

The Quest... An intensive comparison analysis of three Bluetooth headsets.

This article is about my quest for the perfect Bluetooth headset. It all started when I lost a vintage Plantronics and found its replacement, a Plantronics Explorer, less than what I was expecting. Deciding to take advantage of eBay pricing, I elected to go for the highest quality I could afford and compare contenders with the aforementioned Explorer model as a baseline. After reading several reviews I learned the two highest quality Bluetooth headsets available in my price range were offered by Plantronics and Aliph (the maker of the Jawbone line). Using the Explorer as a control, a three way comparison was set up between:

1. The Plantronics Voyager Pro
2. The Jawbone 3 Prime
3. The Plantronics Explorer

All three were evaluated using a ten point scale in two categories split into a total of five individual test sub-categories. The two primary categories were Sound Quality and Comfort. Sound Quality was further divided into tests under "Room", "High Noise" and "Wind" conditions. Comfort was tested under the sub-categories "Comfort" and "Stability".

- "Room" conditions were as the name suggests, a quiet room with no unusual ambient noises.
- "High Noise" was in a parking garage adjacent to a multilane freeway.
- "Wind" was in a convertible traveling down the freeway with the top down at 65-70 mph.
- All sound was compared to the quality one would expect from a landline or hardwired phone.
- "Comfort" was an evaluation of how noticeable the headset was when worn over a long period of time... an entire evening... 3-4 hours.
- "Stability" was an assessment of how firmly the headset seemed to be attached to the wearer.

IMPRESSIONS

The Plantronics Voyager Pro

This headset was the largest of the three. It was also the heaviest. Despite its dimensions, it was found reasonably comfortable and fairly stable in the ear. One could jog with this headset on and while some movement would be noticed, it would not be inordinate. Depending on positioning, the large battery pack can become a little uncomfortable but for the most part, it can be worn for hours with only slight distraction from comfort and stability issues. The sound quality is superb, both from the standpoint of incoming and outgoing calls. There seems to be a nice bass tone to the speaker, adding depth to the overall received call experience. Persons hearing calls from this device reported excellent sound and

were completely unaware I was using a Bluetooth device. Controls are easy to find and all buttons were crisp and functioned well. Noise reduction, like overall sound quality, was hands down the best of all three evaluated units. The top down freeway drive was completely intelligible. The only issue with sound on this unit was occasional low frequency garble but this was very minor. The Voyager Pro articulates at two pivot points near the boom, adding to its lack of complete stability. These pivot points do however, allow the head piece to be easily switched from right to left ear wear. The size of the Voyager Pro gives the look and feel of a Praying Mantis hanging on to one's ear... a look some people don't care for. Personally I find Praying Mantis's rather elegant so this doesn't bother me.

The Jawbone 3 Prime

This headset is a very modern design and fits very securely to the ear. It can be used with or without an ear loop and I found that using the loop placed the device rock solid against my ear. It literally disappeared once applied making it the most comfortable of the three devices. It was also the most stable, making it a very good choice for jogging. Controls were an issue. In an effort to create a "beautiful" headset, controls were placed under the device's decorative skin. I found this made the controls harder to find and in the test unit I used, locating a button under the skin made the volume control almost completely unusable. Sound quality was disappointing. Under room conditions it was noticeably inferior to the Voyager Pro and didn't even sound as good as the Plantronics Explorer. High Noise and Wind conditions improved its performance over the Explorer but it was still noticeably inferior to the Voyager Pro. It seemed "tinny" to me and lacked depth in room conditions. This was intensified as high noise conditions were introduced. There also seemed to be a lot of sound dropouts under the high noise conditions, especially during the top down test. Overall, the Jawbone was by far the most comfortable and stable of the three but when compared to the Voyager Pro, it lacked noticeably in sound quality.

The Plantronics Explorer

This device was a "stop gap" product purchased to get me by until I found something I really liked. Under room conditions its sound quality actually surpassed that of the Jawbone. Like the Jawbone, it tends to be a little too high frequency for my personal taste, giving it a tinny sound. Still, it was reasonable good under low noise conditions. That all changed when high noise was introduced. High noise rendered the Explorer very difficult to hear and during the top down test it was useless. Controls on the Explorer are actually quite good. The answer button is large and easy to find. The volume controls were equally easy to use. Even the on-off switch was a plus... a slider, giving a positive on/off. Overall I would place the controls in the Explorer as the best of the three units evaluated. The charging port is another matter. Plugging the charger into this unit is a task and I really couldn't identify a good reason for it. It just seemed the plug just didn't fit well. Comfort was another issue. This unit made the back of my ear sore because of pressure from the ear loop. Stability was also poor and I felt like I was in danger of losing the headset at times. As a matter of fact, at one point I shook my head and it flew off! It would definitely not be my first choice for jogging. In conclusion, the Explorer has great controls and

fairly good sound quality in low noise environments. Add noise and this unit fails in direct proportion to the level of the noise. Comfort and fit are marginal.

THE SCORES

Final scores are broken down into raw score totals and high scores per category. They are as follows:

Device	Room	High Noise	Wind (top down)	Comfort	Stability
Voyager Pro	9	6.5	6.75	7.75	6.5
Jawbone	6	5.5	6.75	10	9.5
Explorer	7	2.5	.75	7.75	4

Placement Score by Category:

Voyager Pro 13
Jawbone 12
Explorer 7

Placement Score by Raw Score Tally:

Jawbone 37.75
Voyager Pro 36.5
Explorer 22

As you can see, the Voyager Pro wins when scored by Category and the Jawbone wins when scored by raw score tally. In the final analysis, the Voyager Pro is superior in sound quality while the Jawbone is superior in comfort and stability. So which of these is “best”? The answer lies in what is most important to you. If sound quality is of greatest importance, the Voyager Pro at \$75 eBay price is the best way to go. If comfort is your most critical factor, the Jawbone at \$61 eBay price is your best choice. If cost is your only consideration, you can’t beat the Explorer at Costco for \$16! Which did I chose? I sacrificed a little comfort for a lot of sound quality and went with the Plantronics Voyager Pro!