

The content which follows is a transcript of the Practical Amateur Radio Podcast hosted by Jerry Taylor, KDOBİK. This monthly version of PARP is typically released the last week of each month.

The Practical Amateur Radio Podcast – Episode number 50.

From the ham shack of KDOBİK, located in Colorful Colorado, this is the Practical Amateur Radio Podcast.

This is show number 50, volume number 4 with a release date of December 21 , 2011.

Hello everyone. My name is Jerry Taylor; my amateur radio call sign is KDOBİK and welcome to the Practical Amateur Radio Podcast...Creating Elmers One Podcast at a time. Amateur radio or ham radio is what this podcast is all about. If you are currently studying for your exam or have been in ham radio for years....I'm hopeful this podcast will help you. If it has helped you, I hope you will continue to listen and I also hope you'll tell others. Also, in keeping with our Creating Elmers one podcast at a time philosophy, if you learn something from our podcasts....please share that knowledge with others.

WOW....episode 50. While this episode marks a tremendous mile stone for the practical amateur radio podcast and for myself as an amateur radio podcaster....it also marks a tremendous mile stone for many of you who have been with me from episode number ONE. Of course, I know just as many have found the podcast at some stage in the past few years and have worked your way backwards. To each and every listener....I say Thank You. Each and every one of you are important to me and I look forward to the next 50 episodes and beyond.

Episode 50 is going to be devoted to SOTA or Summits On The Air. I talked about SOTA last month and shared with you how I more or less discovered it by mistake, earned my first chaser points and have successfully participated in two solo activations and currently planning my third.

You might wonder why I chose the month of December to talk about SOTA. After all, it is winter and no one in their right mind would go hike up a hill or mountain and play amateur radio.

Yes, it is winter in the northern hemisphere. But it is summer in the southern hemisphere and we have several listeners who listen to the podcast. The other point is, winter doesn't seem to stop SOTA activations from taking place even in the northern hemisphere. Just in my neck of the woods in Colorado, activations are still taking place on the lower peaks. Yes the snow is flying in the high country. But what is covered in snow one day, may be clear and dry the next. But also, I wanted to get the information out there so if it is something that interests you, you'll have time to plan and also spend some time getting those legs in shape on a treadmill or something like that.

Now there are two levels to SOTA. The first being a chaser and the second being an activator. I'll dive into both of these and provide all the practical information you need not only to get started...but have a lot of fun while doing so. It's important to understand that both roles are extremely important. It takes both to make the program successful.

Let's first talk about the Summits on the Air program, how it got started etc. As with all the information I've ever shared with you. Please remember to visit the show notes for this episode, episode 50 for all the URLs and other important details. It will be important as there are several websites that make up the entire SOTA system and I'll provide all the links in the show notes.

The Summits On The Air program was first started in the UK and was the brainstorm of John Linford, G3WGV. The program as we know it today was started in 2002. It really is a way to combine two very exciting hobbies into one.

Now last month I also introduced you to the SOTA website. I hope you've taken the time to check it out. The SOTA program is not some fly by night, make shift, half baked idea. Every thing from the way the program is designed, the point and award structure and the website supporting it all is first class all the way. There are a lot of aspects of our hobby which could learn a few things from the way this system is laid out.

Anyone can participate and there are two ways to do so. First is as a chaser. A chaser simply chases and tries to make contact with those who are activating summits. As I previously mentioned, without chasers willing to attempt to make contact with those who activate....the program wouldn't work. As a chaser all you need is probably what you already have in your ham shack. You can safely and comfortably chase from your shack. A very handy website to watch is the SOTAWatch website at SOTAWatch.org. On this website, you can read about upcoming activations and also view spots posted by others to find where to listen. If you hear and work an activation station, you may also submit a spot to alert others.

Activations take place on qualified SOTA summits all around the US. You'll find what are called associations, (there are 54 associations) around the world. In the US these associations are named W0, W1, W2 etc. All of the call sign areas in the lower 48 are represented with exception to 8 and 9 land.

In these 54 associations you'll find smaller sections called regions which break down the call area into smaller chunks. The associations and regions are all managed by volunteers whose job it is to essentially coordinate and manage the association and regions.

If we break down the W0 Association, you'll find 18 sections consisting of over 1700 summits. The Colorado Front Range is the most eastern part of the Rocky Mountains which extends from the southern border of Colorado into Wyoming. This geographical area contains 219 qualifying summits. That's a lot to keep me busy on the activation side and with over 42,000 qualifying peaks world wide, it is a lot to keep us all busy chasing and activating alike.

Each qualifying SOTA summit will have an identifier which consists of the Association, the Region and the Summit Number. For example, I activated Green Mountain in late November. The identifier for Green Mountain is Whiskey zero stroke Foxtrot Romeo (for Front Range the region) and the summit number of 107.

Like I said, all you really need to chase on-going activations is what you already have in your shack. In the UK and Europe, 2 meter and 70cm are popular along with HF. In the US I've mostly seen activations on the HF bands. But that doesn't mean you can't have a QSO on VHF or UHF if you are close enough. The only general rule is they must be simplex contacts and not via the use of repeaters.

Just visit the SOTAWatch website and look for current activations and spots. Tune in and listen. Now you might need to listen a little harder than you would for contest or special event stations. Most activators are running QRP power up to maybe 20 watts. But do listen. With band conditions being what they are....a mere 5 watts can be heard a long ways.

Once you work a SOTA activation station, you have the option of logging that contact for points on the SOTA website. Just visit sotadata.org.uk, sign up for a free account and submit the chaser entry. It really is that simple.

Want to take it to the next level? Let me first read the fine print by saying that hiking and mountaineering of any kind does come with a certain amount of risk. It is your responsibility to understand exactly what these risks are and how to avoid them. Now that we have that out of the way...let's move on.

Planning an activation will take a little effort on your part. It is safe to say, the planning will be the most difficult for your first activation and get somewhat easier with each future activation you complete. This is especially true if you plan to complete SOTA activations on a regular basis. Regular basis might be defined as once a month or so. The point I'm making here is if you plan to conduct SOTA activations on a regular basis, most of the items you will need to take with you for your first activation will be ready to go for your second, third, fourth and so on activations.

While my ham shack might not look like it. I'm a bit of an organization freak. I love to create checklists and that is exactly what I did to prepare for my first SOTA activation. I created a checklist of all the items I felt I should take with me. On this checklist was the item name followed by some checkboxes. These checkboxes helped me to know that ONE, I packed the particular item and TWO, (and this is truly perhaps the most important) that I actually used the item.

As I've previously mentioned. I'm not a rookie when it comes to hiking, backpacking and general mountaineering. However, I was (and yes still am) when combining amateur radio and SOTA activations. I've been hiking and backpacking since I was a kid. I've not done as much in recent years, but like riding a bike....there are things that you just simply don't forget.

When I sat down in my ham shack and started packing my pack for my first SOTA activation and creating that checklist I just mentioned, I was thankful to have had my past experiences to fall back on. The checklist filled up quickly and I began packing everything in the pack and checking it off the list as it went in. I'll admit....my pack was heavier than I wanted it to be. However, unlike cutting off the shaft of a toothbrush or drilling holes in it....there's no way to make a 12v seal lead acid battery any lighter.

Now my equipment list did actually change considerably after my first activation and it also was modified slightly after my second. I expect to once again fine tune it a bit more with the knowledge I'm sure to gain from my third activation.

I used my checklist system to determine how useful the items were I carried with me. Between activation #1 and #2, I lightened my load by simply replacing the 12v seal lead acid battery with the Buddipole A123 battery power packs. I also tweaked my antenna setup to better survive high winds which I know I'll encounter again. I expect to eliminate a few items which I've never needed and continue to expect to lose a few more pounds in the process.

What you pack in your pack will be similar to what I carry...but of course it may also differ. What works for me, may or may not work for you and your budget. Example of the buddipole power packs. In any event, the equipment you will need may be stuff you already own or you might need to purchase or borrow.

Depending on weather conditions, at a minimum these items referred to as the Ten Essentials include Map, Compass or GPS along with the knowledge of how to use them, Sunglasses and sunscreen, extra food and water, extra clothes, headlamp or flashlight, first aid kit, fire starter, matches and a knife. These really are must have items and my checklist theory of removing an item if not used doesn't apply.

The exact type of footwear, packs and such you choose to use is up to you. Since this podcast is about the amateur radio side of this I'll stick to just that. But will say you'll want comfortable boots and you'll want a comfortable pack. Both your feet and back/shoulders will thank you later. If you don't own either of these already. I highly recommend visiting a outdoor sporting goods retailer like REI, Gander Mountain, Cabelas etc. and let an expert help you with sizing these items.

Now let's talk about amateur radio gear. If you've ever worked portable like either taking your gear to a picnic site or field day, well a SOTA activation is similar. The only difference is in how you get the gear you'll need to make contacts up the hill or mountain.

For obvious reasons, you'll need an amateur radio transceiver, antenna, power supply and just like the other items I named off a few minutes ago, you'll need the knowledge to use these devices with you as well. You don't want to hike for several hours to only learn you don't know how to use that new HF radio you just purchased for SOTA activations.

Again, what I use may or may not work for you. The HF rig I use for SOTA activations is the Yaesu FT-817 QRP rig. If you are not familiar with this model, it provides 5 watts output on HF and weighs just a few pounds. While it does have a built in battery pack, I supplement that with the buddipole A123 Nanophosphate battery pack. The model pack I use is the 4S4P model. This powerpack provides 13.2 volts with total capacity of 9.2Ah. Total weight is 50 ounces.

My antenna setup consists of a buddipole versatee vertical. I plan to capture video on my 3rd activation and will make this available via Youtube. Once this is ready, I'll mention it on a future episode.

So how do we get ourselves and our gear on the top of a SOTA summit for a successful activation? We walk of course. But.....

Some hills and mountains have roads and or highways to the top. Two of the 54 14,000 foot summits in Colorado have roads to the top a few others have 4x4 jeep trails. However, SOTA rules do state the final ascent must be of non-motorized means for the last 100 feet of vertical gain. This means if I drive to the summit of Pikes Peak. I must unload my truck and essentially carry my gear.....all the gear I'll need for the activation at least 100 feet of vertical gain. This would mean I might park in the parking area. Grab my pack and hike down 100 feet and then back up.

In addition, rules also state that the activation zone is defined by an area of 75 feet. This can allow you to get out of wind and weather conditions should it be required. In other words, you don't have to sit on the very top of the summit to be legal. But of course, like a lot of aspects of amateur radio....this does operate on the honor system.

Once you reach the summit, you'll need to set up your gear and get on the air. If you've done all your pre-planning by posting your activation intentions on the sotawatch website, you'll probably have chasers waiting for you to start calling CQ.

Don't be surprised if you don't generate a quick pile-up and if conditions are right, also don't be surprised if you hear DX stations answering your CQ. On my first activation, I worked several DX contacts including Spain, Germany and a new DX entity of Czech Republic.

Depending on just how much time you want to spend on each QSO. I typically record the date, time, frequency, call sign, name and signal report. I use the special Rite-in-the-Rain note pads you can get from outdoor specialty stores like REI. Make sure you have plenty of extra pens and/or pencils. By the way, I feel I can write faster than using my iPad for logging. But if you have an iPhone or iPad, you might want to check out the app simply titled Ham Log.

While you will need to make 4 QSO's to earn points for the activation. How you define a successful SOTA activation is up to you. Meaning, once I reach the summit....I'm happy to just take in the beauty, the fresh air and the feeling of accomplishment for having just hiked up to the top of a summit (regardless of total height).

Regardless if you plan to chase SOTA activations or activate your own, there are several websites you will want to check out. These will of course be listed in the show notes for this episode, episode 50 on www.myamateurradio.com

The first URL you want to visit is the SOTA.org.uk website. This website provides all the rules and guidelines for both chasing and activating SOTA.

<http://www.sota.org.uk/>

The sotawatch.org website is your key to understanding what activations are taking place or will soon take place. Think of it as a DX Cluster site. This is a great place to post your planned activation along with the time and planned frequencies for your activation.

<http://www.sotawatch.org/>

The sotadata.org.uk site is where you will need to setup an account to log your chaser and activation contacts.

<http://www.sotadata.org.uk/>

Finally, want to see what SOTA qualifying summits are near you? Check out adventureradio.de/mapview/index.php Just visit myamateurradio.com for the URL if you missed that.

<http://www.adventureradio.de/mapview/index.php>

Trust me, I could spend a lot more time going over all the little details of the SOTA program. In keeping with the name of this podcast, the practical amateur radio podcast...I believe I've provided enough practical information for you. I encourage you to visit the SOTA website links I just mentioned and read the information.

I will also list in the show notes a few more URLs you might find interesting to help you learn more about portable operations.

<http://hfpack.com/>

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

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

In closing, our hobby of amateur radio is a very diverse in what it offers those who participate. Not every mode, not every way of operation will be for every licensed amateur. However, I truly believe SOTA (if you try it) will be something you'll enjoy adding to your amateur radio hobby. But I must warn you....both chasing and activating is very addicting. Good luck and be careful out there.

Featured Website Segment

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None

Featured Gadget Segment

Amateur Radio is all about gadgets. Some gadgets may directly relate to amateur radio and some may not. However, in most cases the featured gadget will at the very least be something that may help you in some capacity around the shack.

The featured gadget for this episode is fitting with our discussion on all things Summits on the Air. As I've talked about on previous episodes. I'm a firm believer that all amateurs should have an antenna analyzer in their shack. If you don't have one, you should at least have access to one. Many amateur radio clubs own one or more and may make the available to borrow by the membership.

I've owned the MFJ model and use it around the home shack and have also taken it to field day sites and when I've done portable operations near the car. While it's not as heavy as a battery, I wasn't looking forward to lugging it up a mountain either. I began looking into smaller and yes lighter models.

The iP30 from iPortable seems to be a favorite among SOTA activators and it's worked great for me. It measures 3.5 x 2.5 x 1.25 inches and weighs in at 140g. It operates off a 9v battery and provides accurate SWR calculations from 1 - 30Mhz.

Check out the link in the show notes or just simply Google iP30 antenna analyzer. In addition, I purchased a model 1015 Pelican Case to protect my iP30.

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

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Ham Adventures Segment

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It's been a busy last few weeks for me at work. My wife and I traveled to Texas in early December and unfortunately, I decided not to load up the Ford Escape with HF gear. Instead we listened to a few audio books we were both interested in. As I know many of you can relate, you tend to work really hard to

get ready for a vacation or time off and then you have to work really hard once you return. This is especially true for those of us who have no backup when we're not working. In any event, I'm about caught up from the time off.

The end of the year is always a busy time in the world of IT. While many of the employees I support are on vacation and not in the office, it is also a great time to do maintenance of the machines and systems these employees use. I manage a small support environment lab and will be busy the week leading up to Christmas and the week before New Years performing some patching and upgrades.

Having said that. I do plan to take a day or two off and on one of those days I would like to plan a SOTA activation. I will of course tweet my intentions on Twitter and post updates to Facebook and Google +. Of course, this is all very much dependent on weather conditions.

Outside of that, I am hopeful to spend some time in the shack throughout the holidays and take advantage of the awesome band conditions we've certainly been enjoying in the past few weeks.

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Mailbag

Mail goes here

Well this wraps another episode of The Practical Amateur Radio Podcast. We will return again with episode 51 sometime in January.

I have already started mapping out episode 51 and have show ideas for episodes 52 - 55 or so. I am also looking at doing more supplemental video content throughout 2012 to better be able to demonstrate and illustrate some of the topics I share.

I very much still enjoy producing this podcast and serving as an Elmer to all of you who take the time to listen. I would like to ask you all a favor however. Think of it as a Christmas gift....not to me, but to our wonderful hobby. Please do talk about this podcast at your local amateur radio club meetings and if your club has a newsletter, please ask if the editor might put a small mention of the podcast in an upcoming edition of the club newsletter. Also, mention the podcast to those who are interested in the hobby, but have not yet become licensed.

While I lost track a long time ago, I know I've received dozens of emails from listeners who have earned their ticket because someone like you told them about the hobby of amateur radio and now they too are involved. We're doing this together my friends. Thank you.

One final comment and I'll wrap this episode up. Starting on Jan. 1, 2012 I'm going to kick off a non-amateur radio media program via YouTube and a blog site. Again, this will not be about amateur radio...but it will be technical in nature. However, if you've been in tech for a long time...the subject matter and the method of delivery will probably sound very elementary.

The new project is called OurTechLife. As we all know, technology is all around us. I believe there is a large audience of people who (even in the year 2011, almost 2012) avoid it because they don't believe

they can understand it. I'm going to take the method of how I deliver the content I've delivered through the practical amateur radio podcast and deliver tech knowledge in a practical way.

I know the internet is saturated with tech topic shows. But few break tech down the way I plan to do it. Again, I would imagine that most listening to the practical amateur radio podcast will find the content elementary. But I would certainly appreciate the help in spreading the word. I'll post links in the show notes for this episode, episode 50 and if you could and would share those links that will help me get the word out.

I hope everyone has a very merry Christmas, happy holidays and a happy and safe New Years. May we continue to enjoy that wonderful DX and spread the enjoyment of the greatest hobby on this planet. Thank you and may God bless you and yours.

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Until next time, 73 to all from KDOBIK.

This has been The Practical Amateur Radio Podcast. The Practical Amateur Radio Podcast is written and produced by Jerry Taylor. You may contact Jerry by email at kd0bik@arrl.net or by visiting his website at www.myamateurradio.com. The practical amateur radio podcast and myamateurradio.com are protected under the Creative Commons license. Please see myamateurradio.com for details.

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