

Guide to HF

PART 4 HOW TO WORK DX...

The concluding part of Colin Dollery's feature on how to work HF DX – with more light-hearted warnings on how not to do it!

To get propagation on the higher bands (14MHz and above) you [generally – Ed] need a daylight path. So in the morning seek stations to the east and in the afternoon to the west. After dark, except in very good conditions, the higher bands quickly fold. The grey line, along which the sun is just rising or setting, can be (briefly) great for low-band DXing. If you have a rotary antenna remember that Japan is at about 30 degrees and W7 at about 320 degrees (ie not due east and west). Use the propagation charts in *RadCom* and watch the packet cluster. Subscriptions to the Weekly DX (www.dailydx.com) and membership of the Chiltern DX Club (www.cdxc.org.uk) are good value.

LEARN SOME MORSE

I can feel you wilting – surely that went out with the dodo? Not for DXing it didn't, and if you have a pip-squeak set-up it is by far your best chance of working significant DX. You can use your computer to send beautiful regular Morse but you must learn to read the callsigns and simple overs by ear. Morse reading programs don't work when there are several stations on the frequency but human ears and brains do. In poor conditions Morse will get through when SSB won't. As the current sunspot cycle declines that will become even more important. Most of the DX I worked when first licensed was on CW; I could not afford the big audio amplifier and modulation transformer you needed for AM phone.

LEARN A LITTLE FRENCH & SPANISH

You only need about 100 words and callsign phonetics in their language – but do get the accent right (most Brits have dreadful accents in French and

Spanish). Many of the weaker South American stations are reluctant to take calls in English because they speak it so poorly. Overseas French-speaking stations often call for “stations français” but seem quite happy to take other countries provided that they respond in reasonable French. Great for working French Polynesia (FO) around 14125kHz!

“CQ DX, CQ DX”

Sadly, if you have a plain-vanilla M or G callsign like me, calling CQ DX is as likely to flush out rare DX as standing beside a rabbit burrow in broad daylight and shouting “Come out little bunny I want to catch you for my dinner”. As a DXer in a ‘common’ country you will spend most of your time listening. But there are a few exceptions. CQ calls may work during a contest and it will work if you have a fancy call even if it isn't rare. I seized the opportunity of a GQ call during the Queen's Jubilee last year (thank you RSGB) and on the first day pointed my antenna at Japan and called CQ on 21MHz. Three hours or so later I had a large pile-up with 300 contacts in the log, 66 with Japan. The high point was when Ed, P5/4L4FN, in North Korea

called me. When did you last have a P5 come back to a CQ call, and now that Ed has had to close down when will you again?

TUNING AROUND

A dying art in the era of the packet cluster? It shouldn't be. A DX station must start transmitting some time and if you find it before the wolf pack you can have a nice quiet easy QSO. I worked EP6KI on a new IOTA island off the Iranian coast with 50 watts and my antenna beaming west in just that way. Of course, I was very weak but the frequency was clear and he had no problems copying me. It was his first CQ call on that band for the day. It's also worth occasionally tuning the high end of the DX bands. You won't find ultra rare stuff up there but a satisfying QSO with Australia or the West Coast of the USA may result. The pack does not often listen above about 14280, 21280 or 28520kHz.

FOLLOW THE FOOTPRINTS

Most DX stations work split to keep their own transmit frequency clear. Usually they listen 5 to 10kHz up on SSB and 2 to 5kHz up on CW, but if they have a big pile-up the limits may

QSL cards are not always what they seem. Goodness knows where Romeo Stepanenko, 3W3RR, and his friends were on these DXpeditions, but apparently not in Myanmar or North Korea.



...AND HOW

NIPpers...

NON-UNIFORMED Ionosphere Police (NIPpers). This secretive group of plain clothes police (they never give callsigns) attempt to enforce discipline on DX frequencies. NIPpers are only allowed a very restricted vocabulary for security reasons. New recruits may only say “Split”, “QSY” or “Up” and the officers are allowed to add “Idiot”. DXers tempted to hit back should remember the EU ban on corporal punishment for young children.

QSO RUSTLERS (the QuORUS, pronounced chorus). A DX station struggling with a weak caller comes back “number six mike alfa only please”. Immediately one of the lead singers in the QuORUS steps forward to say “Thank you very much

Quorus!

this is ## three alfa bravo charlie, you are five and nine”. After this has happened successfully a few times a jammer may be borne. Curiously the NIPpers never attempt to arrest members of the QuORUS. Some believe that they have secured reciprocal recognition of their qualifications under EU regulations.

This my frequency!

SPECTRUM OWNERSHIP

“This my frequency” an impatient voice announces. A tough one this. I always ask at least twice whether a frequency is in use before I call on a crowded band. Changing propagation or a distant station turning his beam can cause perfectly innocent parties to believe that they were both on the frequency before the other. But sometimes it is a tactic to grab a clear

Operating



Left: Colin's wife Diana, heroine of many a fraught antenna building project, with his pump-up 1/4-wave vertical for 80 metres.

out the interval and the direction he is moving and the next time call him by that amount along the path he is going. It often works.

RAKE THE DYING EMBERS

If you have a modest station, the first days of a big DXpedition or the first day of a big contest like CQ World Wide are tough as there are so many 'mega stations' on the air. Time to dig the garden or cut the hedge. But most DXpeditions try to stay on the air over two weekends. On the second weekend you may see a notice on the packet cluster: "21190 3XY7C ...lonely". All the mega stations have worked him but he still wants contacts, and now it is your chance. Similarly on the second afternoon of the CQWW DX Contest (it lasts 48 hours) it can be quite easy to work the many Caribbean stations that have been set up specially for the contest.

BRINGING IN THE QSLs

Some old hands are bored with QSLs, but I am not, they are really an exciting part of DXing. You can send cards via the bureau. DXpeditions from Germany and the UK (and most of the western Europeans) are pretty good about responding to bureau cards, the USA and Japan a bit less so. But

it may take years for the card to arrive. The rest of the world is erratic, to say the least, about replying to bureau cards and many of the rare countries do not even have a functional QSL bureau. You will have to QSL direct enclosing an international reply coupon (IRC) or a US one dollar bill ('green stamp'), sometimes two. This by no means guarantees a direct reply. About half the cards I send direct these days seem to come back via the bureau – but at least most of them come back. A few DX stations in poor countries are in it strictly for the money and never reply – they just pocket the green stamps. But be realistic guys, printing cards and mailing them costs money and time, so as long as they respond some way don't be too critical. In a materialistic world if we want QSLs we have to help out poor DX stations that get inundated with requests. You must also realise that much of the mail to South America, Eastern Europe and the poorer parts of Asia is systematically raided by postal employees, looking for those green stamps. ♦

Last vestige of G3GAF's 1950s station, an ex-US Signals Corp, Lionel J-36 bug key.



encouraged by certain DX stations running a pile-up and only giving their call sign every 10 minutes or so.

NOT TO

frequency. Try to remain polite and exchange callsigns and agree who will QSY. If the other station will not give his call that makes one suspicious. Some regular nets consider that they own particular frequencies at certain times of day and are not above strong arm tactics (including deliberate jamming) to secure it. It doesn't endear one to their controllers.

NUMBAGS!

NUMERICAL AGNOSIA

(NUMbAGs). This unusual condition is characterised by a temporary inability to recognise numbers between zero and nine. It is rare in the general public but often afflicts DXers. The DX calls "Number eights only please". All the NUMbAGs on frequency

reply irrespective of the number in their callsign. An iron-willed DX station can affect a cure in most cases but the slightest sign of weakness and the disease spreads like wildfire.

TAIL ENDING. It used to be a legitimate tactic to slip in your callsign immediately after the last station the DX was working had signed off. The problem is that everyone does it now and many European stations start calling on top of a QSO after one over on the assumption that is his ration. I say "his" deliberately as YLs are usually better operators. Mayhem follows when the DX is unwise enough to accept a station that has persistently called during his QSO.

Tail ending...

Sadly tail ending is now best avoided.

WOTSIT. WOTSITs exist in two life forms. The minor irritant type have a mega station and work anything promising in a pile-up without first finding out the callsign and then have to ask what the call is during the contact and waste everyone's time. The major irritant variety persistently ask "What is the DX?" on the DX station's transmit frequency. Often they jam your hard-won QSO and if they do not their friend in short skip range does so when he comes on the DX frequency to tell his buddy it is XYOZZ. Unfortunately both types of this behaviour are

WOTSIT!?

PERSISTENTLY REPREHENSIBLE

Amateur Transmitting (PRAT). It is unfortunate (but not entirely coincidental) that the eponym for this phrase resembles an uncomplimentary Anglo-Saxon word. A generic description of the operating practices, and operators, listed above. Not to be used on the air though. Let's face it, European DXers have a well-deserved reputation for being the most undisciplined operators in the world, bar none, so maybe we should all make a resolution to improve?

PRAT...