WARN Wireless Winch Controller on Test

A winch controller that doesn't 'tie' you to the vehicle is more convenient and safe.

The need for a wireless winch controller sprang from the ATV market. These little go-anywhere quads frequently need self-recovery, but it's tricky to clamber up a steep slope beside an ATV, holding onto the winch controller, without occasionally sliding under the front wheels. A wireless controller lets the rider stand at the top of the slope, close to the winch hook anchor point and wind the vehicle up the slope from this vantage point.

The wireless winch controller was an instant hit with the ATV market and the requests flooded into Warn Industries for a kit that would suit larger 4x4 winches. It's now a reality.

In Australia the wireless winch control kit is being marketed by Ateco and ARB. The wireless controller is a plug and play installation onto Warn winches that have a five-wire electrical system, making it fully retro-fittable for most existing owners.

Many 4x4 owners in the USA have adapted the kit to suit Warn winches with older-style wiring.

The Wireless Kit

Our test unit arrived from Ateco in a plastic blister pack that contained a set of installation instructions; a how-to-winch safely booklet; a hand-held transmitter; a receiver; a wiring harness with fitted connectors; a splice connector (not needed with five-wire systems); plated mounting bolts, nuts and washers; cable ties; a 3M adhesive mounting pad; a sheath for the hand-held transmitter and a sheath mounting bracket that betrayed the original ATV origins - it being a handlebar clamp!

The wireless receiver can be mounted on any flat surface, provided it's away from hot engine components and batteries. We used the adhesive mounting pad, rather than drilling through the inner mudguard and located the receiver in a cool corner of the engine bay, about a half-metre from the starting battery.

The wiring kit connects the receiver to the Warn winch control box, by way of a sealed, snap connector at the receiver end and a rubber-encased plug at the control box end. The control box plug is similar to the standard one that comes with the cable controller.

We fed the wiring through the Disco grille bars and coiled the excess, which has sufficient length to allow the receiver to be located anywhere in most engine bays. We've stowed the plug, which comes with a sealing cap, just beside the control box, where it can be plugged in quickly.

The hand-held transmitter came with two AA batteries already installed. We chose to leave it unmounted, but locked into its sheath and slipped into the glove box.

The entire fitting operation took 15 minutes.

Operation couldn't be easier. After clearing the winch hook from the fairlead recess and engaging the winch clutch the winch action can be controlled entirely from the hand-held transmitter.

Two fat, recessed buttons on the hand-held are easily operated, even when wearing gloves. Holding both down for three seconds activates the transmitter – confirmed by a green light - and then it's simply a matter of pressing the 'in' and 'out' buttons to operate the winch – confirmed by a red light. If the transmitter isn't operated for five minutes it shuts down to save battery life, but it can be turned off manually by pressing both buttons for three seconds. If the hand-held's batteries become low, the LED will flash red during operation.

Warn claims an operating range of around 30 metres for the wireless control system, but most test situations saw me inside the vehicle with the wireless hand-held, thankful that there wasn't the usual tangle of control cable around the bull bar, radio aerials and the rear vision mirror.

As important as the wireless feature is when winching is the safety factor when retrieving the cable after the recovery has finished. It's possible to reload the cable by holding any point along its length, instead of being limited in distance by the controller cable. There's also no chance of the controller cable getting caught around the winch cable.

Because the Warn wireless winch control system is an add-on it doesn't interfere with the standard cable-control arrangement – it's simply a matter of plugging either system into the winch control box. If there's a problem with either control system the other will work.