

Tech review: GPS gadgets let you track your kid, elderly loved one or car

January 9 2014, by Jim Rossman

We've all seen news alerts for missing senior citizens. Sometimes those have a happy outcome, and other times they don't.

I'm sure parents of kids with special needs also live with the worry that their child might wander off and get lost.

The devices we're looking at today could help folks find their missing loved ones, but they aren't cheap or effortless to use.

I'm talking about portable GPS tracking devices that can be attached to a key ring or worn on a chain.

I suppose if you have a big enough issue with pets running off, they could be used on your dog's collar.

We've all seen commercials that feature a senior citizen who has fallen and needs help. Think of these gadgets like that help button, but they work from almost anywhere.

GPS tracking devices have long been used by secret agents in the movies and in real life, but until recently, they've been too big and too expensive to appeal to the public.

The two devices I reviewed run off a [rechargeable battery](#) that can last for days, depending on how often you want it to "phone home."

The devices work by sending out a tracking signal that is picked up by cellular towers and relayed to a webpage where it's noted on a map.

To track the device, users log in to that website and can see the map.

ETRAK PERSONAL GPS TRACKING SYSTEM: The eTrak (\$130 plus monthly fee) is about the size of two dominoes stacked together and weighs less than an ounce. It has a hole at the top to attach a chain or key ring and one big panic button on the front.

It runs off a battery. The whole unit slips into a tiny cradle and charges from any USB port.

Charge for a few hours, and it will transmit for up to seven days of normal use.

The eTrak enables the user to draw "safety circles" on a map. If the eTrak unit travels outside the circles, notifications will be sent. The notifications can be texts, emails or even pre-recorded calls to phones with a message that the panic button was pressed. The notification can include a map of the unit's location and turn-by-turn directions.

It takes a steady three or four seconds of pressing the [panic button](#) for the help call to go out, which minimizes false alarms.

The eTrak uses GPS, Wi-Fi mapping and cell tower triangulation to determine its position, which means it will work inside a car or backpack.

On the website, you can see the eTrak's history to monitor where the device has been throughout the day. The eTrak doesn't have an on/off switch, so it can't be disabled by the user.

There is a monthly fee for tracking. The device requires the tracking plan, which is \$15 per month for no contract. It costs \$100 per year prepaid and goes down to \$10 per month with a two-year contract.

EZOOM PORTABLE TRACKING AND SAFETY LOCATOR: The eZoom (\$100 plus monthly fee) is a bit larger than the eTrak and seems sturdier. The eZoom is waterproof and can withstand two tons. I wouldn't put it on a keychain, but it does come with a little pouch that you can mount on a belt or bag. It weighs about 3 ounces.

It also has a rechargeable battery that will last from three to 21 days based on how often it sends out its location. You can have it send out a location every few minutes, which kills the battery pretty fast, or less often, which extends battery life but leaves gaps in the tracking data - it's your choice.

The eZoom has an accelerometer, so you can arm the unit from your smartphone and it will send notifications upon movement.

Think of it as a car alarm that silently alerts you if the car moves and can tell you its exact location.

It can also send alerts if eZoom goes faster than a preset speed. This is handy if you're worried about teen drivers obeying the speed limits.

There is a mounting kit for permanently attaching it to your car, including directly powering it from your car's fuse box or 12v port.

Like the eTrak, the eZoom allows users to set up SafeSpots that can send alerts if the unit enters or leaves. This is great to know when your kids get home from school.

The eZoom is trackable from the company website or smartphone app,

where you can press a button to update its location.

The eZoom also has a button to send out notifications with the unit's location. Notifications are text or email only - no phone calls.

Again, you'll need a service plan, which ranges from \$20 per month for a one-year contract up to \$311.76 prepaid for two years. There are also activation fees.

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ETRAK:

-Pros: Small, light and fits on a keychain or necklace. SOS phone calls.

-Cons: Only charges in cradle.

-Bottom line: Very unobtrusive. Don't lose the cradle; it's the only way to charge it.

-Price: \$130 plus monthly fee

-On the Web: etrak.com

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EZOOM:

-Pros: Sturdy, large battery, can mount in car.

-Cons: Expensive plans, activation fees. No notification [phone calls](#).

-Bottom line: Seems like one I'd choose to protect my [car](#).

-Price: \$100 plus monthly fee

-On the Web: ezoomgps.com

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