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SPOT intros refreshed, smaller Satellite GPS Messenger

by [Darren Murph](#) posted Jul 22nd 2009 at 12:49PM



Globalstar's **SPOT personal GPS tracker** made waves amongst outdoorsmen and argonauts the world over when it was [introduced](#) back in 2007, and now the outfit is finally gearing up to ship the second iteration. The newly revamped SPOT is some 30 percent smaller than the previous model, and it also boasts an enhanced antenna for picking up signal whilst deep in the brush, a GPS acquisition light, "Message Sending" indicator light, illuminated buttons and a dedicated pre-programmable Custom Message button. There's also a protective cover over the all-important S.O.S. button to prevent inadvertent message transmissions (wouldn't want that, now would we?), and in a move to give fashionistas a choice, this one will be available in both silver and orange. It's expected to be available in select retailers this fall, but you'll have to wait until then to get a handle on pricing.

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 **Herbie555** @ Jul 22nd 2009 1:00PM Neutral [+](#) [-](#) [!](#)
Pass. I'll continue to carry my 406MHz PLB when I'm in the wilderness. I prefer knowing my SOS will be handled by the COSPAS/SARSAT network, not some private company in Texas...
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 **Chris** @ Jul 22nd 2009 1:58PM Neutral [+](#) [-](#) [!](#)
Which one do you have? Any recommendations as to what works best?

 **Herbie555** @ Jul 22nd 2009 2:14PM Neutral [+](#) [-](#) [!](#)
I have the ACR Micro-Fix, since that was the smallest/lightest available when we bought mine a few years ago. I do a lot of solo hiking and the wife felt much better knowing that if I snapped an ankle out on a trail somewhere it wouldn't be a death sentence.

They're all built to a standard, so any 406MHz beacon should work.

GPS is optional (the main locative technology is via doppler shift at the receiving satellites), but IMHO worth it since it can add accuracy to your beacon location, which is especially important if you're moving. (Not a good tactic if you're in an emergency on land, but unavoidable if you're at sea, so more accurate location data over time can help the rescuers more accurately predict your drift, etc.)

The cost difference is pretty small now. The latest generations of beacons cost like half of what I paid, and since there is NO FEE for a PLB beyond purchasing the device, they are actually cheaper in the long run vs. a subscription service like SPOT.

As I said, I prefer a real PLB over something that's privately serviced. If you forget to pay your bill, the SPOT people can just ignore your SOS, they're under no legal obligation to provide you service, unlike a cell phone that must always let you call 911 even if you don't have a valid account. If you trigger a 406MHz PLB, the alert goes directly to the Strategic Air and Space command (assuming you're in North America when the alert is triggered) and they will kick off the appropriate rescue from there. Range is also a big issue for some people. The SPOT system uses a private LEO constellation which only covers most of North America, but not the extremes like Alaska and Northern Canada,

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8/6/2009

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rest of the world is completely out. In comparison, the PLB constellation is a mix of LEO and GeoStat birds that covers the entire planet. If your device is registered in North America but you trigger an alert while on vacation in Australia, there might be a small delay while they handoff the emergency to local authorities, but you know that the alert will be handled. And since the device is registered to an individual and the penalties for abuse are pretty stiff, there's no "false alarm" problem, every alert is treated as a Life and Death emergency.



bdav @ Jul 22nd 2009 2:16PM

Neutral

That was my first thought - what do these things offer over your standard EPIRB/PLB?



Herbie555 @ Jul 22nd 2009 2:25PM

Neutral

The big selling point of the spot, and IMHO the thing that makes it a toy and not an emergency device, is that it lets you send location updates in a non-emergency fashion.

It would be great if you were through-hiking the PCT and wanted to let friends/family watch your progress every day. You could send a "here I am, alive and well" type message every evening, for example. They're definitely a neat device, just not emergency equipment in my mind.



Vammo @ Jul 22nd 2009 3:01PM

Neutral

The SPOT has its place but you are right about them toting the 911 feature. I've got a buddy in NW Canada transecting Princess Royal Island by foot and packraft using a SPOT right now. It was donated to them and they have a PLB, too...for real emergencies.

The are using the SPOT so people can follow them on the website....do PLBs do that?

<http://www.rainforesttreks.com/SpiritBearJourney/?page=Track>



Craig @ Jul 22nd 2009 10:09PM

Neutral

A couple did just that this year (carried it on the PCT). Only made it as far as Independence though, and their map page kept resetting everytime they hit a town. Dunno if they were resetting it manually of it the SPOT maps only show the last 6 transmissions. See walk2650.com



Eric Greenwell @ Jul 22nd 2009 10:43PM

Neutral

The PLB requires the owner to activate it, which might not always be possible; for example, becoming unconscious or dead by some hiking or fishing accident. You may not care if it's not activated if you are dead, but a search will still be launched anyway (with the attendant risks to the searchers), and your friends and family will still want to know what happened to you.

In my case, I fly a glider, and it's unlikely I'd be able to trigger it before a crash occurred. The track from SPOT will narrow the area that has to be searched from about 10,000 square miles to about 400. Huge difference. The glider also has an ELT in it, but they are notoriously unreliable in accidents.

A feature of glider flying is the occasional "landout", where the pilot doesn't make it back to the airport. In the Western USA, huge areas are without cell phone coverage or people, and that's where the "send help", not the "911" feature, can be invaluable. You don't need search and rescue; you just need someone to come with the trailer and retrieve you.

Seeing the SPOT track progressing during a typical 5 to 6 hour flight, which can cover several hundred miles, gives a lot of comfort to my wife, who doesn't have to worry about what's happening to me. We also use them in competitions for the safety aspect, but a big benefit is the almost "real time" ability for the officials, crews, and spectators to follow the competition each day. And, not just the people at the airport where the event is being held, but around the country via the web.

Don't judge it just by your individual circumstances: it's much more than a "toy", and tons of pilots are quite happy to pay the subscription fees.



Alan N @ Jul 22nd 2009 1:18PM

Neutral

SNARF

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JStro @ Jul 22nd 2009 1:29PM

Neutral

Will be made mandatory for all NFL players to carry on future fishing trips.

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Herbie555 @ Jul 22nd 2009 2:36PM

Neutral

For reference, here's an evaluation of the new McMurdo Fast Find PLB that is about half the size and half the cost of my ACR Micro-Fix:

<http://equipped.org/McMurdoNewFastFind.htm>

When the service life of my battery is up in another couple of years, I'll have to evaluate whether to have it replaced by ACR or to replace with something lighter. (Or maybe do both and use the McMurdo for hiking and loan out the ACR to friends/family doing car camping...)

[Reply](#)



Cash @ Jul 22nd 2009 3:48PM

Neutral

SPOTs are handy and all, but the real cost comes in the monthly service charge. I almost got one for my girlfriend for christmas last year, until I found out it would have set her back a couple hundred dollars a year just to use the stupid thing.

Merry Christmas sweetheart, I got you a pocket sized black hole for money!

[Reply](#)



Craig @ Jul 23rd 2009 2:10AM

Neutral

Herbie555, you're kidding right? Have you ever even looked at a coverage map for the SPOT device? I have used one extensively in Australia and last year took one hiking through the jungles of Cambodia and Northern Thailand where they said there was no coverage but still worked fine. It is never supposed to replace a PLB or the like but what happens if your driving across the Nullarbor Plain and you get a flat tyre or you take the tinnie out fishing and you run out of fuel or your motor dies, are you going to be happy for Emergency services to bill you for a rescue cause you really didn't need one!

[Reply](#)



jjcprice @ Jul 31st 2009 2:43PM

Neutral

Herbie,
Am I wrong.....I thought one of the drawbacks with the PRB was that it had to be reset if you used it in an emergency? And that reset required sending the unit back to the factory.

And it's not free....in fact, it's quite a hefty fee plus the time involved.

Please advise.

Ps...monthly subscription for the spot is less than \$9. plus the mega insurance policy you can purchase for less than \$10 that will pay for an extraction anywhere in the world. Not a problem here in the USA but go climbing in Patagonia and run into a problem where you need a medvac and just guess at the cost.....which needs to be paid before you exit the country.

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