soft-roader showdown

We put 2011 newcomers – Holden’s Captiva 5, Nissan’s X-Trail and Subaru’s Forester X – to the test.

STORY BARRY GREEN | PHOTOS MARK HORSBURGH
STARTERS: HOLDEN CAPTIVA 5 2WD, NISSAN X-TRAIL ST 2WD, SUBARU FORESTER X.

TESTERS: BARRY GREEN, JOHN EWING, GREG MCMANUS.

NO SOONER HAD we completed our four-way face-off between two-wheel-drive (2WD) versions of the 2011 Hyundai IX35, Kia Sportage, Mitsubishi ASX and Nissan Dualis (The Road Ahead Feb/Mar issue), than on the showroom floor appeared the new Holden Captiva 5, Nissan X-Trail and Subaru Forester.

So, with another compact Sports Utility Vehicle (SUV) comparison begging, we opted (again in the relevance of affordability) for the entry level variants which equated to 2WD Captiva 5 and X-Trail ST pitched against Forester X (Subaru only make 4WD), all with manual transmission.

But first, a bit of background as to how they fit in their various model line-ups.

Earlier this year, Holden rolled out its Series II Captiva 5 and Captiva 7 (as in seven seats) range, offering buyers of the former a boost in powertrain specification along with styling enhancements and feature upgrades. There’s now the choice of a 2.2-litre turbo diesel engine, teamed with six-speed automatic transmission ($33,990) or a new generation 2.4-litre four-cylinder petrol engine – available with either six-speed manual ($27,990) or auto ($29,990) – which is 19 percent more powerful than its predecessor. The diesel option is equipped with electronically controlled active all-wheel drive (AWD).

Styling wise, the Series II is set apart by a subtle new grille treatment with mesh detailing, echoed in a slim air intake flanked by fog lamps with chrome bezels.

Last December, Nissan added a 2WD model to its Series 4 X-Trail range in ST trim with six-speed manual ($27,990) or optional CVT ($30,990) as well as ST-L (CVT only, $34,990).

The 2WD variants, which share a 2.0-litre four-cylinder petrol engine with stablemate Dualis, feature the same front and rear interior styling changes and specification upgrades that were made to the 4WD range earlier in 2010. The eight 4WD variants are available in ST, ST-L, Ti, TS and TL spec levels, ranging in price from $32,490 to $45,240. Depending on spec, the 4WD X-Trail comes with either a 2.5-litre petrol or 2.0-litre turbo-diesel engine and manual, CVT or auto transmission.

Then there’s Subaru … a range-topping turbo-charged variant, the S-Edition, stole the show at the launch of the new Forester in February. But it’s the X, the entry-level, that we’re focusing on in our comparison, which is powered by a new, normally-aspirated, 2.5-litre DOHC engine featuring chain driven camshafts, longer stroke and reduced bore size to aid fuel efficiency.

This FB horizontally opposed Boxer powerplant replaces the EJ unit first introduced in 1989. It offers improved low-end torque (up 6 Nm to 235 at 4100 rpm), while refinement, NVH and drivability are also enhanced.

As well as the S-Edition and X, there are six variants of Forester, available in XS, XS Premium, 2.0D, 2.0D Premium (both turbo-diesel), XT, XT Premium with either five-speed manual or four-speed auto (except the diesels, which are manual only).

VALUE FOR MONEY

Unfortunately, our test trio matched up less than uniform when the X-Trail presented with CVT (continuously variable transmission). Thus with the $2500 premium demanded by Nissan for the CVT option making X-Trail the same Manufacturer’s List Price (MLP) as Forester X, Captiva steals a sizeable march ($3000) on its competitors.

But, as we know all too well, the buying price is only the tip of the iceberg in what it costs to own and run a vehicle. Here’s how the numbers crunched in taking into account five years of ownership (@ 15,000 km a year).

Out of sight though it may be, depreciation takes the biggest bite of your ‘hard earned’. While predicted residuals favour the Subaru (39 percent)
to Holden (36 percent) and Nissan (35 percent), the lower purchase price means a Captiva buyer stands to lose less in terms of actual dollars ahead of their Forester and X-Trail counterparts.

However, projected running and repair costs favour X-Trail ($3812) to Captiva ($4491) and Forester ($6455).

Likely fuel consumption, when calculated using the official figures, also has Nissan in front with an ADR average of 8.5 litres/100 km, 0.6 better than Captiva with Forester on 9.3 (It should be said, though, that our test produced a different result with Forester averaging 9.3, X-Trail 10.7 and Captiva 10.8).

Captiva is cheapest to insure through RACQ Insurance at $546.18 per annum, then comes Nissan $579.60 and Forester $692.67.

Each of our trio is well equipped for the price. Standard features include: dual front/side/curtain airbags, anti-lock brakes with electronic brake distribution and emergency brake assist, adjustable front and rear headrests (X-Trail has dual), height adjustable front seatbelts with load limiters and pretensioners, traction control and electronic stability control, immobiliser, childproof rear door locking and three child restraint mounting points.

Tick the boxes also for: cruise control, central locking with remote for doors, stereo theft code protection, airconditioning (Captiva has climate control), front and rear door pockets, tinted windows, trip computer, power mirrors (Captiva’s is remote controlled and manual folding), power windows, intermittent wipers, four tie-down cargo hooks, cargo light/s and roof rails.

Some, though, have more or less than others.

Captiva and Forester are fitted with hill start assist, sunglasses holder, three auxiliary power outlets (X-Trail has two), cargo cover (on the Nissan, it’s an option) and auto off headlights (Captiva also has auto on).

X-Trail and Captiva boast leather trim steering wheel cover and air vents for the rear seat passengers (Forester has rear heater ducts), six-stack CD (Subaru’s is single) and alloy wheels.

Forester and X-Trail can claim bluetooth with steering wheel controls, active front headrests and auxiliary input (Forester also gets USB).

Captiva has active rollover protection, descent control, electric park brake, dual front seatback pockets (the others have one), illuminated dual vanity mirrors, front fog lights and front and rear parking sensors.

Active brake limited slip, cooled and heated glove box, rear seat map light, beam adjustment, and ski hatch are standard on X-Trail.

Forester is alone in having a full size spare wheel (the others 16-inch temporary use steel items), Datadot theft recovery identification and remote boot control.

So there’s much to take into account, but we have Captiva as offering the most ‘bang for buck’ ahead of X-Trail and Forester.

**DESIGN AND FUNCTION**

The driver’s seat in all three of our test trio comes with manual height adjustment, a feature Captiva and X-Trail front passengers also benefit from on their seat. In all, X-Trail offers six-way adjustment for the driver seat and four-way for the front passenger. Captiva has lumbar support for the driver seat and X-Trail also.

But while the Holden boasts a high degree of adjustability, its seats don’t feel as comfortable as the other pair by way of shape or bolstering. Here, there’s not much between the Subaru and the Nissan, but some 800 km of driving convinced us that the latter is better.

Driver’s footrest, steering tilt and reach adjustment and steering wheel-mounted controls for the audio system are standard on all three, but Captiva misses out on steering wheel controls for the cruise control.

All will carry three adult passengers in the rear at a pinch. Captiva and Forester have 60/40 split fold rear seats (the latter electronically). With a 40/20/40 split, X-Trail’s rear seat can be reclined into five positions and folded flat and,
when lowered, the interior opens up by
some 100+ mm in length over the others.
With rear seats in place, the Nissan
also holds a slight advantage in usable
cargo space. By our measurements,
it’s the best in load length and height
and second to the Subaru for width.
Commendably, an internal load lip is
absent on all three, assisting loading and
unloading heavy items measurably.
X-Trail impresses further in having
a removable cargo floor complete with
drawers and removable washable
cover boards, front console storage and
dashboard storage box. Forester has a
centre console bin.
Captiva is fitted with a bin under the
front passenger seat, space inside the
rear centre armrest, small bins front
and rear and a centre console box
with armrest. Handy as the latter is,
the armrest is positioned where it’s all
too easy for the driver to bump their
left elbow. Thick A pillars are another
blot on its ergonomics copy book, a
comment that could well apply to
X-Trail too.
Build and finish is good on all three,
with Subaru just shading the others
overall. Ditto practicality, where we have
Forester a point ahead.

ON THE ROAD
Here, Forester is easily the best drive.
Although only 3 kW and 5 Nm more
powerful than Captiva, the Subaru is
some 165 kg lighter, giving Forester
a considerable edge in real world
relevance. X-Trail is the lightest of all at
1426 kg, but this advantage is negated
by having the smallest engine (with least
power and torque).
In general driving, the Subaru felt the
most athletic and responsive and this
was reinforced by the results of our six
acceleration tests where it was markedly
quicker in all except from 50-80 km/h,
where X-Trail prevailed. In terms of
overall next best, the Nissan just shaded
the Holden but there was little between
the pair.
Subaru as a make consistently
scores highly for ride quality and the
new Forester meets our considerable
expectations. It’s supple and composed
on any road and overall better than
X-Trail. While okay around town,
rougheimer roads exposed Captiva’s
firmer ride.
Forester also proved the best handler;
well sorted suspension, nicely weighted
steering and all-wheel-drive setting
the foundation for its litheness to be
exploited whenever the vehicle was
shown some twisty bits. For turn in
and grip, and degree of body roll, the
Subaru proved itself to be way in front
of the Nissan and Holden which, while
revealing no major vices, could only
follow in its wheel tracks.
In our emergency braking tests (from
80 km/h-stop), Captiva pulled back some
lost ground on Forester by stopping in
an average of 25.9 metres – just 0.2 m
shy – and 0.7 shorter than X-Trail.
All three exhibit a degree of road
noise, primarily from tyre roar on
carser surfaces and wind rustle around
the side mirrors, but it was Captiva that
took the honours in our noise testing,
being the quietest at idle, at a constant
80 km/h and accelerating from 50-80
km/h.
Off road, the Subaru holds an obvious
advantage by being the only 4WD and
thus able to go places the others can’t.
However, the Holden and Nissan (with
200 and 212 mm of ground clearance
respectively) do have some capability
away from the black top. The bottom
line is, if 4WD is a priority, then you
need to look at other variants of Captiva
and X-Trail.

CONCLUSION
Captiva 5 puts up a pretty compelling
case in value for money, being nice on
price and big on standard equipment.
And if space and storage, and plenty
of it, is a primary requirement, then
X-Trail takes some topping.
But for our money, this contest was
game, set and match to Forester. The
previous model was Australia’s biggest
selling Compact SUV for the last three
years. It would not surprise if the 2011
makes it four.
## How they stack up!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th><strong>HOLDEN CAPTIVA 5 2WD</strong></th>
<th><strong>NISSAN X-TRAIL 2WD ST</strong></th>
<th><strong>SUBARU FORESTER X</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Price</strong></td>
<td>$27,990</td>
<td>$30,990 (CVT)</td>
<td>$30,990</td>
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<tr>
<td>Country of Origin</td>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>Japan</td>
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<td><strong>Standard Equipment</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Airconditioning</td>
<td>S (climate control)</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alloy wheels</td>
<td>S (17-inch)</td>
<td>S (17-inch)</td>
<td>X (16-inch steel)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tyres</td>
<td>235/65R17</td>
<td>225/65R17</td>
<td>215/55R16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spare wheel type</td>
<td>Temp use (16-inch steel)</td>
<td>Temp use (16-inch steel)</td>
<td>Full size (16-inch steel)</td>
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<td>CD player/power windows</td>
<td>S (6-disc)/S</td>
<td>S (6-disc)/S</td>
<td>S (single disc)/S</td>
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<td>Driver’s seat height adjustment</td>
<td>S/S</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
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<tr>
<td>Steering height/reach adjustment</td>
<td>S/S</td>
<td>S/S</td>
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<td><strong>Safety</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Seatbelt pretensioners (front)</td>
<td>S/S</td>
<td>S/S/S</td>
<td>S/S/S</td>
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<tr>
<td>Height-adjustable seatbelts (front)</td>
<td>S/S</td>
<td>S/S/S</td>
<td>S/S/S</td>
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<tr>
<td>Crash rating</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Performance</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Engine</td>
<td>2.4-litre DOHC 4-cyl</td>
<td>2.0-litre DOHC 4-cyl</td>
<td>2.5-litre DOHC Boxer 4-cyl</td>
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<tr>
<td>Max. power (kW@rpm)</td>
<td>123 @ 5600</td>
<td>102 @ 5200</td>
<td>126 @ 5800</td>
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<tr>
<td>Max. torque (Nm@rpm)</td>
<td>230 @ 4600</td>
<td>198 @ 4400</td>
<td>235 @ 4100</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transmission</td>
<td>6-spd manual</td>
<td>CVT ($2500)</td>
<td>5-spd manual</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kerb weight (kg)</td>
<td>1640</td>
<td>1426</td>
<td>1475</td>
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<tr>
<td>0-100 km/h (test average, 2 occupants)</td>
<td>12.6 sec</td>
<td>12.1 sec</td>
<td>11.0 sec</td>
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<td>Braking from 80 km/h (average)</td>
<td>25.9 m</td>
<td>28.2 m</td>
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<tr>
<td>Towing (kg-braked/unbraked)</td>
<td>750/1500</td>
<td>750/1500</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Fuel/Environment</strong></td>
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<td>Fuel type</td>
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<tr>
<td>Average (litres/100 km, as tested)</td>
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<td>10.7</td>
<td>9.3</td>
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<td>Tank (litres)/range (km, as tested)</td>
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<td>65/607</td>
<td>60/645</td>
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<tr>
<td>Environmental rating</td>
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<tr>
<td>CO₂ emissions (g/km)</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>220</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Warranty/Servicing</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Warranty (yrs/km)</td>
<td>3/100,000</td>
<td>3/100,000</td>
<td>3/unlimited</td>
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<tr>
<td>Est. servicing costs 5 yrs/75,000 km</td>
<td>$4491</td>
<td>$3812</td>
<td>$6455</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Insurance Costs</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Annual**</td>
<td>$546</td>
<td>$580</td>
<td>$693</td>
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<td><strong>Star Ratings</strong></td>
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<td>Value for money</td>
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<tr>
<td>Design and function</td>
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<tr>
<td>On the road</td>
<td>******</td>
<td>******</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>******</td>
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**Legend:** S = Standard, O = Option, X = Not Standard

^Prices are manufacturers' list prices and do not include statutory and delivery charges.