

How do I?



An occasional series

This week: POTA Hunter Tricks

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

Remember Elmer Fudd and his never ending efforts to bag Bugs Bunny with his popgun? The tears of frustration as he yells “Wascally Wabbit”? Or Wil E Coyote’s efforts to catch the Roadrunner? If your POTA hunting efforts sound similar, stick around.

Parks On The Air (POTA) is perhaps the “it” in amateur radio today. Regardless of ability, license class or equipment, anyone can hunt or activate.

Activators go play radio in a park. The folks who run POTA are no longer accepting applications for new K numbers; unless it is a NEWLY created entity. So if you have a state or national park, forest, monument, battlefield, wetland, preserve, or refuge in your back yard that was not already issued a K number after successful activation and application, it will have to wait. The federal government recently created some more “parks” out west and at this time, those could be activated and a K number applied for.

Hunters tend to work from the comfort of home, but “Park to Park” or “P2P” is perhaps the most sought hunter by an activator. While some of the tips discussed today will be easier to employ at home, they also work for an activator who has “gone hunting”.

POTA activators use all bands and modes. Anything from 70CM to 80M. I am sure this winter we will see activators on 160M. The 40M, 30M, 20M, 15M and 10M bands are the most common, with activity on 17M and 12M. 6M is rare enough to warrant special POTA awards for 6M activity. Activators need 10 contacts on 6M. Hunters need one QSO from each of 6 parks.

Activators can combine 6M with other bands, but if they do so, they need 10 QSOs from 6 parks on 6M. The rules are rather poorly worded. Six meters is a fickle band. Activators need 10 QSOs for an activation, so that is why they need 10. Hunters may have a tough time getting 6M contacts with more than 6 parks.



Elsewhere in this series we have already discussed how to set up your POTA account. Once again, HUNTERS do not submit logs -- only activators submit logs. When 'ya think about it, activators really have a lot to do.

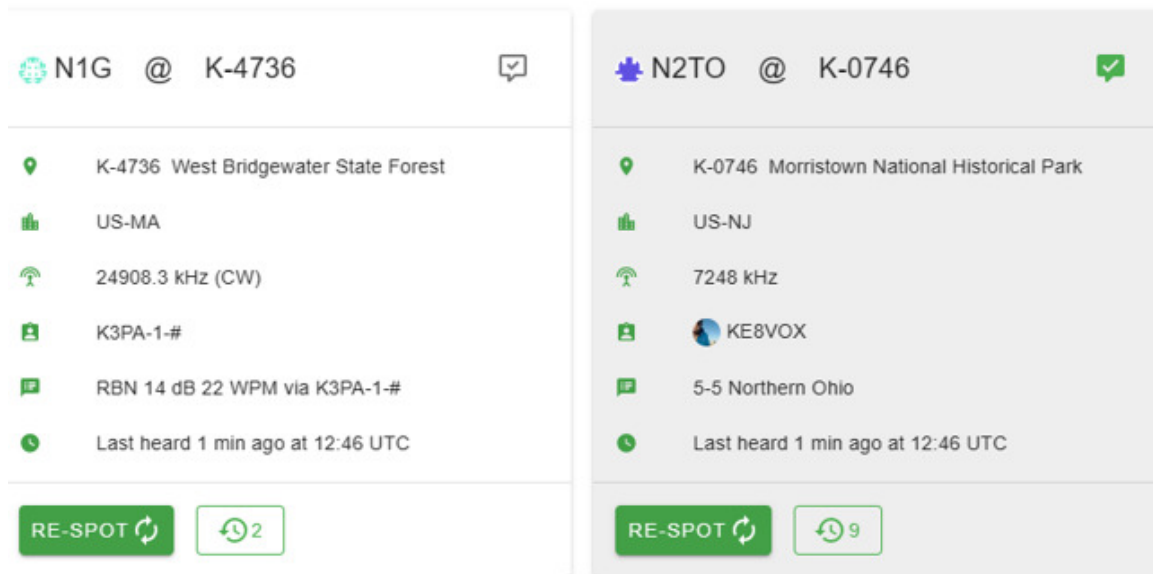
To review: the POTA spots are found at <https://parksontheair.com/>. Click on POTA spots



On the next screen you will see the active spots.

The spot data shows the callsign and park, location, band and mode. The box in the top right shows if that park is already in your hunter log. If the box is white, this park is not in your hunter log, If the box is green, this park is in your hunter log.

Some people like to only work a particular park once. Why is beyond me, as you can earn awards for hunting a park multiple times. Remember, your results will not update until the Activator log is uploaded and you earn credit for the park. It is not instant gratification. Some Activators upload logs in a few hours. Others may need to get to where they have a good internet connection in order to upload. Some may decide to do all the uploading for an entire multi-day or week rove when they return to the comfort of home.



Tip 1: Enter Park Number first

The POTA spotter screen updates every time someone re-spots. It can be frustrating to see a park you want and the spot disappears as you are tuning your VFO dial. When that happens, scroll down. I used to directly enter the callsign in the log. The park number is faster to type. So now I enter the park number first. That way if the spot moves, I only have to find the park and not try to remember the call.

Tip 2: Keep a notepad handy

Keep a scratch pad handy. Sometimes you see a park you want while trying to hunt another one. Write down the callsign and park number. It will be easier to find it later. No need to put down band or frequency., It could change by the time you look for it again on the spotting page.

Tip 3: Get up early

POTA seems to be an early morning and late afternoon activity. From around 1100 to 1600 EST, the activity drops off. The peak is probably 0800 to 1000 or so and 1630 to 1830. Many parks close at dusk and Activators need time to tear down and leave. On Sunday afternoons it is common to see a spike around noon that lasts a couple hours.


Tip 4: Use the OTHER field in N3FJP Amateur Contact Log to record the park number.

I learned this is how Jim K4CGY does it, so I changed my ways. The #49 Hunter must have tricks the rest of us do not yet know. I enter the park number in the OTHER field. For example K-1234.

I used to put POTA there and the park number in the comments. I do not bother to enter the park name in the log. That data is in the POTA website.

When I make a new entry, if I have not entered that park number before, it will show NEW in red beside the OTHER Field.

Activators need to follow the POTA logging standards discussed on the POTA website and elsewhere in this series.



The screenshot shows a web-based logging interface. At the top, there's a header with 'ady to begin!' on the left and 'N0F-P-ndb' on the right. Below this is a grid of input fields. The first row contains: Call, Date, Band, Mode, Power, Time On, Sent, Rec, and Country. The second row contains: Name, State, County, Frequency, and Other. To the right of the 'Other' field are two checkboxes: 'QSL Sent' and 'QSL Rcvd'. Further right, the time is displayed as '7:35:39 AM' and '12:35:39 UTC'. A 'Log Contact' button is located at the bottom right of the form area.

Tip #5: POTA is a contest - operate that way

POTA is a lot of fun. Sometimes you hear Activators seemingly begging for contacts. They may have time to chat. But others have pileups worthy of a State QSO Party Bonus Station or a rare DX expedition. A successful POTA activation is a mini DXpedition. It requires many of the same skills and planning to activate a park 10 minutes from home as it does to activate Bouvet Island. But your local park is a lot easier to get to, the activation duration probably is shorter and it's a lot easier to plan and execute. When you encounter the pileup, work it! Patience. Listen to two or three cycles. Most operators will answer a.) the first callsign heard, b.) the loudest/clearest callsign heard, or c.) the last callsign heard. Figure out how the pileup operator selects a caller and try to be that person. Think like a QRPer. Your 100 Watt station may not be able to drown out the 500W station, but you can wait them out and slide in when it's your turn.

The best operators, in my opinion, try to keep a list. They will pick out "N3FWE" or "SOX" or "station ending in Tango", make notes then come back and say something like "I heard a few, a got a few partials, let's start on the list". When the list is exhausted, the activator calls QRZ or CQ again.

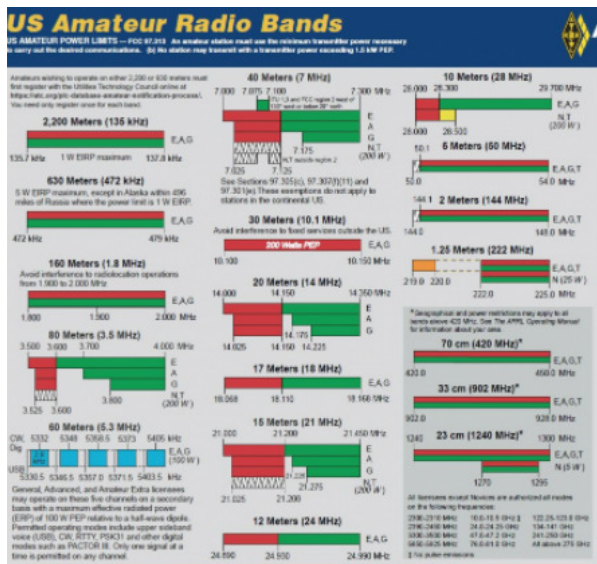
Some activators have been doing this long enough they have a bevy of regular hunters they know by callsign, name, or both. They recognize the voices. They will tend to hear and work those stations first. This is yet another reason to try to "follow" an activator. And since there are awards for working the same activator multiple times, you get credit for improving your odds of logging "The rare one".

Understand what the operator wants. If they are working pileups, don't ask questions like "where are you?" or "what is the weather like?". Give them your callsign, state, signal report and move on. If the activator is in a mood to chat, then it may be okay to ask those questions.

Just like ARRL Field Day or Winter Field Day, some operators are better than others. You probably do not know unless you look up the call in the search box on the POTA spots page if that activator is on their first or their hundredth activation. Most activators do not manage pileups daily. Maybe in another article we will have Activator tips. Keep in mind many activators are using less than ideal antennas. Their radio may not have all the filters the hunter's home station desk top rig has, and does not have a yagi at 100 feet up! The activator may not hear you as well as you hear them.

Tip 6: Be band/mode agnostic

Okay, so not everyone is a skilled CW operator and not everyone enjoys digital modes. POTA embraces all bands and modes. When studying for the General Class license exam, or listening to hams talk about antennas, you get the impression that if “all” you want out of ham radio is regional communication, all you need is a 40M dipole. Want DX ? Then you need a 20M dipole. But we have access to 18 bands! Some are niche bands, used primarily by experimenters or those with deep pockets. Others are hubs of activity. The more bands you can access, the more contacts you can make.



As I am writing this article on a Sunday morning, the number of POTA spots declined from 75 to less than 70 and has climbed back to 93. Phone has the most spots, with about half. The WSJT-X modes (FT8 and FT4) have about one-third and CW has one-sixth. Phone is by far the most popular and is the easiest for most operators to use. The Activator’s station can be as simple as a single band VHF or dual band VHF/UHF in a vehicle, or an HF station inside a RV. Or a portable HF station set up on a picnic table. The Hunter working from home perhaps has more resources at his/her disposal: power mains, better antennas, more room for equipment, more room overall. If you can use that flexibility to have antennas covering multiple bands, you will have more successful hunts.

Most of the activity as I write this article is on 20M, but there are a number of activators on 40M, 30M and 17M as well as 15M, 12M and 10M.

If you are set up for digital or CW, your opportunities increase as well.

Happy hunting!

Catch ‘ya on the air!

