

Top 10 2008 Hybrids

- By Joe Wiesenfelder



Hybrid rankings have often been simplistic: Most are little more than lists of the highest-mileage models on the market. Here, we ranked hybrids based on how much fuel savings they get when compared to their non-hybrid version, as well as how much all that

saved gas is going to cost you. Examinations that compare hybrids to "comparably equipped" versions miss an important point. Hybrids are almost always among the most expensive trim levels, if not the most costly, but our premise is that you're looking for efficiency first, followed closely by price. This isn't about acceleration, so the hybrids are compared to the lowest-priced, most-efficient gas-only trim level in their model line. Our rankings take into account the hybrid's mileage and price premium, in percent, as well as its suggested retail price. This gives less-expensive models a boost while penalizing more-expensive ones.

No. 1: **Toyota Prius**

MSRP: \$21,100 (\$29,500 CAN)

EPA-estimated mileage (city/highway, mpg): 48/45 (20/19 kpl)

After seven years on the market, the Prius is still the best hybrid for people who just plain want to burn less gas. It's arguably also the best for people who hope to save money in the long run. Built from scratch as a hybrid, it maximizes interior space and offers a roomy cargo hatch, whereas hybrid sedans tend to diminish trunk space and/or eliminate folding backseats. There is no gas-only version, but there doesn't have to be. It's both the most efficient and most affordable hybrid out there.

No. 2: **Saturn Vue Green Line**

MSRP: \$24,170 (\$30,790 CAN)

EPA-estimated mileage: 25/32 (10.6/13.6 kpl)

Dramatic mileage boosts get all the attention, but Saturn is onto something with this mild hybrid approach. The current Vue Green Line's premium over the lowest-priced gas-only version is modest — only 14 percent. All the same, its city and highway mileage increases are 32 and 23 percent, respectively. What's more, it's priced below the V-6 version, whose mileage it roughly doubles. The only drawback: The Vue is the only hybrid SUV not to offer all-wheel drive. (Note: A second Green Line with 2 Mode technology is coming late in 2008 as a 2009 model.)

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**No. 3: Honda Civic Hybrid****MSRP: \$22,600 (\$26,350 CAN)****EPA-estimated mileage: 40/45 (17/19 kpl)**

Even though its cost premium over the base Civic is 51 percent, its city and highway mileage are 54 percent and 32 percent higher, respectively, than that already-efficient model, making the payoff quite high. It happens to be an excellent car, too.

**No. 4: Toyota Camry Hybrid****MSRP \$25,200 (\$30,600 CAN)****EPA-estimated mileage: 33/34 (14/14.4 kpl)**

Not everyone wants a small, less-refined car like the Prius, which makes the Camry Hybrid the one for the masses. Priced 36 percent higher than the base four-cylinder model, it gets 57 and 10 percent better gas mileage (city and highway), and even more dramatic improvements over the V-6 versions whose prices it rivals.

**No. 5: Lexus RX 400h****MSRP: \$41,280 (\$55,050 CAN)****EPA-estimated mileage: 27/24 (11.4/10.2 kpl)**

Though it's a luxury model, the RX 400h's price premium is a mere 10 percent over the gas-only RX 350. Combined with a 50 percent city mileage improvement and 4 percent highway bump, it's a compelling package overall. The RX is similar to the Toyota Highlander Hybrid, which has a lower overall price and 1 mpg higher highway mileage, but that model's higher price premium gives it a lower rank. With optional AWD, the RX 400h is an even better deal, with mileage improvements of 53 percent and 9 percent compared to the all-wheel-drive RX 350.

**No. 6: Toyota Highlander Hybrid****MSRP: \$33,700 (\$41,075 CAN)****EPA-estimated mileage: 27/25 (11.4/10.6 kpl)**

The Highlander Hybrid comes only with AWD. The most efficient gas Highlander has FWD. In comparison, the Hybrid costs 23 percent more and delivers 50 percent better city mileage but only a 4 percent highway improvement. If you want AWD, however, the Hybrid costs only 17 percent more than the gas-only model and boasts 59 and 9 percent higher mileage in city and highway driving, respectively.

**No. 7: Ford Escape Hybrid****MSRP: \$26,505 (\$31,499 CAN)****EPA-estimated mileage: 34/30 (14.4/12.7 kpl)**

The Escape Hybrid's rank is a little surprising, given its impressive mileage, but it's hard to overcome the fact that it costs 40 percent more than the base, four-cylinder Escape. Because of this, its 55 percent city and 7 percent highway mileage improvement can't compensate. If you compare it to the thirstier V-6, however, this hybrid would be higher on the list.

**No. 8: Chevrolet Tahoe 2 Mode Hybrid****MSRP: \$49,590 (\$66,125 CAN)****EPA-estimated mileage: 21/22 (8.9/9.3 kpl)**

To people who say a full-size truck defeats the purpose of a hybrid, we say "nonsense." People who want or need a large SUV may have even better reason for cutting back on gas than the owner of an already-efficient car does. The Tahoe Hybrid gives up practically none of the original's capability, including towing, and gets a stunning 50 percent increase in city mileage and 16 percent bump on the highway. It comes in eighth not because of its size, but because of its added cost: 43 percent more than the lowest-priced gas-only Tahoe. In a rare twist, the cheapest Tahoe isn't the most efficient. The LT trim level gets higher mileage (it's an engine thing) but also a higher price. Here the price premium is less, at 35 percent, but the Hybrid's highway mileage is only 10 percent better than this version, rather than 16 percent.

**No. 9: Saturn Aura Green Line****MSRP: \$22,140 (\$27,575 CAN)****EPA-estimated mileage: 24/32 (10.2/13.6 kpl)**

Known as a mild hybrid, the Aura Green Line delivers modest mileage improvements over the four-cylinder Aura — 9 percent in the city and 7 percent on the highway — but its price premium is a mere 12 percent. (Note: Chevrolet will soon also market a mild hybrid version of its Malibu. Later on, 2 Mode hybrid versions of each are expected to join or replace them, adding efficiency and cost.)

**No. 10: Lexus GS 450h****MSRP: \$54,900 (\$71,100 CAN)****EPA-estimated mileage: 22/25 (9.3/10.6 kpl)**

Lexus' GS 450h sedan comes in last because its cost increase outweighs the gains it gets in mileage. The base GS is the GS 350, a relatively efficient and low-priced V-6 model. There's a 24 percent premium between it and the GS 450h, and what you get for it is a 16 percent city mileage improvement and a 7 percent decrease in highway driving. One could argue that the 450h is being shafted because Lexus offers such a high-mileage gas-only version. (When compared to the V-8-powered GS 460, the hybrid isn't very expensive and gets better mileage.) But our assumption is that you want a GS and don't want to pay a lot for efficiency. The 450h's gains over the V-8 460 certainly have worth, but only you can conclude how much. In this ranking, the GS hybrid looks like a lot of money for little gain.



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