

TESTED

HJC Chatterbox **FRS-X2**





The unit allows you to communicate with any other Chatterbox or FRS radio equipped motorcycles.

Transmitting is achieved by using a push-to-talk (PTT) button or the built in voice-activated (VOX) feature. Communication is "half duplex", in other words one person transmits at a time. The unit runs on rechargeable batteries. The Chatterbox is about the size of a pack of cigarettes. It's relatively light and compact, and it mounts to the left side of your helmet.

There are so many things to say about the HJC Chatterbox that I don't even know where to begin, so I'll start by saying this so that it's totally clear how I feel...

I think the Chatterbox is by far one of the coolest, if not THE coolest motorcycle accessory ever invented.

It's an indispensable tool that has saved my hide hundreds of times; from cops to gravel in corners, from crazy stories to break the monotony of the Interstate to the standard "hey I have to go the bathroom now!" call. I like the Chatterbox so much I bought the guys who made it a case of beer. They deserve it. The Chatterbox has provided me with hours and hours on end of entertainment.

Some background for those who don't know what we're talking about; HJC, the helmet manufacturer, distributes bike-to-bike communicators under the Chatterbox brand name. The Chatterbox is essentially a FRS radio that mounts to your helmet. It comes with a headset and microphone equipped harness that you permanently mount inside your helmet's lining.



Battery life is excellent, especially on the newer FRS-X2 models. My personal experience has been about 2 days of continuous use. The unit can be easily recharged off of your bike's battery if you are on a road trip using either the cord you buy from Chatterbox, or your own home made bastardization from your local Radio Shack (what I did).

The inexpensive "base model" FRS Multi Sport Chatterbox offers only 2 channels (FRS channels 2 and 9). The base model is very easy to use and relatively reliable, and I own two of these units as well.

The Chatterbox line has expanded to include the FRS-X2 and the GMRS-X1. The FRS-X2 offers 14 channels and 38 sub channels. The GMRS-X1 has 15 channels with 38 sub channels and also has an extended range of up to 5 miles. In my experience, using any of the two mile range units, the communication distance has been excellent. Similar to any CB radio, the distance is dependant on line

of site. If you have a clear view for miles, say in a valley or a long straight, you will have the best performance. If you travel in the canyons or in the city your range will decrease. Either way the sound quality has always been excellent. Any out of range

transmissions are simply squelched out, no static.

The Chatterbox offers compatibility with standard FRS radios available at any local electronics store (or grocery store nowadays!).

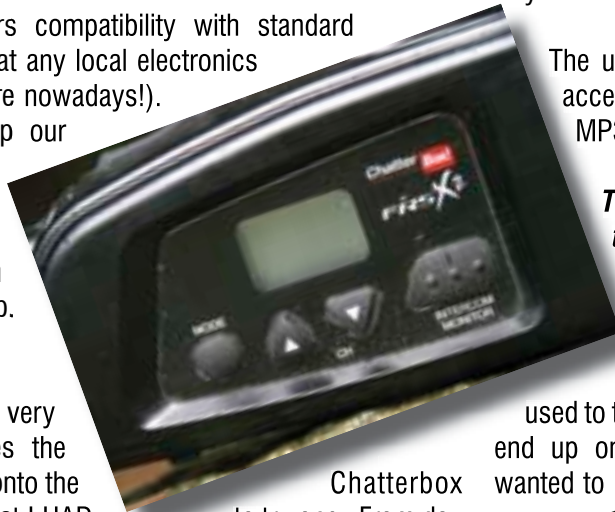
On our last road trip our support vehicle carried an FRS radio and was able to stay in contact with our entire riding group. Very cool!

It was Bikeland's very own Dino who takes the credit for putting me onto the and convincing me that I HAD one Dino taught us a little trick that many people aren't aware of.

The units come with a VOX feature that in my opinion is okay, but simply ineffective for high speed sport riding. Instead of mounting the PTT button, which comes with the units, to the Bike's clipon as Chatterbox suggests, Dino had us Velcro the PTT to our left index finger. By running the PTT wire down the inside of the liner of our jackets, we are now able to leave the wire permanently woven into our clothing.

This allows the rider to leave all the necessary hardware mounted or built into the riding gear, and not the bike, and leaves the rider free to walk away from the bike and still be able to transmit via PTT. Using the units this way lets you easily push the PTT button either with your finger or by rolling it against the clipon.

The only drawback has been the hair thin wire HJC uses and the connectors that come with the Chatterbox. These fail repeatedly. If you plan on using the Chatterbox with this set-up expect to carry spare wires or a soldiering iron. The extra hassle is worth it in my opinion. A nice bonus with the newer generation of Chatterbox units is a built in PTT, so



Chatterbox to try one. From day

that you can reach up and push the button on the unit itself if your wired button fails.

The units have external inputs and allow you to plug in accessories such as a radar detector (another must!) an MP3 player (haven't tried yet) and even a cell phone.

The older FRS Multi Sport units are extremely easy to use. There are only a few switches that are simple to find with your riding gear on.

The newer FRS-X2 units take some getting used to. The extra buttons and functions mean that if you're used to the older models, you may make the odd mistake and end up on some bizarre sub channel when all you wanted to do was adjust the volume.



Once you're familiar with the locations of all the controls on the newer units, there really is no issue whatsoever. The added channels on the new FRS-X2 units mean that you have a better chance of finding some quiet airspace if you live in a built up area.

When we tested our FRS-X2 Chatterboxes what surprised us the most was the wide variety of sound quality from the different units. This summer's group ride, with up to 15 Chatterbox equipped riders, provided interesting

results. Riders were equipped, for the most part, with the older FRS Multi Sport units. The sound quality from all of the radios varied enormously. Some were clearer than others and some were either louder or quieter than others. Some periodically buzzed or sounded raspy, while others were as clear as telephone. We later found out after an installation lesson from Chatterbox reps





whole experience of motorcycling, and definitely for the better.

I can't stress just how cool this product is! Looking to the future HJC plans to release a Bluetooth version of the Chatterbox, hopefully for 2006. This should mean the elimination of all wires and yet again another step into the future.

An important thing to keep in mind. The Chatterbox broadcasts on public airwaves. Anyone with a scanner or an FRS radio can listen in. This may seem like an obvious thing to state, but after using them for so many years, communication with them seems like second nature. You and your riding partners can become so engrossed in conversation that it is possible to forget that other people can hear you...

that the sound quality was directly related to the placement of the microphone in the helmet and also the type of microphone the units came with. The FRS X2 models came equipped with a noise cancellation microphone that, when placed too far away from your mouth, cancelled out your own voice at higher speeds.

Sound quality seemed to depend on a combination of correct installation, and the "luck of the draw". Some units simply sounded much better than others, and we have no explanation for that phenomenon. We must report that most of the sound quality issues can be solved by ensuring that the microphone is installed correctly in your helmet. This requires actually reading the owner's manual, but hey, who does that! (Guilty as charged)

The problems we have run into after tens of thousands of miles of testing have not always been the fault of the Chatterbox. Water has been the Multi-Sport's worst enemy. They are what I like to call "California" waterproof (read: Not at all). Don't get them wet. If it starts to rain, do yourself a favour, pull over and take the unit off and hide it in a dry spot. We experimented with zip lock bags etc, but this really didn't work. Getting the unit soaking wet will leave you sounding like a space alien the next day. Better to save the hassle.

Chatterbox claims that the FRS-X2 and the GMRS-X1 units are "in a tough water resistant casing" but I'm certainly not going to be the one to test that theory. I'm fine playing it safe.

Many of you will read this and say what I said when Dino basically forced me to try the Chatterbox five years ago. "Riding is a personal experience. The last thing I want is to hear someone's voice inside my helmet when I ride". Those were my thoughts and you can't imagine how many times I've had those same words repeated to me when I recommend the Chatterbox to people.

To those of you reading this who feel that way. I was once like you! The Chatterbox changed the way I ride. It changed the

Is the technology perfect? No. Like the dropped call on the cell phone in the middle of a crucial conversation, the Chatterbox does have its issues. Can I live without the Chatterbox? If you ask my honest personal opinion, the answer is no. I can't live without this. I need it like I need my wireless internet, my cell phone and my radar detector. There is no doubt in my mind that the Chatterbox is an essential part of your riding kit.



The future of bike to bike communication? HJC's Bluetooth Chatterbox Prototype.