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Keep an electronic eye out

By Paul Taylor

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My two dogs must have been secretly trained by an escapologist as cunning as Houdini. They regularly escape from our home and fenced-in back yard and trot back exhausted hours later. Meanwhile, we have no idea where they are or what they are doing.

More seriously, some families have elderly relatives suffering from dementia who may become disoriented and lost, or young children they want to keep tabs on between home and school or, perhaps more controversially, teenage drivers who may ignore speed limits.

Once the stuff of spy movies, tracking devices have entered the mainstream following the development of low-cost global positioning system satellite technology. Many people are familiar with GPS-based satellite navigation systems: now many other GPS devices have been designed for specialist use - such as finding lost dogs.

They fall into two basic categories: passive GPS loggers and "real time" GPS trackers.

Passive GPS loggers

These capture and store information from GPS satellites. The data can be downloaded and reviewed on a PC, usually by plugging the device into a USB port. Their main advantage is that they are relatively inexpensive and easy to use.

I recently used the Trackstick II (www.trackstick.com) to monitor cycling trips, my commute and other activities like hiking, as well as tagging digital images with geographical data. The device is light, about the size of a man's index finger and powered by two AAA batteries, and costs around \$170 (£120 in the UK). It has one control - a sliding on/off switch and comes with 1Mb of built-in flash memory and a USB plug at one end to attach to a PC. In use, it continuously records details of your route, stop and start times, speed and direction. Optional settings include the ability to vary the recording interval.

The downloaded data can be viewed as a trail or virtual tour in Google Earth's 3D mapping application. I enjoyed being able to see and calculate the exact mileage and route taken on a cycling trip and precisely measure and track my route to work in New York.

Real time GPS trackers

These are generally for more serious purposes like keeping track of prized possessions and vehicles, or relatives and pets. Like passive devices they receive GPS information from satellites but the information can either be immediately transmitted back to the device operator, typically using a terrestrial mobile phone network or via a satellite, or is sent back when the device moves outside a virtual boundary.

Similar in size to their passive counterparts, real-time trackers are more sophisticated and usually involve a monthly service contract.

I have been testing several systems. One of my favourites is from Zoombak (www.zoombak.com), which sells three versions: Advan-ced GPS Dog Locator, Advanced GPS Car & Family Locator and Universal A-GPS Locator.

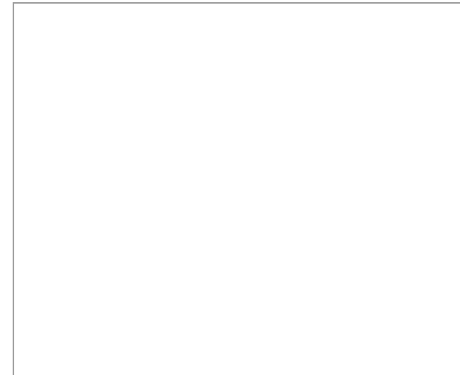
All three work in pretty much the same way but with some differences: for example, the Dog Locator has a pouch that attaches securely to a dog collar and is water resistant (but not waterproof, so owners with swimming dogs are out of luck).

All use assisted GPS technology that augments the satellite GPS system with cellular phone network triangulation and are powered by a rechargeable battery that lasts about five days in standby mode, or up to 150 location re-quests. The Universal and Dog Locator packages cost \$199 (£100) while the Car and Family Locator costs \$50 more. All require a service plan, from \$15 a month.

I found the Zoombak service easy to set up online, a process that involves linking a device to a personal account. You can find the location of your Zoombak device at any time by logging on to the website, sending a mobile phone text message or speaking to a customer care representative.

The neatest feature of Zoombak is the ability to set up as many as 10 personalised safety zones, that can be active simultaneously at any given time, and can be switched on or off quickly and easily. When your Zoombak unit moves outside one of these virtual boundaries, you receive an immediate alert via e-mail and or text message. A boundary radius can range from 110 yards to 880 yards or a ½ mile, and you can set a schedule, say from 8am to 5pm on weekdays.

Another active tracking GPS service called FindWhere works with some Nokia and BlackBerry



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GPS-enabled mobile phones, or with pocket-sized GPS receivers sold by the company, such as the iFind 1000, which costs \$299 (www.findwhere.com). Monthly service costs just under \$20.

Like Zoombak, the (US-only) FindWhere service is configured online and enables users to set up a series of alerts, for example if a driver exceeds a set speed limit or travels outside a "geofence". Like other personal GPS services, a FindWhere-enabled phone or device updates its location on a map automatically and records its route. FindWhere phone users can also set up a "panic" button to call specified recipients for help.

Spot Messenger, another battery-powered personal GPS tracking system (www.findmespot.com), is designed for use in emergencies by climbers, skiers and other adventurers anywhere in the world. It is unique in using satellites not just for GPS tracking, but also for communications so users can summon help even in the remotest places without mobile phone coverage.

You know where you are with GPS

Q What is GPS? GPS stands for Global Positioning System, a constellation of 22 satellites in orbit above the earth that communicate with devices on the ground to provide very accurate information about location. **Q Do GPS systems work everywhere?** Yes and no. Signals from the GPS satellites blanket the earth, so in theory GPS works anywhere there is a clear view of the sky and the ground-based device can obtain a "fix" on three or more satellites to triangulate a position. However, heavy tree cover, "urban canyons" such as Manhattan with lots of high buildings, and extreme weather can cause signal problems, although the latest devices are designed to compensate for this. **Q How accurate are GPS tracking devices?** Very accurate. When the device has a good fix on multiple satellites, GPS tracking systems are accurate to within a few metres. However, tracking systems also depend on the accuracy of the map databases that sit behind the electronics and sometimes these may not have been updated with the latest data.

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