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MACHINERY

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On test

Diesel might be the current fuel of choice for farm buggies, but there is a new wave of petrol-powered machines looking to reverse that trend. **Oliver Mark, Edd Mowbray and James Andrews** put a few key players to the test

The idea of buying a petrol buggy over a diesel one will be an alien concept to most farmers – and it's easy to see why.

For a start, sloshing a few gallons of red into the tank is blissfully convenient compared with humping bundles of jerry cans to the pumps. And the infinitesimal amount of fuel a diesel buggy uses compared with full-scale farm kit means they seem almost free to run.

After all, this fuel saving and convenience is one of the primary reasons why the farm buggy (or UTV, to use the proper term) has caused such a dent in quad bike sales.

But there's a flip side – diesels are expensive



Battle of the

to buy, often complicated to repair, noisy in the cabin and, crucially, painfully slow.

With those shortcomings firmly in mind, a few makers have now swept in with a raft of petrol-powered alternatives that make for very different spec sheet reading.

Power and performance in some of these machines borders on the ridiculous, mechanicals are generally simpler and they usually come in a bit cheaper.

But are they worth the extra hassle? To find out, we assembled a group of some of the

Polaris Ranger XP1000

Quick verdict: The high-powered XP1000 is a complete animal, which makes it good fun to drive but pretty dangerous in the wrong hands. It brings top-drawer ground clearance, long-travel suspension and car-like spec levels in the cab, but the build quality is suspect and it has a worrying habit of sliding out of control on downhill slopes. We'd opt for the lesser-powered version.

PRICE AS TESTED Refused to supply
BEST FOR Looning around
WORST FOR Downhill traction



Driveline

The XP1000 packs a mighty 82hp and 83Nm of torque from its 999cc twin-cylinder engine and has the sort of pants-soiling acceleration to rival a rally car.

One look at the dash dials tells you all you need to know about its performance – the speedo has readings up to 140kph and the rev gauge tops out at 10,000rpm. It has the testosterone of a rodeo bull, which is good fun if you like driving like a nutter, but gets a little

tiresome during work.

It often feels on the edge of being out of control at high speeds and, with very little to protect the driver in a crash, needs to be driven safely and well below its limits to avoid accidents. In reality, the steady-as-you-like nature of the Gator is far less stressful for sheep-feeding duties.

The perk of the power is that it doesn't flinch when hooked up to a trailer and it clocked a similar time to the equally fast (but

more stable) Can-Am and the farm's Toyota Hilux pickup on our mile-long uphill road route.

It came out marginally slower on the steep grass bank climb, but it was a question of traction – rather than power – that limited its sprint time.

Grip proved to be a greater problem during slope descents. Though the engine braking system manages to keep a lid on revs and wheel speed, the lack of weight over the back

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buggies

most popular diesel and petrol buggies on the market. These ranged in shape, size and price considerably, but gave a flavour of the breadth of machines now on offer.

In the derv camp was Kawasaki's Mule (which kicked off the buggy market some

30 years ago) and John Deere's most popular farm-spec Gator. Clearly there is one glaring omission here and although invited, sadly Kubota chose not to provide us with one of its hydrostatic RTV X900s after it saw the list of competing machines.

The petrols, meanwhile, included Polaris' turf-eating Ranger XP 1000, Can-Am's Traxter HD8 and Honda's Pioneer. All were put to test on a Shropshire hill farm with a mix of different driving tests to simulate hard agricultural use. Here's how they got on...

LIKES AND GRIPES

- ✔ Loads of power
- ✔ Pulls a trailer with ease
- ✔ Best ground clearance
- ✔ Car-like interior
- ✘ Dangerously fast
- ✘ Glitchy cab electronics
- ✘ Struggles for downhill traction
- ✘ Lurchy drive at low revs

end means it constantly wants to step out as it starts sliding out of control.

On the flat, the two-range CVT is lurchy when trying to pull away slowly, but pretty smooth at high speeds. There's also the choice of Polaris' one-wheel-drive set-up for turf-type activities, as well as two- and four-wheel power, though, surprisingly, no diff-lock.

Cab

Top-spec Rangers come with a car-like cab that brings previously unseen UTV luxuries such as electric windows, a radio (that tends to get drowned out by engine noise), a proper indicator stalk, air vents all round and various charging ports.

At first glance, it promises a lot and all the fancy extras make it more appealing than the likes of the crudely mechanical Honda. How-

ever, there's far more to go wrong, too.

The build quality lags a long way behind the Can-Am, and the cab plastics feel fairly cheap and tacky. We also had reliability problems, including glitchy electronics that caused the dash screen to flicker on and off, and intermittent power steering.

The cab is shallower than some of its rivals, but there's plenty of room for three, access is good and the passenger bench folds up to reveal extra storage space. There are lots of cubbies dotted around the dash, but most are small and not particularly useful.

Working life

Many of the XP1000's racing-grade characteristics are useful in work.

For a start, the nutty power means it'll pull a trailer with ease – it's rated to 907kg, which is seriously impressive by UTV standards.

Suspension travel totalling 28cm allows it to bounce and bumble its way across pretty much any terrain and it has the best ground clearance, so deep ruts are no problem either.

However, that height and bounce make it fairly wallowy around corners and also means the load bed sits much higher than the likes of the Gator and Traxter.

The bed is tough and can be tipped from both sides, but the rear light clusters look vulnerable and the lash-down points are poor.



MACHINERY FARM BUGGIES ON TEST

Can-Am Traxter HD8 DPS

Quick verdict: The Traxter was at ease with most tasks we threw its way and has the sort of versatility you'd expect from a buggy. Its powerful petrol engine provides all the grunt you'd need and delivers it far more smoothly than the Polaris. Build quality and cab layout were good too, but it lost marks for being skittish on the downhill route with a trailer in tow. It's also worth bearing in mind that spare parts are hideously expensive. Still, it's probably the one we would buy.

PRICE AS TESTED: £11,861

BEST FOR All-round performance
WORST FOR Downhill engine braking



Driveline

The HD8 is the mid-ranking buggy in the Can-Am UTV range, but provides more-than-ample power. It carries a Rotax 779cc engine generating 50hp and has the full off-road spec list, including a low-range box and a locking rear differential. For those who want a bit more, Can-Am also offers the 72hp HD10.

The engine is pretty peachy by farm buggy standards. A slight downside is the in-cab noise at full chat, but it's nowhere near as deafening as the Honda.

The notchy gear selector stalk is clear and well designed – unlike the Polaris – and, once engaged, delivers power to the CVT transmission in typically sneaky but brisk fashion.

In our timed hill climb routes, the Can-Am came out top dog on grass, but was pipped to the post by the more powerful Polaris on the tarmac. In reality, the difference in times is irrelevant and all the drivers preferred the safer-feeling ride of the Traxter to the slightly out-of-control Ranger.

Towing up the hill with a trailer on and two chaps in the front added a barely noticeable three seconds to the unladen time, which isn't far shy of pickup standards.

Cab

Access to the spacious and well-laid-out cab is good. The wide openings allow even the biggest work boots to gain entry without stumbling, though the floppy net guards on our test model were pointless and caused a trip hazard. We would favour solid doors, or nothing at all.

Sat in the driver's seat gives a good view to all four corners of the vehicle and there's enough space to rest a left foot on long journeys, unlike the compact Gator. By buggy standards it's surprisingly comfortable and the two passengers also have lots of legroom and a solid bar to hang onto around the bends.

An abundance of useful cubby holes to store farming paraphernalia wins it more brownie points, while a handy removable glovebox could house some go-to tools or medicines that need to stay dry.

The build quality was another feather in the Traxter's cap. It's solid, all the switches worked as they should and the flat floor can be pressure washed out without worrying about ruining the electrics.

A helpful addition was the ability to flip-up the two passenger seats to offer an unobstructed floor-to-ceiling space capable of swallowing an assortment of dogs or multiple buckets of feed.

Working life

Going slowly down hills wasn't part of the Traxter's A-game. The engine did an average job of slowing the buggy on some steep descents without a load on the back, but it had a tendency to run away before reaching the bottom.

However, with a bale-filled trailer hooked on the low ball its performance was far worse – particularly when compared with the ice-cool Gator. It simply couldn't keep the engine speed under control for a sustained spell and could turn out to be quite dangerous if it has to negotiate lots of hills.

Elsewhere, the good-sized load bed offers a handy 840mm load height. With the Honda's bed sitting a whole 100mm higher, lifting 20-litre chemical cans is relatively easy, but it was still bettered by the John Deere. Handily there are no bars to obscure connecting a trailer, though.

Access to the engine for servicing was decent with the load bed tipped. On the down side, the rear lights are woefully exposed on the Traxter and it would only take a slight bump against a gate before some expensive clusters are ruined.

LIKES AND GRIPES

- ✓ Strong build quality
- ✓ Comfortable and well-laid-out cab
- ✓ Good load bed height
- ✓ Excellent petrol engine
- ✗ Engine braking almost non-existent
- ✗ Expensive replacement parts
- ✗ No diesel options
- ✗ Noisy acceleration



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MACHINERY FARM BUGGIES ON TEST

John Deere Gator XUV 855M

Quick verdict: The Gator's golfing roots make it ultra-maneuvrable and deliver a pretty languid driving style, but also limit legroom and make long hours in the seat uncomfortable. That said, the diesel engine was far peppier than the labourer Mule – though still miles from petrol equivalents – and it handled our downhill route far better than the rest. It's very expensive, though.

PRICE AS TESTED £16,737
BEST FOR Going downhill
WORST FOR Cab comfort



Driveline

Diesel-powered UTVs have a reputation for fairly lacklustre performance, but the Gator was livelier than expected. At 854cc, its three-bore Yanmar engine is slightly smaller than that of the Kawasaki but, ironically, leaves the sluggish Mule looking like a bit of a donkey.

The Gator beat its old adversary by three seconds in the uphill sprint (nothing special here – they were both tortuously slow) but by almost a minute in the two-mile uphill slog. If we'd had the Kubota RTV on test then it would have likely been left for dead, too.

Like most of its rivals, JD fits a two-speed CVT transmission that provides a moderate turn of pace restricted to a top speed of 45kph. Though it might sound fairly pedestrian, it's more than adequate for most journeys and also prevents pushing the vehicle beyond its rudimentary limits.

The slow-and-steady Gator also took first prize in our engine braking test. The system is engaged by gently throttling on downhill sections, where it demonstrates remarkable discipline to rarely drift past 2kph.

Cab

While the driveline might have performed better than expected, the Gator's cab is less suited to owners clocking high hours on slug pelleting jobs and the like.



The main problem is the driver's proximity to the front wheel arch, which leaves very little space for the left leg and means it can feel very cramped after a short time. Passengers will also find themselves bereft of knee room and, even without a cab, the footwells get unpleasantly toasty – engine heat is the main culprit.

Whether or not to spec a sealed cab is a long-running debate among owners. On the plus side, it minimises the dust problem, which is a big deal as the Gator tends to suck debris stirred up by the front wheels into the cockpit. On the other hand, the shape of the frame means the top of the doors eat into shoulder room and the engine thrum tends to echo loudly, as Honda Pioneer owners will have no doubt found out.

It's not all bad news though – despite the low driving position the visibility is surprisingly good and makes it really easy to manoeuvre, even through pretty dense woodland.

The controls are easy to find and use too, but there's only space for two occupants – all of the others offer the flexibility of a bench seat.

Working life

On paper, the Gator looks the least agricultural of the group. For starters, ground clearance is poor and the suspension is short of travel, which makes rides over rough, rutted ground

LIKES AND GRIPES

- ✓ Very manoeuvrable
- ✓ Best engine braking
- ✓ Nippy for a diesel
- ✓ Good visibility
- ✗ Cab fills with dust when travelling at speed
- ✗ Poor cab ergonomics
- ✗ Lack of ground clearance
- ✗ Rear bar restricts access to tow ball

pretty uncomfortable.

However, it can handle itself over less extreme surfaces and matches reasonable power and speed with very good balance, a low centre of gravity and the best turning circle among its rivals.

The thick, plastic load bed is solidly made and sits low, making it easy to lob in bales and bags. Steel side bars provide decent lash-down points too, but the bed can only be tipped from one side via a slightly sticky pin arrangement.

Our model also came with a rear protective bar that sits below the tailgate, which made hooking on a trailer a rear hassle. On the plus side, rear lights are cage protected and there's a pickup-style latch on the tailgate.



Kawasaki Mule Pro-DX

Quick verdict: The Mule is seen as the grandfather of the buggy world and, like most ageing pensioners, it moves with little grace and doesn't go anywhere in a hurry. What it lacks in performance and handling it does make up for in terms of build quality and practicality, with the largest load bed on test and a spacious cabin with roomy bench seat. It's also a lot cheaper than the other diesel on test – the Gator.

PRICE AS TESTED £14,912
BEST FOR: Carrying bulky loads
WORST FOR: Getting somewhere in a hurry



Driveline

Like most diesel-burning UTVs, the Mule is fitted with a three-cylinder Yanmar engine that develops a widow-making 24hp.

It's a similar unit to the one slotted in John Deere's Gator, but it has a slightly higher capacity of 993cc and a smidge more horsepower. Sadly, that extra oomph doesn't translate into extra performance and the Mule was the more sluggish of the two by some margin.

That could be something to do with the fact that it is 54kg heavier, but we suspect the transmission is a little more power-hungry too – even though it's the same belt-type CVT with high and low range.

When cruising around on flatish ground the lack of go wasn't a problem, but when we started adding weight and poking its nose uphill, things started to go awry.

During our mile-log uphill slog with a trailer in tow the Mule came in a resounding last place, with a depressingly slow time of 4m 12s. And it was back of the pack for the steep uphill climb off-road, too. However, even though it was on its knees, it kept plugging away and we didn't have any refusals.

As for the engine-braking test, it didn't sparkle there either. Like the Gator you have to apply a little throttle to engage the drive, but it still gathered pace pretty rapidly unless we dabbed the brakes with our left foot.



Cab

Things looked up for the Mule when we turned our attention to its large, utilitarian cabin.

There is a sizable bench seat that can comfortably accommodate three adult passengers and a flat floor that makes it easy to slide in and out. Technically, only two passengers are permitted to use it in the UK, but there are mounting points for a third seatbelt should you choose to fit one.

Unlike the unpleasantly cramped Gator, drivers get a decent amount of legroom, an adjustable steering wheel and a waft of fresh air from the built-in air vents. Specifying the full cab also means you get a heater, which is a pricey add-on for some other makers.

Storage wasn't the best in the test group, but there are several useful stowage areas and the option of adding a large plastic box under the seat. However, at about £100, this is an overly pricey extra.

Kawasaki doesn't offer its own cab enclosure, so our machine came with a retrofit unit built by DFK.

It's a tad crude when compared with some of the competitors' purpose-built offerings, with an unpleasant rattle (particularly at tick-over) and poor rear visibility. It's unfair to compare the noise to Gator though as this didn't come with an enclosed cab.



LIKES AND GRIPES

- ✓ Large load bed
- ✓ Spacious cabin
- ✓ Tough construction
- ✓ Good ventilation
- ✗ Sluggish performance
- ✗ Large turning circle
- ✗ Disappointing engine braking
- ✗ Crude cab enclosure

Working life

For those who want to lug bulky materials around, the Mule's massive tipping bed is in a league of its own. It will comfortably accommodate a 4ft round bale and is ideal for carting around fencing materials. However, buyers need to be aware that this additional space doesn't mean you can add additional weight.

In fact, the 453kg maximum payload is actually slightly lower than some of the other machines on test, and although Kawasaki offers a heavy-duty spring option, this doesn't increase the on-paper payload.

As good as the load bed might be, it can't disguise some of the buggy's other shortcomings. These include a huge turning circle that makes it cumbersome in tight spaces, fairly poor engine braking and that all-important lack of power.

Honda Pioneer SXS

Quick verdict: The Honda was the cheapest buggy on test and surprisingly fun to drive, but the lack of a low-range box and power steering hampered its performance on hard-going terrain. A shortage of engine braking was another downside, particularly with a loaded trailer on the back, but it easily held its own on the flat. Cab noise was a major problem, so we'd opt to make-do with just a roof. In reality, it seems better suited to leisure than work.

PRICE: £11,500
BEST FOR: Compact and nimble
WORST FOR: Cabin noise



Driveline

The Pioneer had a spirited turn of pace from its 675cc Honda engine, which put the Gator and the Mule to shame and managed to climb our test hill unladen in under 10s – not far off the more powerful Polaris.

However, engine noise in the cab comes as a bit of a shock. It's so loud that drivers should probably kit up with ear defenders, though if you ordered one without a cab – which simply works to amplify the racket from the engine – then things would undoubtedly improve.

The Pioneer differs from the rest in the transmission department by opting for a three-speed automatic. Under load, the switch between ranges is very noticeable, so the drive is far less smooth than most other buggies on the market.

But the biggest stumbling block is the lack of a low-range box, particularly given that UTVs spend most of their time off-road and in fairly gnarly conditions. The fact that it's very light works in its favour, but doesn't make-up for the shortage of gearbox ranges.

On the road, the Pioneer was quick, but there's no avoiding the engine noise. The cheap tyres and slightly vacant unpowered steering mean pilots will rarely feel comfortable driving it fast, either.

Cab

The aftermarket cab – adding just under



£3,500 to the price – is a strange add-on that looks a few sizes too big for the body.

It also limits ventilation as there is no opening front window and only a small horizontally sliding opening on the side that slams shut under hard braking. Monster pillars and thick metal panels completely wreck views outwards, too.

However, without the cab it's an entirely different proposition. The seats are pretty comfortable, the dash is uncluttered and the controls are mechanical and unbeatably simple – particularly when sat alongside the car-like Polaris.

The flat floor and bench seat also offer maximum flexibility, though shoulder room with three people on board is limited.

If it's likely to do a lot of transport duties then Honda offers a four-seat option. It's ideal for ferrying guns around on shoot days and is an extra not available on all of the others, but the downside is that it eats into the rear load bed space.

Despite the perks, the Pioneer falls a fair way short of the standards we'd typically expect from Honda's off-road range.

Working life

There are plenty of handy credentials for work life – notably its compact size and surprising balance – but, unfortunately, the turning circle isn't one of them.

LIKES AND GRIPES

- ✓ Small and compact frame
- ✓ Brisk petrol engine
- ✓ Simple to operate
- ✓ Four-seat option
- ✗ No low-range box
- ✗ Unrelenting engine noise
- ✗ Lack of power steering
- ✗ Poor cab visibility

The load bed is small, and the tailgate comes with ruff latches and doesn't lie flat, which means it sits 940mm from the ground and makes loading it with feed bags a bit more of a chore.

However, suspension travel is reasonable across each corner and the Honda did an OK job of soaking up rutted tracks. Of course, having a bench seat means the occupants tend to get thrown about a bit.

Towing is also a problem, largely because of the single range transmission. Though it has the power, the lack of a low range means that the gearing is too high for serious trailer work on hilly ground, with the non-existent engine braking pretty useless on the downhill sections.

The payload is also a good bit lower than the others, which harms its suitability as a genuine working tool.

So which is best – petrol or diesel?

If we put the issue of fuel cost and convenience to one side for a minute, it becomes an easy decision to pick petrol power over diesel.

The engines are smoother, cleaner burning and offer so much power that you'll rarely need to flog them hard.

They will also keep up with traffic on the road – so you have the option of running to the pumps rather than carting cans around – and the lower purchase price means you have a fair bit of extra cash to put towards that pricier fuel.

But there's an unexpected downside to this power that is easy to overlook until you get in the seat, and that's safety. You can put anyone on the Gator or Mule and the lack of performance means they'll have to work pretty hard to get into trouble.

However, all of our petrol machines (the Polaris in particular) had enough power to get a lairy driver out of shape very quickly. The fact they will reach car-like speeds on the road with none of the crash protection is another thing to be wary of.

As for the diesels, the fuel cost and convenience is still a massive draw and if we didn't have a lot of heavy towing to do, or steep banks to fire up, we would still be sorely tempted.

On balance, we'd have probably gone for the Gator over the Mule, but it's so expensive – even in base spec form – that it's very difficult to justify. And if you want to add a cab, heater and lighting kit then it'll end up well into farm pickup price territory.

Therefore, if we had to single out any machine from the test, we would opt for Can-Am's Traxxer. It has plenty of power, a well-thought-out cabin, smooth operation and comes in at a decent price. You can also get keys to restrict the power for less experienced operators. That's enough to put up with running to the pumps every now and again.

VIDEO



See our video of the five buggies battling it out by negotiating some challenging and bone-dry Shropshire countryside at www.fwi.co.uk/atv-test



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MACHINERY FARM BUGGIES ON TEST

HOW THEY COMPARE: THE FIGURES

	Polaris Ranger XP1000	Can-Am Trauter HDB DPS	John Deere Gator XUV 855M	Kawasaki Mule Pro-DX	Honda Pioneer SX5
Engine	Polaris Pro-star two-cylinder 999cc	Rotax 779cc V-twin	Yanmar three-cylinder, 854cc	Yanmar three-cylinder 993cc	Honda single-cylinder 678cc
Power	82hp	50hp	22hp	24hp	36hp
Fuel	Petrol	Petrol	Diesel	Diesel	Petrol
Transmission	Two-speed CVT	Two-speed CVT	Two-speed CVT	Two-speed CVT	Three-speed CVT
Four-wheel drive	Selectable one-, two- and four-wheel drive	Selectable two- and four-wheel drive	Selectable two- and four-wheel drive	Selectable two- and four-wheel drive	Selectable two- and four-wheel drive
Diff lock	No diff lock	Lockable rear and auto locking front	Auto locking front, mechanically actuated rear	Rear diff lock	No diff lock
Suspension	Dual A-arm, 279mm travel	Dual A-arm, 254mm travel	Dual A-arm, 203mm travel front, 229mm travel rear	Double wishbone, 220mm travel	Front: Double wishbone - 200mm, Rear: Independent dual arm - 231mm
Brakes	Four-wheel hydraulic discs	Four-wheel hydraulic discs	Four-wheel hydraulic discs	Four-wheel hydraulic discs	Dual hydraulic 200mm discs (front)
Rear bed dimensions	94.3 x 139.3 x 31.7cm	97.8 x 143 x 29.5cm	114.3 x 132.0 x 30.5cm	141.1 x 139.4 x 27.9cm	93.3 x 115.2 x 28.2cm
Rear bed capacity	454kg	454kg	454kg	453kg	386kg
Rear load height	87.7cm	84cm	83.8cm	87.7cm	94cm
Towing capacity	907kg	907kg	680kg	907kg	680kg
Ground clearance	300mm	280mm	223mm	262mm	265mm
Weight	710kg	646kg	788kg	842kg	710kg
Turning circle	8.25m	7.72m	7.93m	10.02m	8.94m
Noise, tickover	61.2dBA	65.5dBA	69dBA	75dBA	71dBA
Noise, acceleration	87.1dBA	90.5dBA	85.6dBA	86dBA	92dBA
Downhill towing (60m, 17.5deg slope)	41s	22.9s	57.2s	14.5s	10.2s
Uphill towing, off-road (60m, 25deg slope)	11s	10.9s	29.2s	30.7s	15.2s
Uphill towing, road (1-mile, 7.5deg slope)	1m 35s	1m 38s	3m 26s	4m 12s	2m 14s
Tyres	Maxxis MU52 27x11 rear, MU51 27x9 front	Maxxis Bighorn 27x11 rear, 27x9 front, 14in	Maxxis Bighorn 27x11 rear, 27x9 front, 14in	Frontier Duro 26x11 rear, 26x9 front, 12in	Black stone HP-007 25x10 rear, 25x8 front 8in
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