

Stay Safe Using Your SPOT Locator Beacon

By Blake Miller

While backpacking with my sons, hundreds of miles from home in a remote area of Glacier National Park, I was able to send information to my wife every evening. Those messages from my SPOT (which stands for “SPOT”) locator gave my wife peace-of-mind.

Locator beacons have been available to outdoorsman for several years. The basic idea is pretty straight forward: to help someone stay out of trouble in the backcountry by providing a method for them get help.

Spot units are communication devices that use satellite systems to link to control stations to forward messages. SPOT, manufactured by Global Star Communications, made locator beacons affordable and multifunctional. Criticized initially for a lack of GPS sensitivity and other issues, SPOT responded with the SPOT II, an upgraded and improved, smaller and more reliable model. An annual subscription fee is charged to use a SPOT unit.

SPOT units are a good choice for anyone who wants to stay connected to family, friends and emergency responders. One of my friends gives his wife the SPOT when they go shopping in Portland, Or., at the malls! Talk about urban survival skills!

My intent is not to get into a technical discussion but to share some lessons that I have learned after extensive use of my SPOT in a variety of locations and weather conditions.

Last year SPOT came out with a memo of “Top Tips...” for using the beacon. These tips can be found below at their “Frequently Asked Questions” post (www.findmespot.com).

Among those tips are:

- Always use lithium batteries. They provide more power and work at lower temperatures than alkaline batteries.
- SPOT recommends that you send and verify receipt of an OK message on its first use, after:
 - traveling long distances;
 - after changing the batteries; and,
 - if the unit has been sitting on the shelf longer than two weeks.
- Check the SPOT web site for the complete details; search on “tips.”

After purchase, you’ll need to set up your SPOT at home on your computer. That’s pretty straight forward. You will be asked to enter either email addresses

or cell phone numbers for text messaging. You can enter a maximum of 10 or a collection of several combined text and email messages. Messages are preloaded at home. You cannot load a message for transmission in the field.

Now that I've had and used my SPOT for almost two years, there are a few lessons friends and I have learned:

- As you type your message, enter your name, cell phone number and a general description of your location. For example: "I am fine, camping up in the National Forest, 541 280 1234."
- You may end up on several of your friends' call lists. It would be good to know, if you receive a SPOT message, who it is from so that you can respond appropriately.
- Confirm with your friends that it's OK to have them on your help list. Update that list for each trip. Don't take for granted that you have their blanket permission to be there forever.
- Now this can be a bit dicey. If an acquaintance calls you and asks if he can put you on his list, think that over carefully. Do you really want to be on his list? If so, set a time limit or establish some parameters.
- I recommend you also send one OK/Checking-in message before departing on a trip.
- Try to give your SPOT a clear sky view when preparing to send a message. Some tree cover is OK but a heavy canopy can present a problem.
- After sending one message, I always repeat the message to ensure transmission.
- The power on-and-off button is a bit difficult to press down. That's OK – you don't want it to activate unintentionally in your pack.
- Remember, if you are injured away from your pack, and incapacitated, you can't activate your SPOT.
- If you tell your friends and family on the call list that you will send a message at certain times during the day, stick to that schedule. You don't want them to request Search and Rescue assistance if you don't need it.

The SPOT beacons offer a unique method of communications in the back country but it is by no means the end-all to wilderness safety. Any electronic device that uses batteries is vulnerable to failure, damage or shorting out. No SPOT or GPS is a substitute for a map and compass and the ability to use them. No electronic device, no matter how advanced, can ever excuse you from taking along a complete survival kit.

The SPOT offers a unique method of communication and can provide peace-of-mind to the people in the backcountry and to those at home. Use your SPOT responsibly.

Blake Miller

Blake Miller has made a career out of staying found and knowing where he is at all times. His formal navigation training began when he joined the U.S. Navy in 1973. He served as an officer aboard several Navy ships over his twenty-year career; many of those tours included the duty of Navigator. Blake began working with satellite navigation systems at sea in 1976, culminating with the then-new Global Positioning Systems aboard the Battleship WISCONSIN in early 1990.

In 1998 Blake started Outdoor Quest, a business dedicated to backcountry navigation and wilderness survival. Blake has taught classes to wild land firefighters, state agency staffs, Search and Rescue team members, hunters, hikers, skiers, fishermen and equestrians. He regularly teaches classes through the Community Education programs at Central Oregon (Bend) and Chemeketa (Salem, OR) Community Colleges.

As a volunteer, Blake teaches navigation and survival classes through the Becoming an Outdoor Woman (BOW) program, to students in the local school district, and conservation groups. He is a member of a Search and Rescue team.

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For technical information: Visit the SPOT web site at www.findmespot.com or Doug Ritter's site at www.equipped.org.

For Terrain Navigator Mapping Software or compasses click on [Outdoor Quest](#).