

ROCKY TALKIE > 5W RADIOS

Review by Brian Clark with support from official OTFM field testers Taison Clark and Andrew Vrana

When I was a kid, walkie talkies were a blast. Whatever we discussed over them couldn't have been very important, but the novelty of talking over thin air was enthralling. My kids, who grew up with cell phones and internet-based chat applications, seem less excited about walkie talkies. I'm not sure whether I envy them or feel that a bit of magic has been lost.

"Magic" is a stretch, of course. The walkie talkies that I played with as a kid came second-hand from garage sales and rarely worked well. Fortunately, modern walkie talkie technology has moved on from those fiddly squelch knobs and ever-scratchy reception. Contemporary models offer range, reception quality, and features that far outshine what we had, and even in an era where mobile phones are ubiquitous, a reliable set of walkie talkies can be very useful when wandering deep into wilderness without much cellular service. The purposes we use them for are more important, too – not just to chatter about whether the fish are biting in one place or another. These days we do regular welfare checks on our fishing and hunting partners, and radios can literally be life-saving tools in a real emergency.

Not only do the new 5W units from Rockie Talkie excel at those applications, they've also made them sturdy enough to handle the abuse of an outdoorsy life in the mountains and beyond. Here's a quick rundown of key features along with our observations from extensive testing in coastal environments.

Water / Dust

The 5W model is IP67 rated, meaning that it's sealed against dust ingress and waterproof down to one meter for up to 30 minutes. While chasing tails on a flat in Belize, I accidentally flipped one of our remote hand mics overboard where it dragged in saltwater for at least a half-hour of poling; I didn't plan that test, but it passed just fine – a quick swish in freshwater later that night left no trace of salt or malfunction. My core unit also got soaked in the rain and dunked multiple times while wading, and it didn't even seem to notice. It's nice not having to worry about it.

Battery Life

The official published claim is that each unit can run 4-6 days on a single charge of the 1800mAh batteries, and that

tracks with our experience. I charged ours at the beginning of the trip, turned them on when we arrived at the lodge, used them frequently throughout each day, and turned them off only when I packed them up again about four days later. One was at 12%, the other at 18%. I was suitably impressed. Note that backcountry skiers and snowboarders are among the primary target audiences for Rocky Talkie, so the batteries are engineered to be cold tolerant to -20°F.

IMPORTANT: the units use integrated lithium batteries that aren't removable, so leave room in your carry-on luggage if you fly with them.

Attachments

Although it's the battery life and range that determine your talk times and ability to communicate with others, don't overlook the attachment mechanisms. In reality, you spend far more time carrying the device than using it, so how it connects to your gear shouldn't be overlooked. It needs to be secure enough not to bounce (or bounce off!) while hiking, yet easy enough to grab and detach quickly, so that you aren't struggling with the fastener every time you need to use the device. The method of attachment turns out to be quite important for in-the-field utility.

The 5W model comes standard with a powerful rotatable gator clip on the back, and Rockie Talkie also offers an optional locking carabiner attachment. We tried both, and they're both solid. The clips fit into standard MOLLE slots and other strap attachment points, but it can be a bit slow getting the jaws detached. For quick retrieval, the carabiner was definitely easier, and no less secure. My favorite configuration for wading the flats was to clip the radio to an external webbing loop on my submersible sling, then clip the handheld mic to the shoulder strap. Clean, convenient, secure – very well-designed.

NOTE: the gator clip and carabiner attachments aren't hot-swappable in the field. You need a screwdriver, clean working space, and a few minutes to change from the clip to 'biner (or vice versa). Do some testing of your kit in advance.

One more thing: each unit also comes with a coiled leash that attaches to the base of the unit with a small 'biner. That's not for *if* you drop the radio; it's for *when* you drop it. Because you definitely will, eventually.

Range

Here are the published range estimates from Rockie Talkie for their 5W radios – your mileage may vary!

- Line-of-Sight: 35+ miles
- Mountains: 1 to 8 miles
- Forest and Hills: 0.5 to 5 miles
- Rivers: 0.5 to 3 miles
- City: Up to 1.5 miles

We couldn't really test the line-of-sight range, and I'm not sure it's a realistic scenario for our typical use cases. Even relatively flat places still offer plenty of interference, and evaporation over water (particularly in the tropics) can disrupt signals as well. It's probably plausible for a perfect peak-to-peak situation, but that's not our usual game.

The other scenarios are more representative for us, and our results were predictably mixed. Most of our testing in Belize and on the Texas coast ran from under a mile up to around three miles across lagoon, jungle, marsh, and open water. On average, somewhere around 1.5 miles is where it got scratchy enough to require multiple tries, but a couple times we got clear comms out to more like three miles.

I'm broadly willing to accept the minimum ranges in their official claims, and a few of the longer ones as well – although you'll have to catch it just right to hit those higher numbers. They do pretty well through trees and even dense jungle; not so much through hills and rock walls.

We had less luck in suburbia where we struggled to get clear signal even at only a half-mile across the neighborhood. To be fair, the "terrain" is packed with houses, large metal objects, and lots of wood, and we intentionally tested from inside our homes. Reception was notably improved by going upstairs in both houses – elevation really matters.

The channel also matters. Seven of the 5W radio's 22 channels are low power and transmit at just 0.5W; the rest are high power channels which use the full 5W potential. Channel power is clearly indicated on the display, and there's a predictable trade-off: high-power channels increase range but reduce battery life. We stuck with the high channels.

We ran with the default compact 7.5cm antenna, but a flexible 17cm antenna is also provided with each unit, and longer whip antennas are available. Longer antennas improve range, but we didn't find it necessary.



Features

They didn't sacrifice the feature set when they made these radios powerful and rugged. The radios can scan all channels as well as the eleven NOAA Weather Channels. It's possible to "watch" dual channels, enabling you to monitor and transmit via two different channels easily with a simple toggle. It's also possible to connect via sub-channels (121 per primary channel) for privacy. The button layout is intuitive, and it takes only a few minutes to learn how to activate the various features.

GMRS

This is an important point: the Rocky Talkie 5W radio uses GMRS, the General Mobile Radio Service. Their 2W model, the Mountain Radio, uses FRS, the Family Radio Service. GMRS requires a basic operator's license from the FCC; FRS doesn't. Fortunately, the license is relatively inexpensive – US\$35 for ten years, and family members can be added – and easy to get online. There's a detailed guide on the Rocky Talkie website that walks you through getting an FRN (FCC Registered Number) and applying for the GMRS license. It might've taken me 15 minutes, start to finish.

That said, be careful with the jurisdictions. Getting your FCC license covers GMRS usage anywhere in the US, but regulations and radio standards vary significantly by country. If you'll be traveling abroad with your radios, check the legality (wattage and frequency) in advance.

Last but not least, there's interoperability between GMRS and FRS. If others in your group are on 2W FRS radios from Rocky Talkies or other brands, you'll still be able to communicate – just determine your channel and privacy channel in advance, and test it before heading out.

MSRP US\$180 each; US\$360 per pair, plus accessories
www.rockytalkie.com

