

Review: iPod remote rundown

Wireless iPod remote controls compared

By Dan Frakes

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, range, and price.

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.

(Although most people will likely use a remote control for the iPod indoors, or perhaps in a car, we also tested all of the remotes both indoors and out. Unfortunately, the performance of every model was significantly worse when used outdoors; so much so that we hesitate to recommend any of them for this use. The ranges we note below are all based on indoor testing.)

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.

Although the remotes differ in a number of ways, the receivers differ 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 with the latest iPod software update. We were pleasantly surprised to find that all but Ten Technology's original naviPod 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 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, wireless networks, etc.—a significant issue in our testing. 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. 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 you’ll be using the remote in your car (where your iPod may be in a storage compartment), RF is probably a better choice. On the other hand, if you want to integrate your iPod into your home stereo or theater system, IR will allow you to program your system’s universal 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—none of the RF-based products we tested offered reliable performance. We realize that this isn’t a typical environment, but considering that those in the market for an iPod remote control are likely owners of a number of other tech gadgets, it’s an important caveat.

Testing Technicalities

Finally, before we get to the descriptions of the remotes themselves, a couple of 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](#).

With respect to RF-based remotes in general, be aware that there will be an initial delay before they function properly. Unlike IR models, which work immediately after connecting the receiver to your iPod, some RF systems require a “pairing” period when first used that allow the remote and receiver to find a common frequency. In our testing, this period ranged from 20 to 40 seconds, depending on the system. We mention this only because if you don’t read the manual, you may assume that the system isn’t working.

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 the most complete accessories package. 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 controller, 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.) 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 away. Although our results weren't quite so dramatic, the iJet provided the best range of the remotes we tested, working consistently from well over 30 unobstructed feet away—reaching the limits of our testing room. (We tried to achieve longer ranges outdoors, but as we noted above, had trouble outdoors with all the remotes.) In addition, we were able to use the iJet from approximately 20 feet away through two interior walls. ABT notes that every wall reduces range by 20-30 feet; if this is true, it would indicate a maximum unobstructed indoor range of over 50 feet—plenty for most rooms.

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.



DLO's iDirect

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 the remote to be the most difficult to use of the models we tested. The remote itself is the smallest of the bunch, at just over 1” wide and about 2” long, and, like the iDirect, can be attached to a keychain or lanyard. But the buttons themselves 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 provided 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 approximately 25 unobstructed feet away. It also worked well through a single interior wall from up to 10 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; however, 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 push). On the other hand, although the Remote Remote 2's buttons are the most difficult to press, the AirClick's feature the poorest

layout. 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. The other remotes all feature the play button in the middle with the two “pairs” arranged logically around it.

When testing the AirClick, our first sample had significant reception problems; however, the second unit we tested worked fine. Although the AirClick had the shortest range of any of the remotes we tested—16 unobstructed feet—it worked successfully through a single interior wall from about 6 feet away.

Ten Technology naviPod (🔴🔴🔴; \$50). The original naviPod for 1st-generation iPods—released a couple of 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 control. 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), we recommend you check out Ten’s newer naviPro eX (below) instead—for the same price 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 and use. (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—and, again, before choosing an RF remote, we encourage you to read our notes above about RF interference—we recommend ABT's iJet, with Griffin's AirClick a close second. The AirClick's unique features—the ability to work with multiple receivers or pair specifically, the cradle accessory, the hold switch, and the reception indicator—really stand out, and at \$40, it's one of the least expensive remotes. However, its short range and odd button layout keep us from fully endorsing it. ABT's iJet, on the other hand, is easy to use, has the best range (in a typical environment) of any tested remote, includes a nice accessory package, and features a water-resistant transmitter. 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 our universal remote control 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 iJet and the naviPro eX is tough, due to their different strengths. If we had to buy only a single remote, we'd give the edge to the naviPro eX for its additional functionality and immunity to RF interference. However, if you need the ability to control your iPod through a wall, backpack, or other barrier, the iJet is the way to go.

	ABT iJet/ Targus RemoteTunes	DLO iDirect	Engineered Audio Remote Remote 2	Griffin AirClick	TEN Technology naviPod	TEN Technology naviPlay eX
IR or RF	RF	IR	RF	RF	IR	IR
Play/Pause/Sleep	•	•	•	•	•	•
Skip Fwd/Back	•	•	•	•	•	•
Scan Fwd/Back	•	•	•	•	•	•
Playlist Fwd/Back						•
Album Fwd/Back						•
Chapter Fwd/Back						•
Volume Up/Down	•	•	•	•	•	•
Shuffle Mode						•
Repeat Mode	•					•
Hold feature			•	•		
Headphone jack	•	•	•	•	•	•
Recept. Indicator				•		
iPod photo control	•	•	•	•		•
Range (indoors)	> 30 ft (successful through two walls)	30 ft	25 ft (successful through one wall)	16 ft (successful through one wall)	30 ft	30 ft
Price	\$60	\$50	\$40	\$40	\$50	\$50
Playlist Rating	4	3	3	3	3	4

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