

## Review: iPod Remote Rundown, Redux

### Wireless iPod remote controls compared

By Dan Frakes

*This is a revised version of an article originally published on April 12, 2005. Although we tested a number of different iPod models (3G, 4G, photo, and mini) for remote compatibility, we used a 60GB, 1st-generation iPod photo for range testing in the original article. This decision was based on what appeared to be similar performance between models during functionality testing, and the fact that we were also testing remotes for iPod photo compatibility. However, after the article was published, Griffin Technology brought to our attention an undocumented RF interference issue that is apparently exhibited by only 1st-generation iPod photo models; this issue affects the performance of RF-based remotes when used with these models. During subsequent range testing of the three RF-based remote systems using other iPod models, we were able to confirm this issue, both indoors and out. As a result, we have updated the original article with new range results for the RF remotes and appropriate edits regarding performance. We have also revised our product ratings and overall recommendations.*

Although the iPod is usually thought of as a device that you carry in-hand or within easy reach, there are plenty of times when it's not so conveniently located. Apple sells a wired remote that lets you control your iPod when it's in a pocket or bag, but what if you listen to your iPod when it's connected to your stereo at home—or sitting in your car's glove compartment, or attached to a set of portable speakers in a hotel room—and you want to be able to control the music when your iPod's out of reach? You need a wireless remote control, and nowadays you've got plenty of choices. Too many, perhaps—they all seem to do the same thing, so how do you choose one? We're here to help. We gathered every iPod remote we could find and put them through their paces: features, accessories, and range.

The products we tested include ABT's iJet (also known as the Targus RemoteTunes), DLO's iDirect, Engineered Audio's Remote Remote 2, Griffin Technology's AirClick, and Ten Technology's naviPod and naviPro eX. To test these products, we used various iPod models connected to a stereo system via the iPod's headphone jack; this connection, as opposed to the fixed (line-level) audio output of the iPod's dock base, allowed us to test the volume up/down feature of the remotes. Ranges provided are for the maximum distance at which we were able to get consistently reliable reception—in our testing, the remotes still functioned, though intermittently, at longer distances.

Read on for our remote results.

### Compatibility

All of the remote control systems we tested include a battery-powered transmitter (the actual remote control) and a receiver that plugs into the headphone/remote jack on dockable iPods—making them compatible with 3G and 4G iPods, iPod photos, and iPod minis. (Ten Technology also offers a model for older iPods, noted below.) The receivers get their juice from the iPod's headphone jack; the battery used by the transmitters is a user-replaceable CR-2032 cell, available for a few dollars at your local Radio Shack.

*As noted in the note at the beginning of this article, first-generation (40GB and 60GB) iPod photo models apparently suffer from an undocumented issue that adversely affects the performance of RF-based remotes when used with these iPods. This issue was so recently discovered that manufacturers of these remotes do not—at the time of this writing—note this limitation; all claim iPod photo compatibility. If you have one of these early iPod photo models, keep your eyes peeled for information from Apple regarding possible fixes. If you own a 1G iPod photo and require a remote control right now, we recommend an IR-based model instead. (See below for more information on RF and IR remotes.)*

Although the remotes themselves differ in a number of ways, the receivers vary only slightly in their size and shape. (Note that because the iPod mini's headphone/remote jack is off-center, receivers not specifically designed for the iPod mini will likewise be off-center when attached. This is a purely cosmetic issue and doesn't affect the functionality of these remotes.)

iPod photo owners will likely be curious about slideshow compatibility. We tested the remotes on an original 60GB iPod photo and, in revised testing, a 2G 30GB iPod photo with the latest iPod software update. We were pleasantly surprised to find that all of the remotes are able to control iPod photo slideshows—play, pause, skip forward one slide, and skip backward one slide—even when displaying the slideshow on a TV or projector. However, keep in mind that the receivers plug into the iPod's headphone jack; on the



iPod photo, this jack doubles as a video output when using Apple's iPod photo AV cable, but none of the receivers can pass the video part of the signal through to the receiver's headphone jack. This means that to use a remote while displaying your photos on a TV, you need to output the video using Apple's now-optional iPod photo dock base, which provides a separate S-Video port.

Finally, note that some remote features—such as iPod photo compatibility—require the latest iPod software, so before using any iPod remote, make sure you've [downloaded](#) and installed the latest version for your iPod.

## Remote Technology: IR vs. RF

One of the most important features of an iPod remote—yet one that most consumers are unlikely to be aware of—is the technology it uses for transmitting and receiving commands. The remotes we tested use one of two technologies: infrared (IR) or radio frequency (RF). Both technologies have their pros and cons. RF can be used at any angle and can pass through walls, but it's susceptible to RF interference from household appliances, phones, airport networks, etc. IR is immune to radio interference, and can be “learned” by most universal remote controls—useful if you want to use a single remote for your home entertainment system, or if your universal remote handles “macros” that can perform a number of functions in sequence—but requires an unobstructed path (line-of-sight, generally 90 degrees off-center or less) between the remote and the face of the receiver. IR can also be adversely affected by [light interference](#) from some fluorescent light ballasts and even bright sunlight. Both technologies are capable of producing exceptionally long range, but for home electronics use, range is generally limited by cost concerns and/or federal regulations (not to mention the size of your listening room).

Which of these technologies is better for you depends on where you'll be using your remote. If you'd like to be able to control your iPod from the next room, or if your iPod will be out of sight (for example, in your glove compartment or in a bag or backpack), RF is the better choice. RF is also a better option for outdoor use, since it's not susceptible to light interference. (We tested all of the remotes outside, and while the range of IR models generally decreased outdoors, RF remote range was approximately the same as unobstructed indoor range—which for many people will mean longer effective ranges, since indoor unobstructed range is usually limited by room size.) On the other hand, if you want to integrate your iPod into your home stereo or theater system, IR will allow you to program a universal “learning” remote so that it can control your iPod, as well.

(Note: Although for most consumers the choice between IR and RF will involve a decision based on the above factors, before purchasing an RF-based remote, take note of the environment in which you'll be using it. In a typical home setting, both IR and RF systems worked very well. However, in an RF-heavy testing room—an office packed with several 802.11b/g and Bluetooth devices, a number of computers, and lots of other electronic equipment—the RF-based products we tested performed a bit less reliably than they did in our more typical testing environment. We realize that this isn't likely to be an issue for most readers, but considering that those in the market for an iPod remote control are likely owners of a number of other tech gadgets, it's worth noting.)

## Testing Technicalities

Finally, before we get to the descriptions of the remotes themselves, a couple notes about our testing experiences. The manual for ABT's iJet states that the iJet uses any cable connected to the unit's headphone jack—whether it be a headphone cable or a cable connecting your iPod to your home stereo—as an antenna to increase the range of the remote. This was the only RF product that explicitly noted this use of the headphone jack, but it led us to re-test all of the RF-based remote systems both with an audio cable connected to the jack and with the jack empty; in the latter case, we connected the iPod to speakers via the dock base's audio output jack. (Infrared units require a direct transmission of infrared light from the remote to the receiver, so there is no antenna affect.) We did find a slight difference in range with all three RF-based remotes when we didn't plug a cable into the remote's headphone jack. We also found that the *type* of cable mattered—a thick miniplug-to-RCA (left/right) cable improved reception more than a thin miniplug-to-miniplug cable. Because of this, if you purchase an RF-based remote, we recommend plugging an audio cable into the headphone jack, even if you're connecting your iPod to your stereo via the line-level output on the dock base or via an accessory like SendStation's [PocketDock Line Out](#).

## The Contenders

[ABT iJet/Targus RemoteTunes](#) (🔴🔴🔴🔴; \$60). The ABT iJet, also sold as the Targus RemoteTunes, is the most expensive remote system we tested, but also includes a generous accessory package and provides the longest range. Included in the box is the remote, the transmitter, a mounting bracket that can be used to clip the remote to your belt or bag or to mount it on any flat surface, and a miniplug-to-RCA (left/right) cable for connecting your iPod to your home stereo. The remote itself, while standard in its buttons (play/pause, forward/back, volume up/down), is our favorite of the bunch in terms of usability: First and foremost, the buttons are large enough and spaced well enough apart that they're easy to press, yet recessed enough that they aren't accidentally bumped when the remote is in your pocket or bag. The buttons also provide a nice, tactile “click” when pressed that, along with a red indicator light on the remote, let you know if you've actually pressed a button. (Don't laugh; we couldn't always be sure with some remotes.) Yet despite the large buttons, the iJet remote is still among the smallest of the lot, and can be attached to a keychain or

lanyard to keep it secure. Finally, the iJet/RemoteTunes remote is the only one we tested that's water-resistant.



*ABT's iJet (a.k.a., Targus's RemoteTunes)*

In terms of range, ABT claims the RF-based iJet will work up to 150 feet. Although our results weren't quite so dramatic, the iJet provided the best range of the remotes we tested, working consistently from well over 40 unobstructed feet indoors —reaching the limits of our testing room. We were also able to use the iJet from nearly 20 feet away through two interior walls. ABT notes that every wall reduces range by 20-30 feet, implying a maximum unobstructed indoor range of over 50 feet—plenty for most rooms, and in line with our outdoor results of approximately 50 feet.

**Digital Lifestyle Outfitters iDirect** (🔴🔴🔴; \$50). DLO's IR-based iDirect provides the standard iPod remote functions—play/pause, volume up/down, forward/back—via large, easy to press buttons that, like the iJet, provide good feedback via tactile “clicks.” The package also includes a handy plastic cap that fits over the headphone/remote plugs to protect them when the receiver is not attached to your iPod.



Like all of the IR-based remotes we tested, the iDirect provides very good range and reliability indoors—approximately 30 unobstructed feet—but does not function through walls or around corners.

**Engineered Audio Remote Remote 2** (🔴🔴🔴; \$40). The RF-based Remote Remote 2 is available in three styles—a white version for full-size iPods, a white version for iPod minis, and a black version for the U2 Special Edition iPod—that differ only in color and the size of the receiver; all use the same remote design. Unfortunately, we found that design to be the most difficult to use of the models we tested. The remote is the smallest of the bunch, at just over 1” wide and about 2” long, and like the iJet can be attached to a keychain or lanyard. But the buttons are smaller than they need to be and crowded together, making it too easy to press more than one button at a time. Similarly, since the keys provide no tactile feedback, on more than one occasion we accidentally put the iPod to sleep trying to press the Play/Pause button. (Just as holding down the Play/Pause button on the iPod will put the iPod to sleep, holding down the same button on any of the remotes here puts the player to sleep.)



#### Engineered Audio's Remote Remote 2

On the other hand, we did like the fact that the Remote Remote 2's remote control provides a hold feature; however, enabling this feature requires that you hold down the Volume Up and Volume Down keys for 6 seconds—we much preferred the hold switch on Griffin's AirClick. And although all of the RF-based systems require an initial “syncing” to ensure the remote and the receiver are using the same frequency, the Remote Remote 2 requires that you perform this procedure manually by holding down the Play/Pause button for 10 seconds.

The Remote Remote 2 provided good range, successfully controlling the iPod from over 30 unobstructed feet away. It also worked well through a single interior wall from up to 15 feet away.

**Griffin Technology AirClick** (🔴🔴🔴🔴; \$40). The RF-based AirClick is available in three models: one for standard iPods, one for iPod minis, and a third (not tested here) that can be used to control media applications on a computer via the computer's USB port. By default, one remote can control multiple receivers, which is a nice feature if you've got iPods in two different locations, or both an iPod and a computer AirClick, and only want to keep track of a single remote; you can also pair remotes and receivers so they work only with a specific counterpart. The AirClick receiver is also the only receiver featuring a reception indicator—you know the receiver is picking up the remote's signal when you see the red light blink. (It's too bad none of the systems we tested provided both a reception light *and* feedback on the remote.)



#### Griffin Technology's AirClick

The AirClick remote has a permanent belt clip on the back, so you don't need to attach a bulky clip assembly like you do with the iJet. The clip can also be used to attach the remote to an included cradle; using one of two included Velcro straps, you can wear the cradle on your arm or attach it to a bike frame or steering wheel. We enjoyed being able to control an iPod in our glove compartment from the steering wheel, or an iPod in our backpack from our wrist. The AirClick remote is also the only one to feature a hardware hold

switch—no worrying about accidentally pressing a button (a valid concern with the AirClick, as the buttons are large and easy to press). On the other hand, although the Remote Remote 2's buttons are the most difficult to press, we found the AirClick's button layout unintuitive. As you can see in the picture above, the buttons are arranged in a zig-zag pattern, with no tactile indication of whether the two "pairs" (forward/back, volume up/down) are the top four buttons or the bottom four. In order to use the AirClick remote without looking at it, you have to stop and remember how the buttons are arranged. Other remotes all feature the play button in the middle with the two "pairs" arranged logically around it.

Like the Remote Remote 2, the AirClick provided good reception from over 30 unobstructed feet away and worked successfully through a single interior wall from about 15 feet away.

**Ten Technology naviPod** (★★★★; \$40). The original naviPod for 1st-generation iPods—released a couple years ago—was the first remote control for the iPod. Ten Technology still produces that model, and if you've got an older iPod (1G or 2G), it's your only option for a remote. The current model works with all dockable iPods. Whichever model you choose, you get an IR-based system that features a nifty circular remote with Play/Pause, Forward, Back, Volume Down, and Volume Up buttons. Both models also feature a handy metal stand that attaches to the back of the receiver and keeps your iPod standing upright—a nice touch for iPods that didn't come with Apple's dock base.



#### *Ten Technology's naviPod*

The naviPod provides the same approximate range, 30 feet, as all the IR systems we tested. However, unless you've got an older (1G or 2G) iPod, we recommend you check out Ten's newer naviPro eX (below) instead—for \$10 more, you get a much better product.

**Ten Technology naviPro eX** (★★★★★; \$50). We've already [reviewed](#) the naviPro eX, but here's a quick recap: As a standard IR remote, it has approximately 30-foot range. It also includes the same metal stand and receiver that come with its little brother, the naviPod. However, what sets the naviPro eX apart from other remotes is its functionality: In addition to the usual play/pause, forward/back, and volume up/down features, its larger (5"x2") remote also lets you switch between playlists (up/down, one playlist at a time); switch between albums (forward/back, one album at a time); skip chapters in audio books (forward/back, one chapter at a time); and toggle shuffle and repeat modes. And the naviPro eX's remote is easily the most comfortable to hold because of its larger side. (For more details, see our full review at the URL above.) The naviPro eX is also available in black.



*Ten Technology's naviPro eX*

## **The Lowdown**

Which remote is right for you? If you're in the market for an RF remote—see the section above covering the differences between RF and IR remotes—we like Griffin's AirClick and ABT's iJet. The AirClick has a few unique features—the ability to work with multiple receivers or pair specifically with one, a hold switch, a reception indicator, and a cradle accessory for attaching the remote to a steering wheel or bike frame—that really stand out, and at \$40, it's one of the least expensive remotes on the market. We're not fans of its odd button layout, but that's not a deal-breaker—owners of the device will soon learn its layout. ABT's iJet provides the best range of all the remotes we tested, includes a nice accessory package, and features a water-resistant transmitter with much better button layout and “feel.” Its only real drawback is its high price, which is 50% more than the AirClick.

In the IR category, all three remotes offered similar range and reliability, and the universal remote in our home entertainment system had no trouble “learning” their commands. However, Ten Technology's naviPlay eX is the clear winner in terms of functionality. For the same price as the competition it offers additional control features unavailable from any other product, IR or RF—in terms of iPod-controlling functionality, other remotes are playing catch-up.

Choosing between the AirClick, iJet, and naviPro eX is tough, due to their different strengths. If we had to buy a remote for use in a home entertainment system, we'd give the edge to the naviPro eX for its additional functionality. (We also recommend the IR-based naviPro eX for owners of first-generation iPod photos, for reasons discussed at the beginning of this article.) However, if you need the ability to control your iPod through a wall, backpack, or other barrier, or if you plan to use the remote outdoors, the AirClick or iJet is the way to go.

	ABT iJet/ Targus Remote- Tunes	DLO iDirect	Engineered Audio Remote Remote 2	Griffin AirClick	TEN Technology naviPod	TEN Technology naviPlay eX
<b>IR or RF</b>	RF	IR	RF	RF	IR	IR
<b>Play/Pause/Sleep</b>	•	•	•	•	•	•
<b>Skip Fwd/Back</b>	•	•	•	•	•	•
<b>Scan Fwd/Back</b>	•	•	•	•	•	•
<b>Playlist Fwd/Back</b>						•
<b>Album Fwd/Back</b>						•
<b>Chapter Fwd/Back</b>						•
<b>Volume Up/Down</b>	•	•	•	•	•	•
<b>Shuffle Mode</b>						•
<b>Repeat Mode</b>	•					•
<b>Hold feature</b>			•	•		
<b>Headphone jack</b>	•	•	•	•	•	•
<b>Recept. Indicator</b>				•		
<b>iPod photo control</b>	•*	•	•*	•*	•	•
<b>Range (indoors)</b>	>40 ft (>15 ft through two walls)	~30 ft	>30 ft (>15 ft through one wall)	>30 ft (>15 ft through one wall)	~30 ft	~30 ft
<b>Price</b>	\$60	\$50	\$40	\$40	\$50	\$50
<b>Playlist Rating</b>	4	3	3	4	3	4

\* See note at beginning of article about first-generation iPod photo compatibility

LEAVE A COMMENT EMAIL THIS STORY TO A FRIEND



**Free Apple iPod Offer** We'll Ship You A 40GB iPod Free. Simply Fill Out Our Survey!

**Padgett Communications** Audience Response Specialists providing wireless voting keypads.

**The Laser Mouse** Official Site of the Laser Mouse. Perfect for PowerPoint!

**Remote Presentation** Present Online With Screen Sharing Take a Free 15-Day Trial Now.

[Advertising](#) | [Press Releases](#) | [IDG Network](#)

Copyright 2004 Mac Publishing LLC. All rights reserved