



# Top Electronic Gadgets and Gear of the Year

**A**s singlehanders and anyone who has sailed fogbound, high-traffic coastal waters can attest, having a reliable radio at the helm often becomes essential. A good remote mic allows you the safety net of helm-based communications, but allows you to keep the VHF radio safe and dry belowdecks, where it belongs.

In the November 2007 issue, we evaluated six remote mics from Icom, Raymarine, Standard Horizon, and Uniden—each designed to work with one or more compatible, fixed-mount VHF radios.

Icom's CommandMic III proved to be the champ with its easy, intuitive operation, and jog dial selector for various functions and menu items. Overall, testers found that the CommandMic III body fit well in hand and appeared to be well constructed. Its easy, intuitive operation lands it on our Gear of the Year list.

Icom's CommandMic III—designated the HM-162—is designed to provide the full functionality of the M504 and M604, Icom's newest fixed-mount VHF radios. The microphone hooks up to the radio via an OPC-1540 connection cable.

Testers found that CommandMic III's front panel dial made adjusting things like volume, squelch, and channels very easy. It's also used to change a variety of menu settings. Several other pushbuttons are located on the front panel to control channel selection, quick 16, scan, and menu functions. Push-to-talk and High/Low power buttons are mounted on the side. Functionality of the CommandMic III was outstanding, with everything from power up to automatic foghorn control to full DSC calling available via the microphone controls.

*Icom CommandMic III*



*Garmin GPSMap 545s*

Channel numbers appear big and easy to read. When the unit is hooked to a GPS, both vessel position and current time are displayed.

The downside here is that this mic will work only with the newest Icom radios. However, it has come down in price since we tested it. We found it for

\$99 at [www.boatersworld.com](http://www.boatersworld.com) (\$40 cheaper than a year ago). The mic carries a three-year warranty.

## CHARTPLOTTER-SOUNDER

*Practical Sailor* has reviewed numerous multi-function electronics fit for duty aboard a sailboat. They've run the gamut in size, price, features, and function. In the October 2008 issue, we took a look at small chartplotter-sounders. The Garmin GPSMap 545s, with its 5-inch screen and \$999 price tag, beat four other devices for the top spot in that test.

The Garmin 545s was one of only two tested with an integrated chartplotter and depth sounder. (The others used separate black-box sounders.) It also is rated to withstand temporary submersion, and like the other test products, it offers auto and manual gain control, takes water-temperature readings, and draws less than an amp.

Priced a little higher than others this size (\$1,286 with transducer, [www.defender.com](http://www.defender.com)), the 545s comes with some innovative features. Testers rated the portrait-oriented screen (480 by 640-pixel resolution) as Excellent, and noted its sharp details and top-notch viewability. Testers also gave high marks to the display's automatic backlight control system, which works via a sensor on the front of the display.

The sounder, capable of putting out 1,000 watts of power, has all the capabilities of a fishfinder, including A-scope and bottom lock. It clearly marked our three test targets, was easy to operate,





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and worked well in all auto modes.

The 545s ships with an internal sounder, pre-loaded cartography, an internal GPS receiver, and internal antenna. Our test unit had Garmin's BlueChart g2 U.S. Coastal cartography covering both mainland coasts from Canada to Mexico and the Bahamas, Puerto Rico, Hawaii, and Guam. It can also run Garmin BlueChart g2 Vision cards, which offer 3D views above and below the water as well as extensive satellite and aerial photo coverage.

Testers noted one negative: the multi-step man-overboard function, which the company aims to improve.

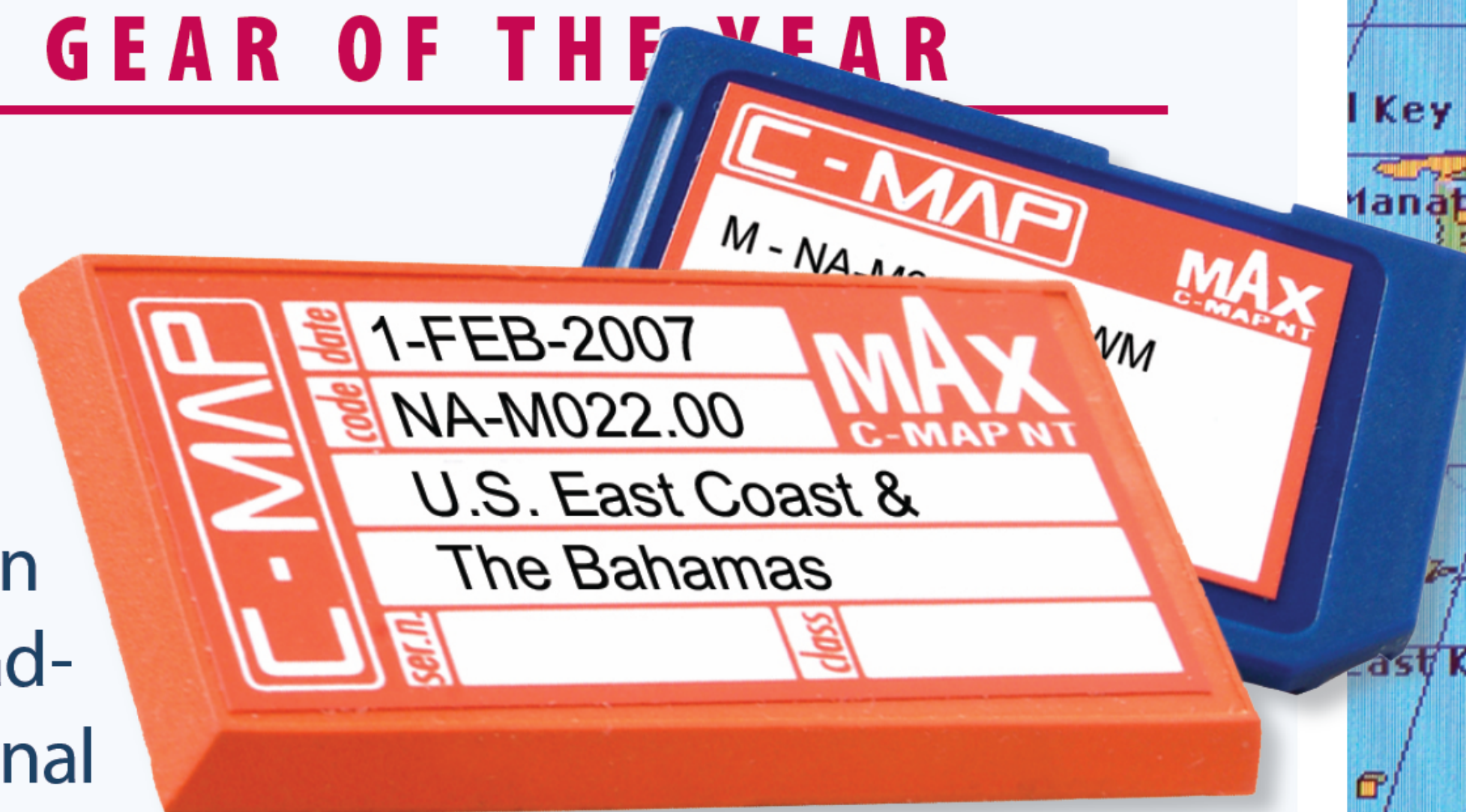
The feature-laden Garmin 545's small size, average price, and razor-sharp screen details earn it a place on the Gear of the Year list.

### DIGITAL CHART UPDATE SERVICES

Digital charts have become the norm for today's sailors, and making sure you have the most up-to-date charts is a must for safe navigation and trip planning. Because the updating process can be laborious and expensive with some navigation software, *Practical Sailor* set out in the April 2008 issue to find a quality charting program that offers the most affordable and user-friendly digital chart updating procedures.

We evaluated the update process and costs of the big players in the "hard-card" cartography arena: Garmin, Jeppesen Marine, and Navionics. Jeppesen Marine, which provides annual updates at more-than-affordable prices, took Best Choice honors.

Jeppesen offers a few options for C-Map (NT+, MAX, and MAX Pro) chart updates. For \$89 a year, owners of NT+ and MAX series charts can join Club Jeppesen. Members receive annually an update of a selected chart card shipped directly to them. (They must ship back their old card at their expense within 30 days of purchasing the new card.) Other Club Jeppesen benefits include discounts on certain products, a card-trading program, and the ability to rent cards on a short-term basis for



*Jeppesen Marine offers user-friendly, affordable updates for its C-Map and MAX Pro hard-card cartography.*

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a one-time cruise. Non-members can get updates at certain authorized marine electronics dealers for \$109 to \$129.

A license for MAX Pro charts, usable with Northstar 8000i and Simrad GB40 plotter systems, is issued with the purchase of a new MAX Pro card and is valid for one year. With this license, the customer is entitled to free downloads of chart updates. These are actual chart corrections that would appear on the display.

Real-time updating of a MAX Pro card is accomplished by using a USB thumb drive, an Internet-connected PC, and a chartplotter. Updates can be repeated as often as the customer desires during the one-year license period. (MAX Pro updates and corrections are entered into the server database daily.)

Jeppesen's updating services made the Gear of the Year list because of their automatic and real-time systems. The ability to update the MAX Pro card on a real-time basis via the Internet is the most advanced system going.

### CONTACTS

**GARMIN**, 800/800-1020, [garmin.com](http://garmin.com)

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**JEPPESEN**, 800/621-5377, [jeppesen.com](http://jeppesen.com)