

How do I?

An occasional series

This week: Tips & Tricks for a Successful Activation (POTA, SOTA, IOTA, MOTA...)



(Some of these tips will aid Hunters as well.)

Whether it's ARRL Field Day, The IOTA State QSO Party, activating a park for Parks on the Air, or just operating from someplace new, it's fun to get outside.

Long time readers of this space will see there are many articles on radios, antennas, and other tips and tricks for operating away from your home station. See <https://www.radioclub-carc.com/resources/> for more articles.

Parks On The Air (POTA) has become one of the more popular radio-sport events. While being a Hunter can be very rewarding (as I write this, Jim K4CGY has about 7,600 QSOs with about 5,300 parks worldwide) Activating can be even more fun.

We have discussed portable operations elsewhere in this series, but today let's take a look at some specific things you can do to help ensure a successful activation.

1. Advertise. No, no need to spring for an airplane towing a banner over Beaver Stadium on a fall Saturday afternoon. Simply go to the POTA site: [Parks on the Air \(pota.app\)](https://pota.app), sign-in and post your upcoming activation.
2. Spotting! While spotting your POTA activation at [Parks on the Air \(pota.app\)](https://pota.app) is definitely encouraged, you need to be careful if combining POTA with say a state QSO party or other contest. Some contests, maybe a majority, do not allow SELF-Spotting. But if you are spotted by someone else, that is OK. The POTA rules simply state you need to live up to the spirit of the event. I take this to mean that you are happily camping and decide to do a POTA activation from the park you are in. You self-spot yourself. While operating, someone in another park (a sought after P2P) QSO, or Park-to-Park, calls you and during the exchanges tells you they are also operating in the Kansas QSO party. It may not allow self-spotting. You didn't intend to operate in the QSO party, you just blundered into it. No harm, no foul. Similarly, you may plan a bucket list visit to Yellowstone a year out and post your POTA activation plan. Then when you start operating you realize you are in Yellowstone during the 7th Call Area QSO Party. That sounds like fun. But you self-spotted that morning. Ok. let others keep spotting you, just don't spot again.

3. Logging! Keep it simple. If you have someone to help with logging, that can make life easier, especially the first few times out. There are various computer logging programs out there. But that can mean more to carry and set up. Sometimes pen and paper is just simpler.
4. Be wanted! We cannot all live next to a rarely activated park. Parks-On-The-Air is old enough many Hunters have worked that location. Jim K4CGY grumbled the other day that he only wanted to work 15 parks because he had previously worked all the others. So how do you attract Jim's attention?
 - a. Try adding a comment to your spotting that this is your first ever attempted activation. It works.
 - b. As your effort goes on, Put in comments like "need 3 more for a successful activation".
 - c. When about ready to close down, say something like "CQ Parks on the Air, K-8868 last call". You may just generate a pile up.
5. Be efficient! Are you right handed? Operating Phone? Mic in left hand or use left hand for PTT on headset. Your right hand remains ready to write! A scratch pad is handy to write down calls, then put in log. If you are sure, Ok to log but if not wait until you have it right. Keep in mind many hunters might not stick around if you keep asking for repeats. Especially if they have worked that park before.

Know before you press the PTT. The POTA spotting makes this easy. You heard the call sign and have visual confirmation on the POTA site. You know the mode and frequency. You know the park #. You have a good idea of what signal report you will give them. All you really need is the TIME ON and the signal report you receive. If hunting, have all that in the log before you even try to make contact. As soon as they come back with your call, put the time in and signal report you give. All you need then is the report they give you.

Activators have more to write, so be patient. Especially in a Park-to-Park!

6. Park-to-Park? Many activators thrive on P2P contacts. The POTA gurus recommend the hunter say something like "KB3PQT Park-to-Park" when responding to another park's CQ. If there is a pileup, I generally just put out my call. If there are DX, QRP or just generally louder stations that drown out the rest, save your batteries.and.let them go first. Your turn will come.

If there is something of a pileup, when it's my turn, I simply say "KB3PQT" in phonetics- Kilowatt Bravo Three Papa Quebec Tango. Many stations struggle with *Quebec* for some reason. Once we have contact, they say something like "you are 57 into K-0123" and I will reply "QSL you are 59 into K-8868". The surprise can be fun.

7. Have fun! This is not supposed to be stressful.
8. An activation is the entire day in UTC. You do not have to be on the air 8 hours. Work for an hour, then go enjoy a hike. Come back and work for an hour.
9. Work multiple bands or modes. There are awards for operating multiple bands. While 20M and 40M are the most popular. If you are at a common location, maybe someone

wants it on 15M or 10M or 80M. There are awards for 6 meter operation. Local? Try 2M or even 70CM.

I often run US 30 or US 16 around holidays to stay off the interstate. I am surprised at how many hams with recently issued call signs, will travel a few miles to a place like K-1336, Buchanan's Birthplace State Park, and operate 2 meters from their vehicle. They get the activation, and they got to see the magic of 2M simplex (repeater contacts do not count in POTA).

10. Upload logs. Upload not only the required .ADIF file to POTA, but also upload your log to Logbook Of The World (LOTW).
11. Try CW. While 70% of all HF activity might be on FT8, CW is not dead. It is making a stand in state QSO parties and in events like POTA. I expect JIm K4CGY has a lot of his almost 7600 Hunter QSOs in the log via CW.
12. People are people. but I find POTA Hunters are very friendly and want to see people succeed in their activation.
13. Some stuff you may not have thought about. I owe a lot of these ideas to Steve, N3FWE. He has a magnetic white board. It has the POTA logo, a handout he created about POTA and the club's brochure. He places it near his operating site close enough he can keep an eye on it, but far enough away casual visitors are not afraid to come close and take a look. Some parks may consider this to be handing out literature, so be discreet!

Be ready to explain amateur radio and what you are doing. Expect visits from Park Rangers. a.) They will be curious. b.) They will want to decide when someone complains about the weird people talking on radios if they need to come back, or if they can say "Yeah, we know about them. It's amateur radio. It's fine" and go about their other tasks. c.) Keep in mind Park Rangers are people too. They need hobbies. Amateur Radio may be a good one!

You will eventually meet someone who just does not understand. Stay calm. Do not be confrontational. Be prepared to abort the activation if needed, It's a crazy world and no reason to get sucked into something.

14. Be prepared to go hunting. It happens. You set up; you call CQ; time goes by; and you have maybe three QSOs in the log. Maybe changing bands or modes is not an option. What do you do? Go hunting! Find other parks you can work and make Park-to-Park QSOs.
15. Solo activation vs mic handoff. This is a tough one that can go either way. You and another ham go to do an activation. Does one of you start off, make 10-12 QSOs, and then the other operator takes their turn? Or do you have one operator call CQ, make the QSO, then say "stand by for second operator" and pass the mic to ham #2? How about Ham #3 or Ham #4?

Some hunters find this tedious. Especially if it's more than two operators. Others will stick around as this gives them multiple contacts with one park, and there are awards for that. Having been on both sides of the QSO, as Hunter and Activator, I can see advantages

both ways. Passing the mic might mean both operators can have a successful activation. Solo might get Ham 1 an activation but Ham 2 fails to achieve the minimum QSO requirement as people lost interest. Ham 1 may make a cool contact that Ham 2 loses out on. Like I said, It can go both ways. When Elmering a newer operator, mic passing can work well.

Catch 'ya on the air!

Picture 1: Dave Hile W3VRE (left/background) and Andrew Forsyth AF3I (right/foreground) operating at the Cumberland Amateur Radio Club Pennsylvania QSO Party Station (K3IEC) in October 2019.
Frank Mellott KB3PQT photo.