SUV's aren't uncommon, hybrid powered versions remain rather rare. Toyota's hybrid powertrain includes a 2.5L four cylinder gas engine, a Continuously Variable Transmission, and two electric motors. Total system horsepower is 243, with a maximum towing capacity of 3,500 lb. The battery pack is compact enough to fit underneath the second row seats, so there's no storage space penalty for choosing the hybrid over the gas powered model. EPA fuel economy estimates are 36/35/36 for FWD, and 35/35/35 for AWD. I logged an impressive 38 mpg's overall in an extensive (800 mile) test drive, that mixed round town travel with heavy doses of highway driving. The gas/electric interplay is seamless. Engine noise is noticeable under heavy throttle, but it's otherwise a very composed cabin. The Hybrid is about a second slower from 0-60 than the gas powered version, but the difference in fuel economy (the 3.5L gas six is estimated at 20/27/23) makes that an easy tradeoff. The rare combination of room, comfort and fine, fuel economy is Highlander's strong suit.

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