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Wheels

The Nuts and Bolts of Whatever Moves You



July 8, 2009, 1:27 pm

An Emergency Device for Motorcyclists

By [Roy Furchgott](#)

Riding the isolated back roads of Appalachian West Virginia, Jim Ford watched with delight as one of the four motorcyclists in his [Master Rider's workshop](#) smoothly and efficiently “danced” his BMW 1200 GA GS Adventure through a series of mountain curves. His delight turned to shock, when the rider suddenly swung wide, lost control and was catapulted from the high side of his motorcycle, which rolled over repeatedly before coming to rest in an oily heap.



The Spot Satellite GPS Messenger sends prewritten help messages of 140 characters or less.

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The rider was semiconscious, which was bad enough, but Mr. Ford's shock turned to horror when he tried to call for help. "All four of us checked our cellphones," he said. "None of them worked."

But one rider scrambled back to his bike, pulled out an emergency device called the [Spot Satellite GPS Messenger](#) and pressed the 911 button.

"The wheels were in motion," Mr. Ford said. The signal was sent to a low orbiting satellite, routed to Martinsville, Va., which dispatched an ambulance. Mr. Ford's student, whose crash was the apparent result of a medication that caused a sudden drop in blood pressure, was rescued and is recovering.

The riders were able to signal for help because, unlike mobile phones or systems like OnStar, which require a cell tower to relay an emergency call, the Spot Messenger sends a call directly to a satellite with the GPS position of the call.

The Spot Messenger is a relatively new device — it hit the market 18 months ago — although the technology has been used commercially for years. About 100,000 have sold, mostly to campers, boaters and pilots, said Derek Moore, spokesman for the company, but the fastest-growing segment has been the motorcycle market, especially among off-road and desert riders. Worldwide, the units have resulted in about 250 rescue calls, Mr. Moore said.

The unit itself is about the size of a bar of soap and is in a shockproof case waterproof to three meters. It is run by two AA lithium batteries, which are available in groceries and drugstores. A single pair of batteries will power the Spot Messenger for one year on standby, the company said.

The Spot Messenger is about \$150, and basic service is \$100 a year. Basic service includes the 911 service, and the capability to send either of two e-mail messages (or phone texts) you have written in advance. If you press the help button, you send your prewritten message of up to 140 characters to up to the 10 people you have specified. For instance, the message might say, "Running late, don't worry. I'll call when I can."

The "Okay Check button" is for sending an "I'm okay" message.

There are additional services as well. For \$50 a year, your path can be tracked on Google Maps by people you specify (this will run down the Messenger's power more quickly, requiring new batteries about every 14 days).

Another \$30 a year buys roadside assistance so you can summon help for problems that aren't threatening, like a flat tire.

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9 Comments

1. July 8, 2009 1:33 pm [Link](#)

Most motorcycle riders don't even want to wear helmets as protection ~ why would they want this?

— *Dennis Makarov*

2. July 8, 2009 3:02 pm [Link](#)

Dennis, where do you get your information? Latest government figures (for 2007) show that three out of four motorcyclists wear helmets (actually, 74 per cent). The large majority of these helmet-wearers are using DOT certified helmets. Before you spout off at the mouth, look up some figures. And watch out for my bike when I am on the road.

D. Ordes

— *D. Ordes*

3. July 8, 2009 3:29 pm [Link](#)

“[...] his BMW 1200 GA Adventure through a series of mountain curves.”

I think you mean BMW 1200GS Adventure, as there is not and never has been a 1200GA (though GA would make a better abbreviation than 1200GS Adventure).

— *Jordy Jensky*

4. July 8, 2009 3:35 pm [Link](#)

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D. Ordes,

Based on personal observation, where I live in the Upper Midwest it is rare to see a biker wearing a helmet. My mistake in saying "most." Should have said, "many."

— *Dennis Makarov*

5. 5. July 8, 2009 11:35 pm [Link](#)

As a motorcyclist myself, many of us typically pack basic tools, and a tire repair kit...as well as wear safety gear. This would make a great addition for long trips and adventure riding far from civilization or cel towers.

However I wish the service costs were a bit lower. It's hard to justify \$150 or even \$100 a year for only an occasional trip beyond the reaches of cel service.

— *www.citybikerblog.com*

6. 6. July 10, 2009 12:05 am [Link](#)

I like the concept and plan to buy this devise, if it really does what it promises. Did the Times writer do his research or just take the word of the company spokesman? The reviews I have read on the Spot Satellite GPS Messenger are unfortunately mixed at best.

Rick Williams

— *Rick Williams*

7. 7. July 10, 2009 1:05 pm [Link](#)

Re "Latest government figures (for 2007) show that three out of four motorcyclists wear helmets..."

OK, now tell us how many wear helmets in states where they aren't required by law?

— *James*

8. 8. July 17, 2009 12:59 pm [Link](#)

"Latest government figures (for 2007) show that three out of four motorcyclists wear helmets (actually, 74 per cent)."

D. Ordes,

Went on an out-and-back road trip this week, and out of curiosity I counted how many motorcyclists I observed wearing helmets. Of the 53 motorcyclists who I either passed, or who passed me ~ only 14 wore helmets. (I counted only in the lanes of traffic on my side of the four-

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lane I was on.)

Anecdotal I know, but far below the 74% you cited.

— *Dennis Makarov*

9. 9. July 27, 2009 9:57 am [Link](#)

D.Odes,

I did another count yesterday during a Sunday drive. This time I saw 63 motorcyclists. 23 were wearing helmets of some kind or another. Better, but still far below the 74% you cite.

— *Dennis Makarov*

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August 05

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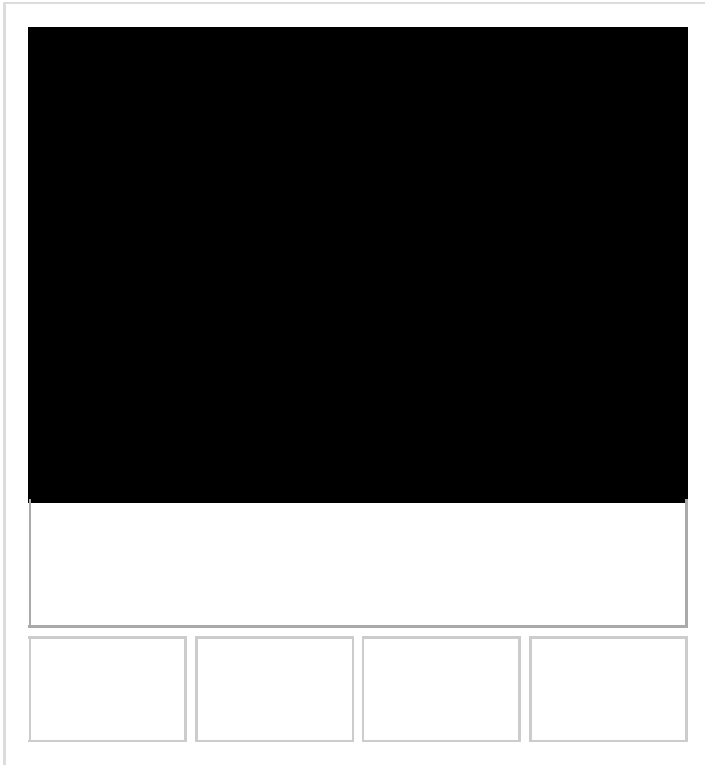
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