

Purchasing Your First GPS

By Blake Miller

Recently, I was in a local and large sporting goods store and watched a clerk recommend a very expensive and complex GPS to an elderly gentleman. The customer simply wanted a GPS that would “get him back to the rig” yet the clerk kept pushing the latest, high tech, touch screen and very expensive GPS receiver.

The customer would have been satisfied with a basic starter model, and it would have served him very well. Instead, he left the store very frustrated, without buying anything.

Buying your first Global Positioning System receiver is a lot like shopping for your first car. In a vehicle, you want it to provide transportation from Point A to Point B. In a GPS, you also want it to take you from Point A to Point B. There are many models that will fill your needs exactly, but before you put the money down, you need to shop intelligently. Here is what you need to know:

Start with a quick education on common GPS terms, and why they're important.

- Coordinates: This refers to your geographic grid system and this pinpoints your position in the world. The most common is Latitude and Longitude though most hikers quickly shift to UTM (Universal Transverse Mercator) because of its simplicity.
- Waypoints – These are your navigation coordinates that you have saved to memory within the GPS. Most receivers will hold 500. That said, you only need to keep a few on your GPS all the time. Use the free program at www.easygps.com to store the rest.
- Compass – An electronic counter-part to your magnetic compass. The GPS compass is dependent on batteries, like the rest of the system, so don't leave your magnetic compass at home.
- Find/Go To – This is the navigation function of the receiver. It is this function that will “steer” you to your destination.

Every GPS has these basic features. All the rest is bells and whistles. And it will be up to you to determine which ones are important. For example, I like a GPS with a Barometric altimeter. I use that function to monitor atmospheric pressure at high elevations; when the pressure drops I look for cover. An altimeter can also be used to help locate where you are on topographic maps. For example, if your location is where a stream crosses an elevation line on a map, and you can be sure where you are.

When looking for your first GPS receiver consider the following:

- Decide how much you want to spend. If you don't know what a GPS might cost, visit www.walmart.com and www.rei.com to get a good price baseline. Check the manufacturer's web site (such as www.garmin.com) for rebates offers. Then research the web with www.google.com for reviews on specific models.
- Decide what model might be best for you. The more expensive models will most likely have a better receiver and antenna. Yet it doesn't have to be expensive to be accurate. All receivers will be accurate to at least +/- 15 meters and some are accurate to +/- 3 meters. That said, giving any receiver the time to adequately calculate position information is essential. Garmin's Venture (HCX) and GarminMap 60Cx are great selections for the beginner.
- Ask friends with GPSs what they use theirs for and what their recommendation would be. One size definitely doesn't fit all! An avid geocacher would have different needs than a hunter. A hunter might opt for a model with a two way radio such as the Garmin Rhino series.
- Older folks and those not "tech savvy" seem to do better with a GPS that has buttons on the front (GarminMap 60 series or the Lowrance IFinder Hunt C); it seems to be more intuitive. As an instructor, I've found that buttons along the side can become frustrating for people with less steady hands.

In the store, pick up the receiver, look at the controls and hold it as you would when using it. Ask yourself:

- Does it feel like a good fit?
- Can I read the buttons and comfortably push them?
- Is the screen size adequate?
- Is the GPS simple or just too complex for me?
- Mapping programs are nice but expect to pay \$100.00 or more. Ask a friend with a GPS and see for yourself if the mapping is an asset for you. Can you read what is presented on the screen or is it just clutter?
- Find out what the store's return policy is on electronics and what their return rate is with various models.
- Whatever you buy, hang on to that receipt and register the product soon after purchase.

Once you buy a GPS, keep fresh batteries in it. Don't put it in the closet, or store it in your survival kit. Take it out and use it; now. You can't break it, and when you practice with your GPS, you are practicing one of your wilderness survival land navigation skills.

Visit the manufacture's web site once every six months or so. The manufactures frequently offer free up-grades allowing the GPS's internal software to run more efficiently. It is usually a simple down load to make your GPS current.

A good way to learn is to take a class where you will learn the basics and how your receiver works. Check with your local Community College's continuing education program or Sporting Goods stores to see if they offer classes.

And don't forget: a GPS is no substitute for a map and a quality compass and the knowledge of how to use them. The most expensive GPS on the market is only as good as its batteries. Anything electronic can fail and they do so at the most inconvenient time.