

Proof.

by Joe Sage

The Toyota Camry Hybrid seems to be proof—if any more were needed—that a dedicated hybrid lineup like Toyota’s own Prius has become little more than a novelty item, with its over-the-top styling coupled with that fact that a hybrid powertrain is not as distinctive a trick as it once was.

If shopping for a sporty car 40 years ago, a fuel-injected engine was a really big deal, with special badges and even pop tunes singing their praises. Now they are ubiquitous and taken as a given.

Today, any of various hybrid powertrain schemes are not much more noteworthy than fuel injection once was. This hybrid, based on the longstanding, hot-selling Camry itself, seems to be proof of that. Not that the car itself is not noteworthy—it is that, as well as highly praiseworthy—but it makes the Prius group seem ever more superfluous.

We had surprised ourselves when we drove the new non-hybrid Camry XSE at the Active Lifestyle Vehicle Awards comparo last fall. Wow. That was not your grandma’s Camry, or maybe it was, depending on your grandma. It was a fabulous drive, strong and sure-footed, nicely outfitted and quick. Thus we welcomed the Camry Hybrid into our fleet with a good mix of optimism and enthusiasm.

And it delivered.

This is a spacious five-seat midsize sedan with mid-to-upper 40s fuel mileage even in top trim, or well into the 50s in the base LE model (see sidebar), competing effectively with—or beating—

any Prius model (other than the Prius Prime PHEV in full electric mode, apples’n’oranges). The Prius lineup is less expensive than Camry, but they could surely give Corolla the same treatment this Camry Hybrid has received and close that gap.

The Camry Hybrid comes in a more mainstream package than Prius, highly stylish, while also aiding in its stealth characteristics, useful since it can launch powerfully with a combined 163 lb-ft of gasoline plus 149 lb-ft of electric torque. Potent.

The Camry Hybrid XLE has a well conceived user interface that combines a stylistically unobtrusive high-function screen with knobs, buttons and switches for a number of tasks best not requiring the distraction of a screen. The beautiful premium leather interior, ours in a light lambskin shade, features currently fashionable quilted seat areas, but in a nicely balanced ratio to their smooth bolsters.

The drivetrain is responsive and strong, as are the brakes, with the exception, typical of regenerative systems, of seeming a little behind or ahead of our intentions occasionally (test drive this to get a feel for it). We experienced no torque steer or lane darting despite its front-drive layout. Suspension was smooth through aggressive corners or across drainage troughs; steering is highly responsive, never quirky or jerky; even auto stop-start is smooth, a rarity, perhaps benefiting from the electric-only quiet when you start your drive in the first place—really, they’ve solved everything.

While this mainstream Camry Hybrid—with so much hybrid drivetrain goodness *plus* general midsize sedan goodness—encroaches on Prius’s terri-

SPECIFICATIONS (XLE)

ENGINE2.5L 4-cyl 16v twin-cam alum alloy block/head	
ELECTRIC MOTORpermanent magnet synchronous	
BATTERY PACK6.5 Ah nickel-metal hydride (Ni-MH)▼	
DRIVETRAINFWD	
HP/TORQUE Gasoline engine176 hp / 163 lb-ft	
Elec motor.....118 hp / 149 lb-ft	
Combined.....208 horsepower	
TRANSMISSIONelectronically controlled CVT	
SUSPENSIONF: indep MacPherson w stblzr bar;	
.....R: dbl-wishbone multi-link w stblzr bar	
STEERINGelec power rack-and-pinion	
BRAKESregenerative: F: 12.0" vented / R: 11.06" solid	
WHEELS/TIRES8x18 alloy / P235/45 R18▼	
LENGTH/WHEELBASE192.1 / 111.2 in	
TURNING CIRCLE38.0 ft▼	
CARGO VOLUME15.1 cu.ft	
WEIGHT3571 lb▼	
FUEL CAPACITY13.0 gal	
MPG44/47/46 (city/hwy/comb)▼	

BASE PRICE.....\$32,250

AUDIO PKG W OPTIONS: Bird’s eye camera (1050), adaptive auto on/off LED heads (415), Power tilt/slide moonroof (845), Entune 3.0 audio w JBL Clari-Fi, connected nav, app suite, wireless phone charge (1800). Total:.....4110

DESTINATION CHARGE.....895

TOTAL.....\$37,255

▼“LE” BASE MODEL KEY DIFFERENCES

BATTERY PACK4.0 Ah lithium-ion (Li-ion)	
WHEELS/TIRES6.5x16 steel / P205/65 R16	
TURNING CIRCLE37.4 ft	
WEIGHT3472 lb	
MPG51/53/52 (city/hwy/comb)	
BASE PRICE\$27,800	

tory, the XLE’s premium touches must have Toyota working extra carefully to keep it from encroaching upon Toyota Avalon—not to mention Lexus.

Toyota has an extensive lineup, and this car—in just three trims—seems capable of competing with about half of it. ■

