

Feature: *Personal GPS* by Eric Jacksch

SPOT puts you on the map!

Where's Eric?

Just about everyone has a mobile phone these days but those of us who venture into the outdoors are well aware that the road less traveled is often outside of a service area. This time last year, I was preparing for a trip to Death Valley and, knowing that there was no cell phone coverage in the park, I considered other options. As a HAM, I own HF radio gear but the size and weight didn't make it attractive. A satellite phone would have been much smaller but, since I was traveling with a friend and we planned to stick to the more popular spots, I just couldn't justify the cost.

So, when I ran across the SPOT Satellite Messenger (<http://www.findmespot.com/>) a few months ago at GTEC, the first question I asked was, "How much?" The answer got my attention: \$169. for the hardware and \$100. per year for unlimited use seemed pretty reasonable for satellite-based communications.

On the SPOT...

SPOT combines a GPS receiver and a satellite transmitter into a small, rugged, handheld device that runs on two AA lithium batteries and weighs a bit over 200 grams. The case features four buttons: 'Power', 'OK', 'HELP' and '911'. Sending a message simply involves turning the device on and pressing the appropriate button. Some of the buttons must be held for a few seconds — a design feature that guards against accidental activation.

As a new SPOT user, the first thing you do is log into the company's Web site and activate the service. Next, you configure the e-mail addresses and/or mobile phones you would like notified when you send an OK or HELP message, along with the introductory text for both. You can specify up to five e-mail addresses and five mobile phone numbers for each message. Your 911 messages are automatically routed to a GEOS International Emergency Response Center.



'It worked exactly as advertised. I have no reservations recommending it...'

In a SPOT?

The intent of these messages is simple: 'OK' is to check in and let people know where you are and 'HELP' is intended as a way to request assistance from friends, relatives or colleagues (as opposed to emergency services). However, since you can configure the text sent with the message, how you use these two messages is really up to you. For example, a snowmobiler, hiker or sailor might use the 'OK' message to let family know that he or she is fine and just running late to avoid worry, and employees working alone at remote locations could be required to periodically check in.

Since messages include GPS coordinates and a link to Google maps, the recipient can easily see where you were when you sent a HELP message and this added context should facilitate a more meaningful response. For example, if a friend sent me a HELP

message from a parking lot in Gatineau Park, I'd probably guess that his or her car wouldn't start. On the other hand, if the message came from the middle of Lake Ontario, I'd be more inclined to call the friend's boating buddies or perhaps even the Coast Guard and ask if they could check on the person.

The 911 button, on the other hand, is intended *solely* for life threatening or other critical emergencies that warrant the activation of emergency services. When the message is received, the Emergency Response Center notifies appropriate agencies, which may include the police, the Coast Guard or search and rescue organizations. According to the product literature, they will also notify the user's predetermined contacts of the distress situation.

SPOT checks..

Like any other GPS receiver, SPOT requires a view of the sky and, in most cases, it will not work indoors. During testing I found that it worked well sitting on the dash of my truck while driving to the office. I periodically hit the 'OK' button and e-mail notifications were in my inbox when I arrived. A few messages also did make their way out of my living room, presumably because I sit close to a large window. I also left SPOT outside in the snow for a few hours one night. Once it was good and cold, I went back outside, pressed the 'HELP' button and set it on a snowbank. The e-mail requesting help arrived about two minutes later.

When you press one of the buttons, SPOT acquires your current location using GPS and then transmits the message on a frequency monitored by commercial satellites. A satellite receiving the message will forward it to a ground station where it is then routed to a SPOT server. This process can take a few minutes, depending on how long the GPS takes to acquire your location. In the case of an 'OK' message, this process is repeated a second time in a few minutes to help ensure that the



message was received. The SPOT system then fires off e-mail and/or SMS messages to your list of preconfigured recipients — which, again, may take a few minutes. HELP messages are sent every five minutes for one hour or until cancelled and 911 messages are sent every five minutes until cancelled or the battery is exhausted. And, if you cancel a HELP or 911 message, a cancellation notification is sent.

Also SPOTs you...

In addition to the 'OK', 'HELP' and '911' features, SPOT also offers a tracking option for an additional \$50 per year. If you subscribe to this option, you can press and hold the 'OK' button for three seconds, and it will send your location every ten minutes for one day.

Unfortunately, the tracking information is only available by logging-in to your SPOT account on the Web. While that may be fine for employers who issue devices to remote employees, I don't think I'd want to give friends my username and password so that they could see where I am, especially since the username and password would also allow them to change my 'OK' and 'HELP' message along with the associated notification lists. If there is one thing I'd like to see improved, it is flexible access to this information, such as a separate password to view it.

SPOT-on!

I tested SPOT for about a week and it worked exactly as advertised. I have no reservations recommending it to outdoors enthusiasts and anyone who travels outside of mobile phone coverage areas. My only advice is to test it out before your trip, ensure people on your notification lists understand the messages and remember that it needs to see the sky to work. ■

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