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New radar/laser detectors for the fast lane

Cobra iRadar

SPEED INTO SPRING

BY REX ROY
For Sun-Times Media

Radar detectors aren't for everybody. Those who approach life's choices as black and white might find this story positively lawless. Shades-of-gray people should keep reading.

The rather gray justification for the use of radar and laser detectors is knowing that radar detectors can help protect you from money-grubbing municipalities (there are some) and otherwise unwanted encounters with representatives of law enforcement agencies.

Measuring up

In Illinois police often use radar and laser "guns" to track traffic. Both units work on the same principle: The computerized units shoot electromagnetic or ultraviolet light waves at your vehicle at a known frequency. When those waves reflect back to the police unit, the frequency shift calculated by the unit spits out your speed and potential court date.

If you want to avoid being detected, there's not a legal device on the planet that can help you achieve complete invisibility to radar and laser. However, if you want to delay being detected and be given an important few seconds of on-the-brakes time, then a modern radar/laser detector is for you.

Several companies make useful radar/laser detectors. As with any purchase, the axiom "you get what you pay for" proves true. The best detectors are made by Valentine, Cobra and Escort.

In a flurry of activity not seen in the detector business for years, both Cobra and Escort introduced revolutionary new models for 2011, just in time for enjoying snow-free roads and the quicker pace that comes with greater traction. Here's the lowdown.

Cobra iRadar

If you're a heavy-duty iPhone user, this sleek radar detector is a mobile accessory you'll want to check out. The iRadar unit turns your iPhone into a radar and laser detector.

Connecting wirelessly via Bluetooth, the iRadar detector automatically pairs with your iPhone, enabling the phone's screen to work as the control interface and display for the detector. The functionality is easier than manipulating tiny buttons used on traditional compact detectors, plus the iPhone screen is easier to see than average detector displays.

With the iPhone handling the visual control duties, the detector has only an on/off switch, a mute button, a volume control and a sole blue LED. The iRadar unit we sampled was easy to set up. The Bluetooth wireless link paired quickly and the touch-screen controls and displays were easy to navigate.

You'll need a mounting bracket for your iPhone so that you can position it in plain sight and within easy reach. On the road, the detector/iPhone pair well together. The iRadar unit sounds an aural alarm (beeps) and the display on the iPhone's screen signals the threat and its band (X-band, K-band, Ka-band, laser). Users can easily classify and store warnings as real or false, a feature that uses GPS tagging to eliminate useless warnings on frequently traveled routes.

To enable the longest detection range, the unit should be able to "see out" through the untinted section of the windshield and also have a clear view out the rear window. Placement becomes an issue because the detector is not battery powered, so it's always tethered to a 12-volt outlet. Depending on your vehicle, this may require adding a multiple-socket 12-volt outlet adapter so that you can power the iPhone and the detector simultaneously.

The iRadar unit wisely taps the iPhone's built-in GPS capabilities to help warn drivers of approaching red-light and speed-camera locations. Cobra offers access to its Aura database for free. It is relatively inexpensive at $169 and works cleverly with the iPhone.

Escort iQ

Escort, a company that has been producing radar and/or laser detectors since 1978, recently introduced a clever solution: a radar/laser detector housed in windshield-mounted GPS navigation unit. Escort calls the new device the iQ.

Sporting a bright 5-inch LCD, the Escort iQ is bulkier than many thin-profile stand-alone GPS units. Packaged within its 1.5 inches of thickness are radar and laser detectors plus GPS electronics loaded with data and tens of thousands of POIs provided by NAVTEQ, a major supplier of mapping software for mobile devices. While the iQ might be bulky by traditional detector standards, it makes up for it by looking like a GPS unit. This camouflaged appearance doesn't broadcast the fact that you're using a sophisticated detector.

The iQ sniffs out the four major types of radar frequencies; X-band, K-band, Ka-band and Ku-band. The unit also has forward and rearward looking laser detectors that perform well given the in-the-open mounting position of the iQ.

Various screens display "threat detection" in different graphic forms. Paging trough the options, we appreciated that even when the screen is in "detector" mode, GPS route instructions remain visible at the top of the screen. Additionally, all screen modes display the current speed limit (data also provided by NAVTEQ) and your actual speed. An adjustable "over the speed limit" audio alert keeps you aware of whether you're speeding. This is especially helpful when driving on roads where there are frequent limit changes, a typically high-risk scenario for speed traps.

Known locations of red-light and/or speed cameras are pre-programmed into the unit. A pay-as-you-go subscription to Escort's Defender Database keeps the information fresh.

One of the best features about the Escort iQ is the way it signals a radar/laser threat; a subtle red LED hidden in the frame of the device illuminates and a pleasant chime rings. These warnings are clear to the driver but don't disturb passengers.

Like any modern GPS nav product, the iQ can get you places with relative ease. Routing directions appear clearly at the top of the screen and there are multiple options to show the complete route. A lane-indicator graphic tells you where to be for successful freeway maneuvers. If there's a Starbucks or Holiday Inn within your map view, you'll know it because their logos appear on screen.

Operating as a nav unit, the iQ performs well enough. It is not, however, a top performer. Many dedicated nav units have higher resolution screens (the iQ's is 480 by 272 pixels) and cleaner graphics featuring 3-D renderings of major landmarks. The iQ also lacks voice recognition, so specific route-to addresses must be manually entered on the unit's touch screen.

The reality is that drivers won't buy the $650 Escort iQ for how it performs as a stand-alone nav unit.

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