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2006 Toyota Highlander Hybrid Review



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The 2006 Toyota Highlander Hybrid is an excellent family SUV that accommodates the needs of most SUV buyers while delivering the benefits of hybrid technology.

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Pros

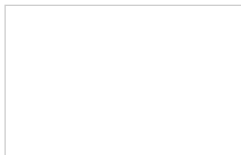
Real-world gas mileage in the 20s, terrific acceleration, smooth ride, comfortable cabin with simple controls and solid materials.

Cons

Extra weight results in so-so handling, engine can be noisy, poor access to third-row seat.

Available Highlander Hybrid SUV Models

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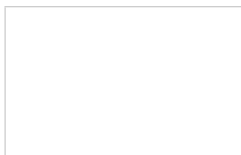
Base

- 3.3L V6 hybrid engine
- Continuously variable transmission
- Up to 28 city/25 hwy mpg
- All-wheel drive
- Side/Curtain Airbags
- Stability Control
- Third row seats
- Traction Control
- DVD player (Optional)

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Limited

- 3.3L V6 hybrid engine
- Continuously variable transmission
- Up to 28 city/25 hwy mpg
- All-wheel drive
- Side/Curtain Airbags
- Stability Control
- Third row seats
- Traction Control
- Navigation System (Optional)
- DVD player (Optional)

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2006 Toyota Highlander Hybrid

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What's New for 2006

New for 2006, the hybrid version of the Highlander pairs a gasoline-powered V6 with electric motors to improve fuel economy and acceleration.

Introduction

Hybrids are certainly not new -- the first Honda Insights and Toyota Priuses rolled into dealerships over five years ago. But the 2006 Toyota Highlander Hybrid is the one that will put the term "hybrid" on the lips of average Americans. As revolutionary as cars like the Insight were, many people need more than two or even five seats. And that's where the Highlander comes in.

As the first seven-passenger hybrid vehicle Toyota's alternative-powered SUV is revolutionary in its own quiet kind of way. Automakers have finally figured out that the key to mass hybrid sales is not necessarily stellar fuel economy. Given the price premium paid for most hybrids, vehicles like the Lexus RX 400h and Honda Accord Hybrid offer more luxury features and extra power. And the Toyota Highlander is no different. The "conserving resources" aspect of the Highlander Hybrid intentionally plays second banana to more important features like extra power and standard third-row seating.

Does the Toyota Highlander Hybrid get better fuel economy than your average V6-powered SUV? Sure, it's rated 31 mpg/27 mpg highway. But it's the added snap of 268 hp that really get this Highlander recognized. The gas-electric Highlander also offers a few extra touches such as standard LED taillights and unique 17-inch wheels. Foglights, a rear roof spoiler and a JBL stereo are options. The Limited version is even more luxurious, as it's loaded up with every possible feature save for an optional DVD-based navigation system. But with that touchscreen nav system, you'll also have the added entertainment of a power flow chart and fuel economy meter like that found in the Prius.

Front-wheel-drive and all-wheel-drive versions are available, though the Toyota Highlander Hybrid is intended for pavement duty. Toyota calls the all-wheel-drive system 4WD-i. It is an on-demand system that improves traction on wet and dry pavement and is capable of regenerating power from all four wheels. The system is unique in that it uses a rear-mounted motor/generator to power the rear wheels when wheel slip is detected in the front. The 2006 Toyota Highlander Hybrid is remarkable in that it doesn't force you to make uncomfortable compromises to stand up for the planet. Thanks, in part, to its conservative styling and simple, comfortable interior, this hybrid should make the move into the high-tech age painless for the typical family car buyer.

Body Styles, Trim Levels, and Options

The Toyota Highlander Hybrid is offered in base and Limited trim levels. The base model is nicely equipped with seven-passenger seating, cloth upholstery, a power driver seat, ABS, stability control, a six-speaker CD stereo and 17-inch alloy wheels. The lone option package for the base model includes a sunroof, an upgraded JBL stereo with a CD changer and foglights. The Limited comes with all of the above, as well as leather upholstery, wood grain interior trim, automatic climate control and a power front-passenger seat. A navigation system is the only option on the Limited.

Powertrains and Performance

To make the hybrid version, Toyota started with the 3.3-liter V6 in the standard Highlander, recalibrated it for duty in a hybrid and installed two electric motors. One of the motors is responsible for starting the gas engine and recharging the 288-volt battery pack. The other teams up with the V6 to drive the front wheels via a continuously variable transmission. All-wheel-drive models get a third motor that can juice the rear wheels when extra power or traction is needed; Toyota calls this setup 4WD-i. The gas-electric power plant makes a combined 268 horsepower. Fuel economy is 33 mpg city/28 mpg highway on front-drive (2WD) models and 31/27 on all-wheel-drive models. Towing capacity is 3,500 pounds.

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Safety

Front-seat side airbags and first- and second-row head curtain airbags are standard on all Toyota Highlander Hybrid models. Also standard are four-wheel antilock disc brakes, ABS with BrakeAssist and Electronic Brakeforce Distribution, traction control, stability control. These safety systems are part of Toyota's new integrated safety system that coordinates all the vehicle's safety features to assure maximum accident avoidance capability and protection should an accident occur.

Interior Design and Special Features

The interior of the Toyota Highlander Hybrid is essentially identical to that of the gasoline-only version. A thoughtful cabin design puts all the controls and storage areas within easy reach. Comfortable seating in the first and second rows and a total of 10 cupholders make the Highlander Hybrid a natural for family transportation. The second-row seat's lack of a flip-and-fold mechanism makes the third row tougher to access than most, but this is still the only hybrid that seats seven.

Driving Impressions

The standard Toyota Highlander has a light and somewhat "tossable" nature but the added weight of the hybrid version gives it a more cumbersome feel around tight turns. It's still easy to maneuver in the city, though, and as smooth as they come on the highway. Acceleration is excellent at any speed, thanks to the electric motor assist.

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