

## **Newcomers and Elmers Net: QSLs-a-Plenty    Robert AK3Q**

### **11.10.13**

QSLs are contact confirmations

- QSL cards are exchanged between hams and between Shortwave listeners to confirm contacts or reception reports
- actually, folks who listen to AM DX stations, or FM DX stations, or even TV DX stations can send reception reports and receive QSL cards back as confirmation of the report
- meaning QSLing is not just limited to amateur radio operators
- over the years I have even received QSL cards from shortwave listeners who caught my contact with another amateur station seeking confirmation of their reception report

QSL cards contain basic information such as the date, time, location (or station), and signal report, in addition to the stations making contact.

- other information such as the grid square, ARRL/CQ/ITU region may be listed, and sometimes a place for comments is there as well
- if there is a special event or the station is part of the IOTA (Islands on the Air) group that information may be printed on the card as well
- cards are usually 3x5, but can be any size, really
- they may be handwritten, typed, or printed, and usually are a combination of all three
- sometimes confirmation reports from special event stations or DX stations may be in the form of a certificate
- usually one side has a photograph or a graphic with the station call sign on one side, and then the pertinent information on the other
- if the cards are sent postcard style, then the standard format of a postcard is used
- if the card is mailed in an envelope, the person may write information over the entire back of the card

People collect QSL cards for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the reminder of an interesting contact, person, or location

- some folks cards are down right beautiful; others are humorous, and others are straight to the point no-nonsense confirmations
- while QSLs have evolved today with the changing times, there is still something quite special about getting a tangible QSL card in the mail – it really brightens your day
- with the move of everything to the computer many folks use electronic QSL cards, printing services, or online log books to confirm contacts, and each have their pluses and minuses

Postal cards are the oldest form of confirmations, and they are cool; a scrapbook or photo album filled with cards is like your own DX trip around the world

-- cards from other hams in the states is also cool, and of course if you collect cards from all 50 states you can receive a WAS or "Worked All States award once they are confirmed

-- if you go to amateur radio hamfests you may find officials there who can record your QSL contacts and authorize awards for them

The downsides to sending cards through the mail are expense, time, and lost/undeliverable mail

-- postage rates keep going up, and so if mailing individual cards it can get quite expensive (I'll offer some suggestions for this later)

-- mailing to other countries can be even more expensive, and can get somewhat complicated

-- DX cards usually require you to send along postage money for a return card (we are usually expected to pay as wealthy Americans), although some folks will say not to send money for various reasons)

-- many folks (even here in the states) want a self-addressed envelope to be included to make their life easier

-- there are usually two schools of thought here: one is if you want a card from someone enough you should be willing to make it as easy as possible for them (the thinking is you are asking something of them)

-- the other school of thought is folks usually only want cards from special contacts or DX stations, the same folks everyone wants a card from, and therefore it would be too expensive for the DX station to foot the bill for everyone's request

The second line of thought is probably the biggest reality—a rare DX station may receive thousands of requests for cards – to pay for printing is already an expense, but add postage and the time to address each card, and we would never get a confirmation or the DX group would be broke long before they could send cards

Fortunately all is not lost for either side, since if we are active hams things can get expensive for us as well!

-- there are several good alternatives to sending individual cards in the mail

-- one good solution is taking advantage of QSL Bureaus—services which allow for bulk mailing of cards as a means of cutting everyone's expenses

-- basically a bureau asks for postage and envelopes to be stocked-up on your behalf so that when a sufficient number of cards come in for you they can mail you an envelope with 10 or 20 cards at once, significantly reducing the cost

- while this takes longer to get your cards (sometime a year or more) the cost savings is real for everyone
- not only do you receive cards in bulk, but you can mail a bulk of cards to the bureau and they will sort them for you and mail them out in the other station's bundle just like they do yours
- if you look on a station's QRZ page listing they will often indicate whether they deal with the bureaus or not; if so, that might be a way to go

Sometimes you will see something mentioned about a QSL manager – this is a person who handles QSL cards/contacts for a station (usually a DX station)

- the advantage to this system is that usually the QSL manager lives in a place where mail is reliable and honest (in some countries postal things get stolen for the value inside), and one is almost assured they will get a return card as requested
- theft is a big deal in some countries, especially when someone realizes a particular group or recipient is getting a lot of mail from all over and there is a good chance there is postage or "greenstamps" inside
- greenstamps is slang for dollar bills, and you can just imagine how that might attract an unscrupulous postal or government worker's attention!
- so bureaus and managers help with this issue significantly

### **Electronic QSLing**

In recent years there have been several computer logging/qsl systems which have become quite popular

- Logbook of the World, or LOTW is probably the most well-known, and most liked/hated of all the systems
- LOTW is hosted by the ARRL and while free, does require some setup on your computer—there is fairly tight security to ensure you are who you say you are, and live where you say you live
- the setup process in a nutshell involves first requesting a password sent by postal mail to your FCC address (for those who live here, of course); once this password is received one uses that password to set up an account on their server to interface with software on your computer
- an authenticity certificate is created in software which is checked whenever you want to upload your contacts, and thus the integrity of the service is reliably maintained
- some folks find the process too tedious or difficult, while others have smooth sailing through the process
- my setup went smoothly as have many others, some folks I know had real problems
- I think the system is better now, but like anything, subject to glitches
- The newest software release is supposed to address some of those issues, so maybe things will be better for everyone

- the advantages to a system like logbook of the world or eQSL.cc are convenience and almost no expense (eQSL requests donations, but their service is basically free for simple QSL confirmations)
- the downside is that only a relatively small number of people are registered with these services
- I typically see about a 1-in-3 return rate of loggings for my DX, and that is consistent with the experiences of others
- for the 1350 contacts I have logged only about 540 have reciprocated, about 35-40% in my case (which is actually getting better)
- however this number will increase as more and more people sign up—the convenience can't be beat, and confirmations can be almost instantaneous if both sides upload their logs frequently

eQSL requires a username and password, as well as an authentication process, but this is much more relaxed; I believe they are secure and can be trusted, but some folks think it is too easy to fake your contacts

- I don't know – I have never tried; my thoughts are if you are willing to cheat with your log there isn't much I can do for you—c'mon, folks, let's get real!
- where's the fun in knowing your log isn't true? I don't get it!

There are also DX services which work in tandem with large DX-peditions to provide cards for contacts at a cost—you will have to decide whether they are worth the expense to you or not, but one thing to consider is that this might be a way to help support folks who take these very expensive trips for us to make cool contacts on out-of-the-way locations—just a thought!

#### Resources

QSL Card Design Sources reference on the Net:

<http://www.w4mpy.com/>

<http://www.cheapqsls.com/>

[www.vistaprint.com](http://www.vistaprint.com) – (not technically a QSL service, but might be useful)

QSL Bureau information

[www.arrl.org/qsl-service](http://www.arrl.org/qsl-service)

LOTW

<https://p1k.arrl.org/lotwuser/default>

eQSL

<http://www.eqsl.cc/qslcard/index.cfm>