



Why can't my Tablet-PC read my USB-connected GPS receiver?

I've written several times about COM ports and GPS receivers. Interestingly, in the last two days, I have spoken with four different folks about how this works, particular in regards to setting up a GPS receiver through a USB port on a tablet computer. It is valuable to understand how this works to avoid frustration in setting up software later.

What is a COM port?

A communication (COM) port streams data into the computer. Older computers had serial ports for this purpose. USB ports are not really COM ports, so you need to download a driver for the conversion. There are two facts about this process: you need a different driver for each different brand of GPS or other devices using the COM port, each USB port needs to be set-up as a COM port and each will be given a different port number. This COM port number will be used in any software that needs to connect to the GPS. (As a side note, you will also need to know the speed of the data stream from the GPS called the Baud rate.)

Setting up a COM port for an SX Blue II Sub-Meter GPS

The first step is to download the driver. I can't post folders in the blog, but I put the driver the Walcott Scientific website. This will comprise a folder with various .dll, security catalog, etc., files for the FTBI driver. The folder is zipped, so you need to unzip it. Then, place the folder somewhere you can find it, like the desktop. Now, power up the SX Blue II and plug it into the USB port you wish to use. The computer will open the "Found New Hardware Wizard." No need for the internet, so click "No, not this time" and click "Next." Then, choose "Install from a list or specific location (Advanced)" and "Next." On this page, choose "Search for the best driver in these locations" and "Include this location in the search:" Use the Browse button to find the folder and click "OK" and "Next." A warning box will appear that the USB Serial Converter has not passed the test. Click "Continue Anyway." The driver is now installed and you will close the Wizard. But wait! Another Wizard will open and you will repeat the process. You've done it!

Finding the COM port

So, what is the COM port? You can use a 'port sniffer' like GPS Viewer which works pretty well for finding GPS devices. Alternatively, you can go to: Control Panel>Administrative Tools>Computer Management>Device Manager and click on the "Ports (COM & LPT)" to see the port number assigned to the SX Blue. This is the COM port you will use in your software. The SX Blue broadcasts at 9600 Baud, 8 stop bits, no parity.

(Blog posted on www.ruggedbits.com)