

# High Tech in the Backcountry

Published in the July, 2012, issue of The Northwest Horse Source.



When is the last time you saw a telephone booth? The cell phones in nearly everyone's pocket are filling the desire for people to be constantly connected. Whether you're for or against, high tech electronics have become ubiquitous in the 21st century world that we live in.

## Global Positioning Systems

The electronic devices that impact trail riders more than any other are primarily centered around Global Positioning System, or GPS, related items. These high tech items can be valuable tools to complement your solid understanding of how to use a tried and true traditional map and compass.

GPS's all use signals sent from a constellation of manmade satellites constantly orbiting overhead, no need for cell phone towers here. From a hand held GPS that leaves electronic bread crumbs back to the trailhead, to a device that signals a helicopter rescue mission in a wilderness area, they all use these same signals and similar technology.

For some riders using a GPS for navigation is part of the fun associated with trail riding. Others may simply want a backup for paper topographic maps—or simply some insurance that they can find their way back home.

There are a wide variety of GPS units on the market from various manufacturers. GPS units best suited for trail riding are small, hand held, rugged receivers used for pinpointing specific locations on trails and in the back country. However, there are a few features that you should look for in a unit.

- Sensitivity – GPS units must be able to receive a satellite signal to work. Devices that pair an external, or quad helix, antenna with a high-sensitivity processor chip will be the most accurate and, even more importantly, the most sensitive. That means the receivers can more often pick up a signal in a deep canyon or through a dense tree canopy.
- Long battery life – Unless you enjoy looking at a blank screen, look at how long a fresh set of batteries will last. Then bring along spares.
- Features – Color screens, altimeters, and even cameras are options that are available on newer units. Keep in mind that the more features a GPS has the faster the batteries will be depleted and the lighter your wallet will be after the purchase.

## **Smart Phone Applications**

A new, and lower cost, entry into the world of GPS equipment are applications that riders can download into their mobile phones. There are apps available for all major smart phones that use GPS information to turn your Smartphone into a capable backcountry navigation tool. I use an application

called ViewRanger that allows me to download topographic maps to my cell phone and then plots my course when I'm in the backcountry, just like a dedicated GPS. With these powerful new tools, you can plan, follow and record routes and create waypoints all without cell tower reception. With a very low price point, compared to a traditional GPS, these programs offer an easy entry into the world of GPS's.

### **For Emergencies Only (Mostly)**

For riders whose idea of getting away from it all means going far beyond the range of cell towers there are two main devices to consider. The SPOT and InReach systems both offer an electronic safety net by which riders can send a signal to a satellite to alert EMS organizations of an emergency. Both of these devices utilize a compact unit that can send a signal to a satellite that then sends the signal back to a location on earth where the message can be routed to emergency service providers. Both the SPOT and InReach require a subscription in addition to the purchase of the unit itself. Also, both devices now offer users the ability to send short text messages to family and friends to let them know that you're making memories to last a life time and they're stuck in civilization. The InReach expands on this technology and allows family and friends to send you text messages as well (perhaps to say that you're urgently needed at home).

Although we've looked at three different types of high tech gear that can aid you in your trail rides, *please remember that the very best, and most sophisticated, technology is **YOU***. Stay alert and attentive, [learn how to use a map and compass](#), be prepared, and ride.