

Review of Uniden UBC-3500XLT by Kevin Paterson

With all the chatter on the news groups about Close Call scanners, I could not wait until I got my hands on my own Bearcat 3500xlt. As soon as I opened the box, I noticed the radio had a good, sturdy feel to it and it was clear that these units are well assembled. The rubber grip strips found on the side of the unit ensure that a good secure grip can be maintained with ease. The specifications listed by Uniden are, to say the least, impressive. Boasting a huge frequency range and including functions that even the most serious of radio enthusiasts would appreciate, it will not be long before this hand-held is a common sight in shacks around the country.

Out of the Box

The silver and black exterior of the 3500 is instantly striking and the complete kit includes: a wrist strap, an AC adapter, rechargeable batteries, an owner's manual, an SMA/BNC adapter and a belt clip. In the past, I have been somewhat disappointed with the quality of the belt clips that come with many radios but the 3500 belt clip is in a league of its own. Once clicked into place, the radio can swivel through 360 degrees when secured to a belt or backpack. It has a similar look and feel to the clips used on the new police tetra radio sets! Although I have only used the radio in the field once since its arrival, I can report that the belt clip is an extremely convenient addition allowing for a secure fit and also easy access via its swivel joint.

The standard antenna is a screw-on SMA rubber duck and Uniden have thoughtfully included an adapter for those wanting to replace it with an external antenna with a BNC connector. While using the scanner locally, I have found the supplied antenna to be very sensitive and have had no trouble picking up signals in the vicinity.

Turn on ... tune in

Once the batteries were installed, I couldn't wait to fire it up and start scanning the bands. Initially, it is a good idea to have the manual handy as the 3500 comes with some unusual features that are not found on many scanners. One in particular, the system called dynamic memory allocation, took me a little while to get used to. It was worth the effort, though, because it has the huge benefit of ensuring no memory space is wasted.

Most scanners use memory banks with a set number of channels assigned to each bank. For example, one of my base scanners has 50 channels per bank and each bank is currently assigned to various areas of radio such as airband, local affairs, retail, etc. The problem with this arrangement, however, is that the retail bank only has 7 frequencies in it, which leaves 43 channels in that bank going to waste.

The 3500 uses dynamic memory allocation to solve this problem by not having a set number of channels assigned to each bank. In fact, the 3500 does not actually have banks at all, it has groups. Instead of assigning existing banks to a certain area of interest, the 3500 allows users to create new groups for those areas. Each group is individually configured so that it only uses enough channels for the stored frequencies. This allows, for example, your airband group to have 46 channels, your retail group to have 7 channels and your fire and rescue group to have 14 channels. No space is wasted and each group can be added to as required.

The 3500 also comes with three predefined band plans with default step sizes. This allows for easier operation if travelling around other countries in Europe. The radio includes 6.25kHz and 8.33kHz step sizes. The 6.25kHz step is something that is being introduced to the PMR world and more and more radios are being made available as these frequencies become more popular. For the airband listeners amongst us, the addition of the 8.33kHz step is essential as this step is slowly being phased into the civil airband area of operations.

As with the latest series of Uniden radios, all frequencies can be assigned an Alpha tag, making it easier to identify the station being listened to. This can be done by the entering the details manually through the keypad or by using computer control. The 3500 is fully capable of being controlled by a home computer. Unlike the US version, the data cable and software required are not provided and have to be purchased separately. As I have just recently got my hands on the 3500, I have yet to buy these, although I have spoken to many people who use their computer to control and upload frequencies onto their radio and I have been told it is definitely the way forward. The computer software makes creating groups, inputting frequencies and assigning alpha tags an absolute breeze, so it's on my list of things to buy this month.

A couple of the other key features that I feel I should mention are the scan speeds and the tone alert. The scanning speed of the 3500 is off the scale as it just rattles through the stored frequencies. With some older radio models, I was always frustrated by the scan speed, it was not with the 3500 - it's incredibly fast. The alert feature is something that I've been told has been carried over from the Uniden 396 (the US equivalent of the 3500). The unit has nine different alert tones that can be assigned to individual channels or frequencies, so you can be alerted when something you are particularly interested in is picked up. A fantastic feature that I am sure will be of great use in the coming months of exercises and airshows.

Close Call

The main reason I took the plunge and purchased yet another radio was the new Close Call function. Many radio enthusiasts enjoy spending hours scanning through frequency ranges looking for new and interesting frequencies. I personally, do not

have the time or the patience for this and can not recall the last time I actually scanned through frequency ranges looking for a new station. When I first read about and then experienced Close Call, it was the answer to my scanning dreams and I knew it would not be long before I spent some money. My first experience with Close Call was when a friend showed me her new Uniden 396 imported from the USA at the International Air Tattoo back in 2006. I was amazed, within seconds of activating the Close Call facility, it was picking up ground operations, air to air frequencies and air traffic control. For me, Close Call is the best radio function ever to be devised by Uniden. I am anxiously waiting for the next military exercise to really put it through its paces but operating the Close Call feature from my shack proved to be very successful too. With just the standard antenna, Close Call instantly picked up my local retail ShopWatch from the town centre 1.5 miles away. Outstanding!

Close Call resembles a frequency counter in a sense because it looks for active frequencies within range of the unit. The difference is that frequency counters have a very limited range and only display the frequencies they find. The super sensitive 3500 not only finds frequencies, it also automatically tunes to the active frequency, allowing you to listen in straight away. For example, when you're walking down your high street using Close Call, the 3500 might tune straight into ShopWatch radio systems, store detectives or an ambulance passing by on its way to an emergency call out. You no longer need to have huge memory banks full of frequencies or to search frantically through the bands trying to find a specific transmission.

The Close Call options are excellent and allow particular bands to be identified or blocked out. If you are sitting at your local airport, you can specifically target the VHF airband to avoid radio transmissions from the local town centre, or if watching a military exercise, you can target the UHF military band and avoid anything else in the area. The potential for finding new frequencies and to really monitor a developing situation has never been more accessible to the radio hobbyist .

Conclusions Despite my limited time so far with the 3500, I have totally fallen in love with it. It is clear that Uniden have thought through this radio and given the radio user as much as possible - ranging from the unique belt clip, the high quality rechargeable batteries and, of course, Close Call. With so many features in one radio and with a price tag of just under £150, you truly cannot go wrong. My advice, buy one!

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