

## Newcomers and Elmers Net: Finding An Operating Niche

9/15/13 Robert AK3Q

Most ham operators find a handful of things they like to focus on in the hobby, or at least one or two areas at a time if you are like me

- DXing is one of the most common, but by no means the only area
- Emergency and Public services are also very common
  - Becoming a good emergency operator takes lots of practice and experience, and it is an area where there are always new things happening; it is a great field to focus upon
  - Training nets; weather spotting; public service events like the Cystic Fibrosis bike-a-thon coming up; helping out in a community event like a fair, parade, or concert, all provide experience communicating in an organized fashion
  - There are online training opportunities, local classes in various communities, etc. (e.g. Hamilton County PODS/Red Cross)
  - National and International Nets and organizations; government organizations such as MARS - Military Auxiliary Radio System (The program consists of licensed amateur radio operators who are interested in military communications. They contribute to the MARS mission providing auxiliary or emergency communications on a local, national, and international basis as an adjunct to normal communications.)
  - Lots of opportunities for experimentation with radios, data modes, antennas and operating under extreme conditions
- Digital/Data Modes – learning to use various computer software programs to transmit data across the world (and even bouncing signals off the moon!)
  - Some folks get into setting up beacon stations which provide propagation condition information as well as verification of signal strength/reception/availability
  - APRS modes – if you travel, like to take vacations, and stay in contact with folks while you or they are traveling, APRS (Automatic Position Reporting System) can let you do just that; you can track someone's progress while driving, hiking, biking etc., as well as allow others to know where you are over the computer
  - You can send and receive messages through packet data modes including store forward messaging, where folks can check BBS to see if they have any messages
  - You can even do this using the ISS! – How cool is that!
  - SSTV or slow-scan TV is a mode for sending pictures through the air to someone around the world – yes, you can do this with your phone or your computer, but what if those services are down? Ham radio to the rescue!
  - Want to be your own television producer? You can with ATV, or Amateur TV – using UHF frequencies you can send video over the air and produce your own TV show

- Contesting – this is considered a sport in amateur radio! There are literally contests every weekend of one kind or another, and many folks have a handful each year about which they are particularly passionate
  - The goal is usually to log as many contacts as possible for a given contest/region/operating style, etc.
  - Sometimes referred to as *radiosport*, these contests can last from a few hours to several days depending on the contest, with rules for how long you may operate without a break
  - Logs are kept of contacts with specific information required per contact, and then these logs are submitted for credit and awards are given for the best scores in each category
  - A big one each year is the CQ World-Wide contest where people from all over the world try to get as many contacts as possible
  - One of the big advantages of working contests is that even if you do not win anything, you really up your own personal contact list, and will soon qualify for contact Awards like the DXCC
  - Contesting encourages you to learn good operating techniques, exposes you to people and places you might not otherwise get to experience, and drives you to make the most of your operating system by learning your equipment inside and out, including radios, antennas, and every other aspect of your station
  - Contests also really raise your ability to copy hard-to-read stations; you will develop an ear for listening to calls and operators through noisy conditions as well as conditions where there is a lot of interference
  - Plus as a small-time operator, especially when starting out, contesting will help you learn how to work smarter and harder because you will be competing with big stations with prime locations and expensive equipment
  - Personally nothing is more satisfying to me than to work a good DX contact with what is a relatively modest station and the other guy has everything going for him; I like being an underdog in amateur radio!
  
- Award Chasing is another aspect of the hobby which brings a lot of enjoyment; it is different from contests in that the awards may be totally unrelated to contests
  - For example, you might want to participate in any number of special event stations such as the Islands on the Air (IOTA) or Summits on the Air (SOTA) where folks make trips to Islands or mountains and make as many contacts as possible. From this side of things you would look to contact as many Island stations as possible, or Mountain Top/Summit Stations as possible
  - Many award systems are graduated—you can get awards for overall # of contacts, or contacts on a band, or mode, or any number of sub-categories
  - Some folks refer to this as collecting wallpaper because many of us like to put our awards on our shack wall

- Like contesting you need to learn the rules, what is expected during the contact, and above all be a responsible, polite amateur radio operator
- Almost any special event or award system has their information posted on the Internet these days, so finding out what is needed is usually not difficult
- And don't worry if you make mistakes – special event stations and award stations are usually very forgiving, as are most testers – but sometimes you will run across a sourpuss, so just shake them off, and go on; we have all made mistakes, and will continue to do so
- QRP – QRP is low power work, generally agreed upon as 10 watts or less, sometimes 5 watts, and even less.
  - QRP is in its own way a whole sub-culture (in a good way!) of amateur radio, where pride of operation comes from getting the most out of every milliwatt, and also learning how to take advantage of propagation to the fullest
  - QRP is often combined with travel, as we rarely live in areas especially well-suited for QRP work, particularly in the city environs
  - Antenna experimentation becomes of special importance as you usually want to have some directionality to your signal, as well as the best signal path possible from rig to air.
  - Qrp'ers often build their own radios and other gear, partly for pride of ownership, but also because the expense is much lower when using low power
  - However, almost every full power 100 watt radio can be turned down to 5 watts or less, so you do not have to have a specific radio for low power—just low power!!
  - Probably more than any other group, QRP folks are usually eager to share their knowledge – they are not in competition, but rather in a spirit of cooperation with one another, and they are usually passionate about this aspect of the hobby and love to talk about it with others
  - We'll talk about QRP in more detail in a few weeks
- Satellite Work is another popular sub-category of Amateur radio, and we'll be talking about that next week!