

Best metal detector?

Contributed by Jay
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Hi Ray and Jay, I hear you guys know a little about finding gold. I have a buddy, Bob, who wants me to join him when I retire in a few weeks on a trip out to the desert to do some metal detecting. He has a couple surplus units he'll let me use to get a feel for it, but he thinks that I shouldn't waste my time looking for a new one. I think he really wants to sell me his old ones! I don't buy used cars, so I'm hesitant to buy a used detector. I want to find a good unit, but there are so many out there. I'll keep it simple: What is the best metal detector?

I'd like to be able to answer that question, and keep it simple, but that's like asking "What's the best car?". My answer would be; "It depends." A whole series of questions needs to be asked relating to what your intended use is, where you are going to use it and how 'hands on' you are, amongst others not least of which is; "Is this your first?"

In order to avoid getting saddled with a unit you won't enjoy, you need to be absolutely clear with regards to how much money you have budgeted to spend and how much time you have to pursue your new hobby. If you anticipate spending a few hours a month detecting at the local park, you might get away with a model that has few features and is relatively inexpensive. If there is any possibility that you may plan a weekend or more a month around detecting, you want to look into a unit that has a few more bells and whistles, yet costs slightly more. The idea behind this is if you spend a bunch of time detecting, you are going to hit the limits of a cheaper, less feature-rich model quickly. You will end up frustrated and will either give up and feel that you have wasted time and money or you will spend even more money on a more expensive model that you probably should have purchased to begin with. It happens time and time again, ask me how I know.

You should also consider the price of accessories, which can make or break your detecting experience. Many detectors have built in speakers and volume control, but you will likely alienate and irritate any companions you have with you when your unit hits a find. A good set of stereo headphones with fine volume control inline will not only save your ears but everyone else's too. Headphones also save your batteries, which you will also want spares of. You will need at the very least a trowel to dig up your finds a beach scoop if you encounter sand, and will quickly desire more excavation equipment as time goes on. You will need a coil cover to keep dirt (which can give false readings or inhibit sensitivity) off and a bag to store your detector in when not in use. Most detector companies have branded accessories available with a branded price tag to match, but careful shopping can net you huge savings.

You should consider where you are going to use your detector and what kind of items you want to detect. Many detectors claim to be general-purpose or all-treasure units, but you will likely find that you spend an awful lot of time digging up tin cans, pop-tops and nails. Treasure units in the lower price range generally stink for finding real treasures. These units lack the fine sensitivity control that microprocessors allow. More expensive units have more features like meters or displays, automatic ground balancing, "notch" discrimination and fancy programming.

If you intend to spend time at the beach with your detector, you may consider investing in a waterproof model. All coils are themselves waterproof, however if you and your detector end up in the water, you can count on having to go shopping soon. The really cool thing about detectors that are intended for use underwater is they generally have no fancy displays and tell you about your finds via audio signal. The different tones and bleeps and bloops are quickly learned and become very intuitive.

If you are only interested in find gold and silver, many precious metal detectors are tuned to only key in on those precious metals, but have very little discrimination. If you want to find coins and relics in addition to precious metals, don't think you'll get good results with a precious metal detector unless it has discrimination adjustment. Either way, with a gold and silver detector, you will have to spend some time in each area you detect in "ground balancing" or "ground

tracking" your unit. This allows the unit to disregard background metals present in the soil after "learning" the area.

You should consider your physical stamina when purchasing a metal detector. The box on a metal detector can feel like it's filled with lead after a very short time, look for a unit that allows you to put the box on your belt if you aren't a weight lifter. If you do any amount of yard work, liken the experience to mowing your lawn with a weed whacker. Some people would do well with a beefy unit, some with a featherweight. Think about how you feel after a hard day of yard work and decide if that's how you'd like to spend hobby time. Don't let anyone else try to convince you otherwise.

Speaking of other people trying to convince you, let's talk about used metal detectors. How about your friend, Bob? Bob might have a detector or two that he'd "let go real cheap" to his good friend but before you commit to anything, think about checking out the features and styling of newer units. Metal detecting technology has come a long way in recent years and a unit that was top of the line just five years ago has now become obsolete due to advances in microprocessor and solid state design. Ergonomics play a larger role these days too. Many of the metal detector companies have learned that comfort will keep folks using their products longer and happily, which leads to more sales to their friends. Don't get stuck with Bob's castoffs when much better and more comfortable units are readily available today.

Nothing beats checking out your local treasure hunting store or gold prospecting outfit, however not everyone has a shop like that in town. Places like Radio Shack or other electronics stores often have a unit or two on the shelves, but you aren't likely to find something that will keep you happy for a good long time. Don't let the price tag on some of these 'discount store' detectors fool you, there is a heavy markup at these places and the aftercare and knowledge available to you from the staff may as well not exist. If you can't find a local outfit to help you out, I've found a great place online, BlackCatMining.com who can supply you with just about everything you would need and the fella who runs the place will do you right with any questions you might have. If you do buy, tell him Jay sent you!

All of my warnings and advice aside, the most important thing is to have fun. Don't worry so much about finding the "right" detector, chances are your first won't be your last. Ask me how I know. ;)