

Communications for Your Hunt

By Andy Cool

EDITOR'S REMARKS

We have been using "Sat" phones on various hunts for several years. Not all sat phone companies are created equal! Both Garth and I have phones from Andy Cool at Explorer Satellite and have had nothing but great results. We have continued to endorse Explorer Satellite through the years because they cater specifically to hunters and understand the unique needs of those of us who love to hunt in remote areas. For those of you who are considering purchasing or renting a sat phone, give Andy a call.

—Jason



There are a number of different communication tools available to today's hunter. Most hunters are concerned about safety and that is the primary reason satellite based communication devices are so desirable for remote endeavors like hunting and fishing where other systems don't provide coverage.

Satellite coverage for most commercially available services is extremely broad and is known as the "footprint." One hunter I know calls it the satellite "hoofprint"! There are actually four satellite networks that are commercially available and support portable devices on the ground.

A matrix showing the various attributes of each is located in a table on the next page. This is more information than is necessary for most hunters, however, it does point out the capabilities of each system.

The questions we get frequently from our hunting clients are:

How do I know which system or device is right for me?

The answer is fairly simple and is based on mainly one consideration - geography. The regional systems (Thuraya and Globalstar) are not an option for most North American hunters. Globalstar had a design flaw in their satellites come to light a few years ago and their phone service is currently unreliable, except for their SPOT Tracker - this is a reliable device that is transmit only, has a built in GPS and 911 functionality and has saved many lives.

Thuraya simply does not work in North America.

That leaves Iridium and Inmarsat. Iridium is by far the most reliable and smallest device that will deliver rock solid voice communication. Most companies rent Iridium handsets only since it is a one size fits all solution for anyone traveling anywhere remote. Inmarsat service does not currently support a handheld phone, so that is usually not an option for most hunters - except those who want an internet connection while in the field.

What is a ball park on rental fees end-to-end?

Having narrowed your choice down to renting an Iridium handset, the going rate hovers between \$75 and \$120 per week (there are two handset models, the 9505A and 9555) for the rental fee and \$1.79 - \$2.29/minute for usage. So, for a 2 week rental, with usage of 40 minutes, you could expect to pay roughly \$230 plus shipping, usually around \$50 round trip or less, for a grand total of under \$300 including usage. Of course, more minute usage will run the total up.

Should I purchase, rent, have the bare minimum, or go without?

It makes more sense to purchase a phone if you hunt three or more times per year for more than 2 weeks at a time. The bare minimum would be to purchase and keep service up and running on a SPOT Tracker. You could always opt to go without and that doesn't need any real explanation!

What is included in a rental and what should I watch out for?

There are a lot of companies that rent and sell satellite phones. For rentals, the key is that the phone arrives a day prior to your departure and the time in transit is included in the rental fee (not added in as an extra "week"). Make sure that the company you rent from has decent inventory and is not renting you a beat up phone that may not function properly and includes or makes available the accessories you may want or need (DC charger, extra batteries, solar chargers, hard cases, insurance). Last, make sure that there aren't any other hidden charges like late return fees or severe penalties for lost or stolen equipment.

For purchase, make sure the company you purchase from has competitive prices, is familiar with their products, has a solid reputation, and can assist you when you need help. If they don't answer their phone when you call to buy a phone, they won't answer it when you have a problem! Satellite equipment is relatively easy to use these days, however, it is different from a cell phone as it must be used outside and is dialed differently.

Satellite communications have come a long way and while still not inexpensive, they are indispensable when you really need them!

THE FOUR SATELLITE NETWORKS AVAILABLE COMMERCIALY

Service Provider	Coverage	Satellite Orbit	# of Satellites	Phone number	Voice	Data speed	Text messaging	Retail price of equipment	Retail price per minute	Digital Technology	Recommended?
	Fully Worldwide	Low Earth Orbit	66	12 digit international satellite number	yes	2.4kbps, up to 10kbps with compression	Yes, 160 character	\$1,495 - \$1,695	\$1.50	TDMA, Cross-link	YES
	Fully Worldwide with Polar exceptions	Geostationary	3	12 digit international satellite number	yes	up to 256kbps Asynchronous data, up to 492kbps Packet Data	Yes	\$1,295 - \$14,995	\$0.99 - \$8.00/minute; \$7.00 per Megabyte for packet data	TDMA Digital	YES
	Middle East, Far East, Northern half of Africa, Europe.	Geostationary	2	12 digit international satellite number	yes	up to 128kbps Asynchronous data, up to 512kbps Packet Data	Yes	\$650- \$1,295	\$0.40 - \$1.50/minute	GSM	YES
	Regional, depending on location of operational Earthstations	Low Earth Orbit	48 originally	"Normal" 254 or 863 area code (TX/FL) 10 digit number	yes	9.6kbps, up to 56/64k with "Express Data"	Yes, 35 characters	\$749 - \$999; SPOT \$150	\$0.99 or less	CDMA, Bent-pipe	NO, except SPOT Tracker