

Internet Interpet

Give Your Dog a Phone



We've all lost a pet at one time or other, whether for a few frightening moments, a scary few hours, an overnight agony, days of worry or the heartbreak of forever. Tags and microchipping are two mandatory methods to help find pet owners when their animals get loose, but it was eventual that technology would triumph in tracking and reuniting us with our lost pets.

In the US, where geeks rule, there are at least seven devices that promise to help locate and track the movements of the straying dog, with GPS (Global Positioning Satellite) technology similar to that on mobile phones and in car navigation systems. Here in Australia, a new device has just been introduced that uses SMS tracking or personal online tracking to do the job.

Before this, the only options were to strap a mobile phone to a dog and hope someone who finds it will call you. Or you could affix a walkie-talkie to a collar where you could transmit messages to it in the hope someone would hear you. But you didn't know where the dog was in real time. And the batteries run out quickly as well as having limited range.

As microchips and communications devices got smaller and mobile phone coverage became ubiquitous with satellite positioning devices cheaper, it was inevitable that the technologies that can be used for home detention would be modified to track kids, befuddled elderly patients and pets as they moved out of safe areas. The same has been done with cars having units that, when reported stolen, track the thieves as they drive.

Whether on a hike with your dog, at the beach or unfamiliar locations, having one of these devices doesn't relieve you of the need to keep them on lead or in control off lead, but it can be a relief if they bolt from the family on holiday or get out of the house or yard accidentally.

Most of the devices in the US require monthly service charges beyond their initial purchase to be hooked up to a US mobile system, so they are incompatible here. But two do not need mobile interfaces.

Garmin, who make handheld and car GPS systems, have an odd-looking harness with a transponder and antenna on it linked to a handheld device called the Astro Dog. It has a range of eight kilometres and updates the location and direction of the animal every five seconds by radioing its position to the receiver. But at US\$650, it's a hefty price for a unit that has a collar charge of only 15 hours. The Australian mapping software is an extra US\$120. See the device and details at www.garmin.com.

The other device is the RoamEO Pet Location System at US\$400. The radio unit is mounted on a rechargeable collar with a ten-hour limit but has less than a two-kilometre range. It displays distance and the dog's speed or direction with updates every three seconds and a three-metre accuracy. Like the Garmin, it can track multiple units at the same time. The website is www.roameoforpets.com, but at present they cannot ship to Australia due to radio laws.

With Australia's new PetTrack, a wandering or missing pet is only an SMS away. Send an SMS from your mobile to the tracking device on your pet and you receive a message back from the device with coordinates detailing its location within a few minutes. It uses the Telstra mobile network and a free prepaid SIM card is included with each unit.

If the mobile phone being used is GPRS compatible (meaning it has mapping software and satellite positioning capabilities) then the recipient receives a full visual display (with coordinates, including street and suburb) via SMS. Via PetTrack you can also track your pet online on their website.

If the mobile phone issuing the command is not GPRS compatible, the recipient will be sent an SMS message containing the coordinates of the dog's location. They will then be required to contact Corteo for full details of their pet's location, such as street name and suburb. GPRS compatible phones allow you to choose to transmit the visual display (coordinates) through GPRS and enjoy a significantly better transmission rate and speed as the animal moves. A free prepaid SIM card comes with the unit. Full details at www.pettrack.com.au or call 1 300 720 920.



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