

## Best Overall Bluetooth Headsets

Due to an increase in the demand to multitask, a myriad of Bluetooth headset models exist today. Before the acceptance of Bluetooth technology as an industry standard, wired headsets dominated the market. Now, it is possible to find fully functional wireless models for the same prices that their wired counterparts use to sell at. Good review sites such as CNet.com, PC Magazine, and Consumer Reports can be extremely helpful at sifting through the array of choices. These sources stay current and provide thorough analyses of the products that they are evaluating.

CNet.com currently has the most expansive collection of reviews for Bluetooth headsets. New models are added as they are released, even though a discontinued model may occasionally pop up in their roundups. Consumer Reports' latest article looking at Bluetooth headsets is due out in their January 2008 issue (it may be found online at ConsumerReports.com), although the tests are mostly conducted before the publish date. Reviews from both sources are unbiased and offer extensive product testing.

By nature, Bluetooth headsets seem to have a polarizing effect on some reviewers. For example, the Aliph Jawbone (\*est. \$85), which we found an overwhelming amount of praise for, is still ranked at the bottom of a few roundups. To help narrow the choices, CNet.com's Nicole Lee says that it is wise to look for a model that has great sound quality, comfortable fit, and appealing design. Since certain elements of design and comfort can be subjective, Lee states that "it can be a challenge to find one that works for you."

However, we were still able to find a couple of favorable reviews even for one of the models that Lee does not recommend, the Jabra BT500 (\*est. \$30). The "design and stiff volume buttons" are cited as problems with the headset, although it performs adequately in the comfort department. In contrast to this, Which.net – an unbiased independent UK review source – touts the BT500 as a "Best Buy." Dissenting reviews can make it extremely difficult to decide which headset model to purchase, but a positive consensus for a particular model is good indicator that it will excel.

Certain brands have good track records when it comes to Bluetooth headsets – namely Jabra and Plantronics. Almost all the highly recommended models that we found were produced by these two brands, except for a model each from Aliph and Motorola.

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Model	Price	Summary
<b>Aliph Jawbone</b>	*est. \$85	<b>Best overall Bluetooth headset.</b> Although expert opinions on Bluetooth headsets are largely mixed, the Aliph Jawbone receives the highest number of favorable reviews. Critics point to its fantastic noise-canceling technology as the main reason to put this model on the top of pack. Stunning design also separates the Jawbone from its competitors, even if not all reviewers are enamored by its level of comfort. The Jawbone's adequate talk time of six hours, along with its somewhat bulky design show that it is not flawless. The concealed nature of its buttons also can make it difficult to utilize some of its features.
<b>Plantronics Voyager 520</b>	*est. \$45	<b>Mid-range headset.</b> For about half the price of the Aliph Jawbone, reviews say that you can get an excellent headset in the Plantronics Voyager 520. The lack of noise-canceling technology is noticeable but does not ruin an otherwise great offering. Its comfort is praised, and at 0.6 ounces it is substantially lighter than the Jawbone. Compared to other models, its design can be boring, even though it is liked more than that of its predecessor, the Voyager 510. Slate magazine's Laura Moser says that "for the price, you really can't beat the Voyager 520."
<b>Jabra BT125</b>	*est. \$20	<b>Best value.</b> At just \$20 it is hard to overlook the Jabra BT125. Sound quality and comfort are comparable to more expensive models, even though there is no noise-canceling technology. It is among the lightest headsets (0.4 ounces) and boasts an average talk time of eight hours. Its ten-second power on and sync time is exceptionally long compared to the average headset, and the buttons can be complicated to use. Even so, reviewers say that for most users, this model will fit the bill quite nicely.
<b>Jabra BT8010</b>	*est. \$85	<b>Stereo/Mono A2DP (Advanced Audio Distribution Profile) headset.</b> The Jabra BT8010 allows for both stereo and mono audio to be streamed over a Bluetooth connection. For the listed price of \$85, two earpieces are included. Upon connection, the second earpiece converts the headset into a stereo one that can be used to listen to music. This is

		facilitated by the sBT8010's ability to function as a remote to control music playback. Battery life while streaming music is reduced to six hours from ten, and the headset's combined weight of 1.3 ounces makes it one of the heavier models.
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## Types and uses of Bluetooth headsets

The Travel Insider observes two main styles of Bluetooth headsets: those held in place by a loop around the ear and those that are secured simply by physically inserting them into the ear. The first type is generally more comfortable, while the latter is more secure. By design, Bluetooth headsets can never be as small or light as their wired counterparts because battery and extra electronics must be included.

There is a great variety in the design of Bluetooth headsets, but they all aim to provide the same basic function: connect to a device (such as a cell phone or mp3 player) using wireless Bluetooth technology and transmit audio between the headset and device. In most cases, a headset allows a cell phone user the benefit of keeping both hands free of use while holding a conversation. Due to the advent of A2DP (Advanced Audio Distribution Profile) technology, it is becoming increasingly popular to use a Bluetooth device to stream high quality audio, in stereo or mono, to a wireless headset.

Aside from connectivity with portable devices, Bluetooth headsets can also be used to sync up with your computer. This can be useful for conferencing using computer telephone services, such as SKYPE. In this case, the same headset can be used for both telephone and computer calls – eliminating the need for two separate headsets. Also gone is the task of making sure a headset is compatible with a certain phone model. Most of today's cell phones and Bluetooth headsets use Bluetooth 1.1 or greater, with newer versions being backwards compatible.

## Best Bluetooth headset

Aliph calls its Jawbone (\*est. \$85) Bluetooth headset "The Highest Rated Bluetooth Headset. Ever." Our findings certainly back up this claim. Among the eight models that we found to be recommended by more than one source, the Jawbone receives the highest number of approvals at nine – this is more than twice that of the Plantronics Voyager 520 (\*est. \$45), which receives four.

The Jawbone receives an 8.7/10 at CNet.com, which places it first amongst reviewed Bluetooth headsets. Reviewer Nicole Lee praises the Jawbone for its fashionable design, comfortable fit, and excellent noise-canceling technology. Lee calls it "one of the most eye-catching headsets we've ever had the pleasure of using." Its rectangular design gives way to a perforated texture that "makes it look more like a piece of art than a simple headset." At 1 ounce, it is not the smallest or lightest model on the market -- but the functionality of its design is said to make up for its slight bulkiness.

Aliph Jawbone's comfort is facilitated by a springy ear loop that allows for easy positioning. True to its name, a voice-activity sensor lies along the user's jawbone to

detect vibrations when talking. Six ear buds and four ear loops are provided to ensure comfort; however, PC Magazine's Jon Halpin notes that they are "stiff" and "often seem at the risk of snapping."

The feature of the Jawbone that makes it really stand out in top reviews is its DARPA (Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency) approved noise-canceling technology – which utilizes three different microphones. For those who consistently need to place calls outside or in other noisy areas, this is where the Jawbone shines. A test by CNet.com placed a caller with a Jawbone in a busy intersection -- the caller on the other end did not realize that the call was placed from outside. Wind did muffle the call a little bit, but sound quality was overall excellent. Halpin further states that interference from wind is a problem common to all headsets.

Despite mostly glowing reviews, not everyone is head-over-heels for Aliph's Jawbone. Laura Moser of Slate Magazine states that she is "a little disappointed with what's been touted as the Holy Grail of Bluetooth headsets." Aside from some comfort issues, she does not like the concealed nature of the buttons. While trying to activate the noise-cancellation feature, it is somewhat easy to inadvertently disconnect from a call. The volume control is also unconventional, as you must cycle through five different levels instead of simply raising or lowering the volume.

With a talk time of six hours, standby time of 120 hours and a slightly hefty weight of 1 ounce, the Jawbone from Aliph may seem unspectacular. Stunning design and even more impressive noise-canceling technology place it high atop the pack, say experts. Also included in its feature-set is support for voice-dialing and a battery strength indicator.

### **Other recommended headsets**

If the Aliph Jawbone's price point of \$85 is too high, experts say that the Plantronics Voyager 520 (\$45) is an excellent alternative. PC Magazine's Jamie Lendino likes the fact that the Voyager 520 is a bit smaller than the Jawbone, even if it lacks sophisticated noise-canceling technology. Noise rejection on the Voyager 520 is still "excellent," and Lendino says the tested talk time of about nine hours is "best result for a headset I've seen in a while."

Although Plantronics states that the Voyager 520 has a range of 33 feet (standard Bluetooth range), static was prevalent at ranges from 12 to 15 feet. CNet.com's Nicole Lee calls the Voyager's black-and-silver color scheme a little "dull." Wind also causes a bit of a problem for the 520, but this is typically to be expected amongst Bluetooth headsets.

Included with the 520 is a charger and small dock. Missing are extra ear loops and buds, but comfort is still adequate -- the soft-rubber ear loop is called "ingenious." The Voyager 520 is lightweight – weighing in at 0.6 ounces. The one control button and easy-to-use volume adjuster emphasize the 520's simplicity. Voice dialing is supported, and a battery strength indicator is included.

The Plantronics Voyager 510 (\*est. \$40) also receives an equivalent amount of praise to that of its successor. Jamie Lendino likes the design of the 520 over the 510, even though Plantronics continues to sell both models. Volume levels on the 510 are perhaps

a touch louder than the 520, but Lendino says that the 520 sounds a bit crisper. For about \$5 more, reviewers say there is no reason to go with the Voyager 520 over the 510, even if both models are excellent headsets.

Somewhere in between the price levels of the Aliph Jawbone and the Plantronics Voyager 520 lie the Jabra JX10 (\*est. \$75) and Motorola H700 (\*est. \$85). Reviews on these models are mixed, and generally say that it makes more sense to go with one of the headsets, but we still found several favorable reviews for each model.

Which.net calls the H700 the “the clearest we tried” when referring to its sound quality. Battery life and comfort are also two of its strong points, but only one earpiece is included in the package. Build quality is subpar as it is “not as well put together as some of the other headsets on test.” The included manual is also lacking and “could be better.”

Brandon King of Digital Trends gushes over the design of the Jabra JX10 – which he gives a rating of a 9/10 and an Editor’s Choice. According to King, the JX10 “sticks out like a supermodel at a hot dog eating contest” when compared to other headsets. Noise canceling technology exists in the microphone, but – like other models -- wind did interfere when it was tested outdoors. The price of the JX10 may be a turn-off to some, but the ear clip may loosen over time. Talk time for the JX10 is five hours, just below Jabra’s advertised time of six hours.

Among inexpensive Bluetooth headsets, the only model which received multiple favorable reviews was the Jabra BT125 (\*est. \$20). The Travel Insider calls the BT125 the “best value headset available in the market currently.” No noise cancellation technology exists at this price point, but even without this feature it is “almost as good as other units costing considerably more.” At 0.4 ounces, it is among the lightest headsets, and boasts a talk time of up to eight hours.

The tradeoff when buying a lower cost headset is that they usually suffer from a few drawbacks and the BT125 is no exception. Button sequences can be complicated and encroach on its functionality. It can also be slightly difficult to quickly mount it to your ear, although once it is in place comfort is not an issue. The BT125 can also take up to ten seconds to power on and sync up with a phone, which is slower than average.

### **Stereo/Mono Bluetooth headset**

Jabra’s BT8010 (\$85) is a highly recommended headset that has support for A2DP (Advanced Audio Distribution Profile). This technology allows for high-quality audio to be streamed over a Bluetooth connection. To capitalize on this, the BT8010 may be connected to a second headset so that stereo audio may be heard. The listed price of \$85 includes both a mono and a stereo earpiece.

When only using the mono earpiece, the BT8010 is still large compared to most other models. Together, both earpieces weigh in at 1.3 ounces, which is well above average. The stereo earpiece is a smaller version of the first one, without the display or functional buttons.

CNet.com’s Nicole Lee likes that the BT8010 doubles as a remote for a Bluetooth-enabled music player. It can be used to play and pause music or skip to the next song in a playlist. Along with the ability to play stereo music from a portable device is an OLED

display. Caller ID and phone contacts can both be seen on the scrollable display. The BT8010 has a talk time of up to ten hours, but while streaming music battery life is reduced to six hours. Noise-cancellation technology is also included.

## Important Features

Choosing a Bluetooth headset can be difficult, but experts say the following can help:

- **More expensive is not always better.** Since headsets are introduced and discontinued so quickly, oftentimes a high price point is simply an indication of a brand-new model or product line. Chances are that the price will come down sooner than later, and that a pricier model does not offer any more than an inexpensive one.
- **Comfort is just as important as sound quality.** It does not matter how good a headset sounds if it hurts over an extended period or might not secure properly. Most headsets are reversible for use with either ear, which can temporarily help relieve discomfort for long conversations.
- **Controls should be easy to use.** If commands or controls are not easy to remember and utilize, many features on a headset can become useless. Easy access to volume adjustment ensures functionality in most environments.
- **Stereo headsets can only be used on devices that support A2DP (Advanced Audio Distribution Profile).** In order to stream high quality audio, your device must support A2DP. If it does not, you will not get CD-like audio even when using a headset designed for it, such as the Jabra BT8010.
- **Compatibility is probably not an issue.** Before Bluetooth became popularized, it was more important to ensure compatibility between devices. Now, if both the device and the headset have at least Bluetooth version 1.1 (which is an older version), there are virtually no problems with compatibility.

Experts say that using any headset is preferable to not using one at all. In some states, it is illegal to use a cell phone without a headset while operating a vehicle. Even if it is legal to do so, freeing up your hands is a much safer alternative. Bluetooth headsets also reduce the amount of radiation that is sent to your brain. Some scientists believe that radiation is extremely harmful, although studies performed thus far have not found conclusive evidence to back this up.

## Consensus Report

# Of picks	Model	Estimated price
9	Aliph Jawbone	\$85
4	Plantronics Voyager 520	\$45
4	Motorola H700	\$55
3	Jabra JX10	\$75

3	Plantronics Voyager 510	\$40
2	Jabra BT8010	\$85
2	Jabra BT125	\$20
2	Jabra BT500 (discontinued)	\$30
1 each	Plantronics voyager 855, Plantronics pulsar 590A, Plantronics discovery 640, Jabra BT5020, Jabra BT250, Samsung WEP 410, Samsung WEP 200, Motorola HT820, Cardo Scala-Rider, Logitech Mobile Freedom, BlueAnt V12, BlueAnt Z9	

In our findings, the Aliph Jawbone is far and away the winner when it comes to Bluetooth headsets. Its superb noise-canceling technology coupled with comfort and flashy design hoist it to the top of the pack. Other offerings from Plantronics and Jabra also fared extremely well in comparison tests. The Plantronics Voyager 520 is a good alternative to the Jawbone and can be purchased for about half the price. For those looking for an entry-level model that can still perform well, experts point to the Jabra BT125.

There are a few options for the increasing number of cell phone users that wish to listen to music on their devices. Of the models that we found reviews on, the Jabra BT8010 was given the most praise.

### **Alternative Considerations**

One alternative to the typical mono Bluetooth headset is a stereo set. There are two models listed in our report on [wireless headphones](#): the Logitech FreePulse Wireless Headphones and Etymotic ety8.

### **Best Research**

The mobile technology reviewers cited in our “All Reviews” section are the best places to check for updates and reviews on new models. [BlueTomorrow.com](#) is also an excellent place to become familiar with Bluetooth technology in general.

A helpful guide on how to choose a Bluetooth headset is available at [The Travel Insider](#).

Manufacturers’ websites are another good source for information on the most current models:

[Aliph](#)

[BlueAnt](#)

[Jabra](#)

[Motorola](#)

[Plantronics](#)

[Samsung](#)

## Comparison Chart

Model	Price	Weight	Features and warranty
<b>Aliph Jawbone</b>	*est. \$85	1 oz	Over-the-ear form factor, 33-foot operating range, up to 6 hours of talk time, up to 120 hours of standby time, rechargeable battery with 2-hour charge time.
<b>Plantronics Voyager 520</b>	*est. \$45	0.6 oz	Over-the-ear reversible form factor, 33-foot operating range, up to 8 hours of talk time, up to 180 hours of standby time, rechargeable lithium polymer batter, one-year warranty.
<b>Jabra BT125</b>	*est. \$20	0.6 oz	Over-the-ear reversible form factor, 30-foot operating range, up to 8 hours of talk time, up to 170 hours of standby time, rechargeable lithium polymer battery with 2-hour recharge time, one-year limited warranty.
<b>Jabra BT8010</b>	*est. \$85	1.3 oz	Two over-the-ear pieces, 33-foot operating range, up to 10 hours of talk time, up to 300 hours of standby time, rechargeable lithium polymer battery with 2-hour recharge time, stereo support for A2DP devices, one-year limited warranty.