

The Seattle Times

Thursday, October 15, 2009 - Page updated at 12:00 AM

Permission to reprint or copy this article or photo, other than personal use, must be obtained from The Seattle Times. Call 206-464-3113 or e-mail resale@seattletimes.com with your request.

SPOT Personal Tracker keeps friends, and rescuers, informed

By Dan A. Nelson
Special to The Seattle Times

Nothing beats proper preparation and careful navigation for staying safe in the backcountry. But when the unexpected happens, even the best planning may not be enough to keep you safe.

If you or someone in your party suffers an injury, or you simply lose your way in a remote location, outside help could be the difference between life and death. After substantial testing of the latest emergency communications tools, we found the **SPOT Personal Tracker** an incredibly easy and effective way to alert rescuers of your plight. The SPOT device also serves as a nonemergency communication tool to keep friends and family advised of your progress during an outdoor adventure.

The SPOT system utilizes a network of satellites and a small handheld device (the SPOT Personal Tracker). You buy the Personal Tracker (recently reduced to \$99.95) and subscribe to the satellite network (\$100 per year for basic service).

The Personal Tracker is a GPS-enabled device with a simple four-button interface. To use, simply turn on the device. If you have an emergency, hit the 911 button and the unit transmits a message to SPOT's central server. From there, the server fixes your location and notifies your emergency contact person and the appropriate emergency response agency of your request for emergency aid. Rescue teams are then on the way to you (your Personal Tracker sent your GPS coordinates along with the call for help).

If you don't need professional emergency-response personnel to aid you, but could use a bit of help from friends, you can use the Help button. This tells the SPOT server to notify your designated "help" contact that you could use their assistance.

This service *does* work — my friend, Backpacker magazine's Rocky Mountain editor Steve Howe, accidentally activated the Help function while trekking on Denali a while back and National Park Service rangers tracked him down high on the mountain to provide aid. He was fine, and surprised to see rescuers, but impressed at the response to the SPOT deployment. (Read Steve's full story here: www.backpacker.com/blogs/234)

SPOT designed the handheld unit to prevent accidental activation. The buttons are recessed so it takes a specific



SPOT
The Spot Personal Tracker can trigger a rescue call via satellite.

push with a small instrument, like a finger tip or a pencil, for an extended period (2-3 seconds) to send out a call. Further, that call can only be made after the on button is pushed to bring the unit out of idle/sleep mode. With two button pushes needed in sequence, inadvertent activation of the device seemed unlikely, if not impossible. A soon-to-be-available new generation of the device, somewhat smaller and lighter (and \$70 more expensive), will include fold-back "safety covers" over the Help button and 911 button ("SOS" in the new version).

We never personally had to test the call-for-aid service, but we did put the Personal Tracker into regular use in the Cascades and Olympics — not to call for aid, but to keep family and friends informed of our wilderness progress. Use the "OK" button to send periodic messages to your predetermined contacts to let them know you are fine. Or better yet, for an extra \$49 per year, you can incorporate a "Track Progress" option. This service plots your route in real time on a personal page on the SPOT Web site. Your handheld device sends a waypoint to the server every 10 minutes and plots it on a map on your personal SPOT account page. You can share this Web address with friends, post it to your Facebook or Twitter accounts, or link it to your personal blog pages. In this way, your friends can watch your real-time progress through the wilderness.

The SPOT Messenger is the most advanced personal locator beacon and emergency communication tool for wilderness adventures. The company continues to expand its global satellite coverage, and currently covers virtually all of the Northern Hemisphere, as well as South America and Australia. For more information, see www.findmespot.com.

For the purpose of review, gear manufacturers lend products to the Times' freelance reviewer, who returns products after a typical use of 4-6 weeks. There is no payment from manufacturers and they have no control over the content of reviews. Dan A. Nelson of Puyallup is a regular contributor to Backpacker magazine, and an author of outdoor guides with The Mountaineers Books. Contact him with gear-related questions at gearguy@adventuresnw.net

Copyright © The Seattle Times Company