



« SPOT Satellite Personal Tracker and ACR MicroFix Personal Locator Beacon are equivalent to having 911 service in your pocket, anywhere in the world.

SAVING LIVES WITH TECHNOLOGY

» BY JEFF RANDALL

Anyone who reads this column on a regular basis knows that I refuse to bet my personal survival on any electronic device.

Battery-operated compasses, GPS units and other gizmos are luxuries, never to be carried as stand-alone survival gear. Well, this month's *Against All Odds* is dedicated to just such a device, and surprisingly, it's a device that I feel no one should be without.

For almost a year now I've been carrying and testing a SPOT (Satellite Personal Tracker), and while it's relatively new to the outdoor world, it's getting good reviews by everyday adventurers as well as noted survival experts like Les Stroud.

The SPOT is a small handheld tracking device that operates via the worldwide GPS network. Not only is the SPOT an emergency device, but it also operates as a personal tracking and notification device. From anywhere in the world, you can use the "Check In" feature by simply pressing a button to send a pre-formatted email message to your



« Having a locator beacon allows user to travel remote and dangerous terrain with the peace of mind that rescue is just a button push away.



» Smaller SPOT unit fits into most small pack pockets, camera bags or in your pants pocket.

contact list notifying them of your exact location. It can also be operated in “SPOTcasting” mode, sending your GPS coordinates to your SPOT account every ten minutes. Anyone with access to your account information can log on and view your route, complete with virtual views provided by Google Maps.

In ALERT 911 mode, the SPOT acquires its exact location and then sends that location, along with a distress message, every five minutes to an International Emergency Response Network. The Emergency Network notifies the proper emergency responders as well as notifying your personal emergency contact list. Even if SPOT cannot acquire its location from the GPS network, it will still attempt to send a distress signal—without exact location—to the Emergency Response Center, which will still notify your contacts of the signal and continue to monitor the network for further messages.

The SPOT also has an “Ask For Help” feature, which allows you to ask for help from family and friends in non-life-threatening situations without activating the ALERT 911 response. For example, if your vehicle breaks down and you don’t have cell service, you can use this feature to summon help.

The basic SPOT service subscription is \$99.99 per year and includes unlimited usage of the “Check In” and “Ask For Help” features as well as ALERT 911 features. If you want the tracking upgrade option (SPOTcasting), then it will cost you an extra \$49.99 per year. This upgrade is well worth it, since it allows you to send and save your location during your journeys, as well as letting your contacts track your progress.

SPOT also offers search and rescue insurance that provides up to \$100,000 of additional search and rescue resources, including helicopter extraction around the world and reimbursement benefits for any emergency service expenses incurred. This feature adds another \$7.95 per year to the package, but I do suggest adding this to your subscription. So, the bottom line is you will spend about \$158 a year for the complete subscription package that will allow you full use of SPOT’s capabilities.

The suggested retail for the device (without service subscription) is around \$160. I don’t know about you, but I figure this is pretty cheap insurance, especially considering all the places I travel to and the number of wilderness treks I do each year.

Having used the SPOT for almost a

year now during my travels, I have to say I am impressed with the tracking, “Check-In” and “Ask for Help” features. I’ve had no reason to test the ALERT 911 feature, but I feel confident it will work as advertised.

Some people are suspicious of whether or not a private emergency response network will work as well as the government-run networks that monitor and respond to the 406 MHz personal locator beacons. The 406 MHz beacon works via the COSPAS-SARSAT satellite system, and while there is no subscription charge for the 406 beacons, you do have to purchase the device (about \$600). Personally, I feel that anything government can do, private industry almost always does better and more efficiently.

One of the concerns among those who would rather carry 406 beacons is that if your SPOT subscription expires, you may not get a private network to respond. Give me a break! Those who refuse to make sure their equipment (and subscriptions) are in working order probably don’t need to be anywhere outside of a rubber room paid for by the taxpayer. Maybe we should just make it mandatory that the government supply everyone a locator beacon with monthly reminders on how to use it, as well as a

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With all that said, it should be noted that 406 MHz personal locator beacon (PLB) technology has been around since 1982 and is credited with saving over 20,300 lives worldwide. In 2006 alone, out of 105 incidents in the United States, 272 people are alive thanks to this technology. So, if you need a device only for emergency purposes, don't want to spend the money on yearly subscriptions, or refuse to trust your butt to a private emergency response network, then I suggest carrying the MicroFix PLB made by ACR Electronics.

The MicroFix is advertised as the smallest and most functional PLB available. It's easily carried in a pack and has a removable holster that allows for multiple mounting options. It's completely waterproof and has a functional self-test of internal circuitry, battery, transmission and GPS acquisition. As with the SPOT, when you acquire the device, you have to register it so the authorities will be able to retrieve valuable personal information about you and your trip should they need to.

In my opinion, no matter which service or device you choose, emergency locator beacons should be required gear for those venturing into the wilds. There is no doubt that numerous lives could have been saved if the lost, stranded or injured victim would have had the ability to press one button and summon help. And while I realize that some of this gear may seem expensive, I would suggest that the price is only relative to the value you place on your own hide. ●

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