

CHARLIE'S WHISTLE

By

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Being a DXer can have disadvantages in the same manner many other things we enjoy can have. I'll bet few readers of Charlie's Whistle have given much conscious thought to which ham radio specialty is better or worse for him or her. Like so many other things, we don't give those things very much thought. Why does one ham become a DXer, another chooses contesting, another goes for emergency communications, and another is attracted to weak signal chasing or moon bounce on VHF? Well, that's surely a subject for another Charlie's Whistle and even then, will take much guesswork and extension of fact. It's true that we all have some favorite mode or band, sometimes due to antenna restrictions or budget. Many operate an FM transceiver on the drive-time commute session using one or more of the local repeaters or possibly use one of the new compact and menu driven SSB rigs on an HF net like ECARS. Others might participate in a weekly net or schedule. Some actually find a clear frequency and call CQ, as astonishing as that may seem to some. A DXer like Charlie isn't likely to do that, though. If you were to ask him, Charlie most likely couldn't remember the last time he called CQ. Surely, it was many years ago but it's simply not his style. He's overwhelmingly a listener.

Charlie is typical of many pure DXers who have reached some position on the DXCC Honor Roll. It's not unusual to see a DXer's log show no entries at all for weeks, possibly even months at a time even though the equipment is on and operating every day. Most all DXers will spend some time every day tuning around his or her favorite bands but often won't fire up the transmitter or the amplifier except to occasionally blow the dust out of the plenum chamber and final sockets and chimneys. Receiver activity, of course, isn't logged. Hence, we have no log entries even though hundreds of hours have been spent on the bands. By now, most of you know that Charlie doesn't fit the traditional prototype of what a top rung DXer is supposed to be. Among other differences, he makes contacts and of course, log entries just about every day. New countries or entities, as they're now called are indeed few and very far between now but that's OK.

Charlie simply enjoys working DX, well beyond having a particular entity logged and confirmed. Not every DXer does. In fact, some regard DXers as Extra class SWLs because they never transmit any longer after reaching the DXCC Honor Roll. To try to understand why that is requires us to understand human nature and library shelves at universities all over the country are filled with doctoral theses on that topic, none with a conclusive and convincing opinion.

In fairness, we must point out and discuss the DX achiever who pursues awards beyond the gold standard of DX achievement, DXCC. There are many other DX awards like 5 band DXCC or WAZ, which signifies earning the achievement on every basic HF band, 80 through 10 meters. There are many Amateurs who chase Islands on The Air or IOTAs. There are presently 1170 IOTA groups recognized. Many chase the 3076 US counties or provinces, states, oblasts, etc of different countries. A serious follower of multiple awards can spend a small fortune on postage and printing chasing cards for all these. We touched on the cost of DX awards a few months ago. If you consider all these popular awards, you can very easily spend far more achieving the wall paper than you invested on the equipment you purchased or made to make the contacts.

A detailed diary of a typical day in Charlie's life may help us understand the complete DX person that he really is and possibly a hint about why a pure DXer like Charlie behaves the way does. He doesn't fit the mold of an ordinary DXer, that's certain. His wife, Mary understands him as well as anyone and respects the way he finds total contentment in pursuing his hobby as a DXer even though she enjoys teasing him about it.

Charlie rises very early nearly every day, well before sunrise, and pours a cup of coffee to take with him into the shack, usually about 3:45 AM at this time of year and a few hours later in winter. He'll sleep later if he learns the night before that WWV is forecasting very poor conditions; low SFI or high A index numbers or if he simply feels like sleeping late, say until 5 or 6 any way.

Mary and Charlie's kitchen has one of those imported programmable coffee makers and either Mary or Charlie will load the water and coffee beans before going to bed so that fresh coffee is made in the morning at 3:30, before our friend Charlie wakes. Mary and their dog, Rufus as well as most other normal beings on earth are still asleep at that time and won't think about rising for a few more hours. But, that's not the schedule of a DXer who is well ahead of other DXers on the DXCC score sheet. Even when Charlie was a working man, he'd be up at that hour to catch gray line signals before heading off to work. Gray line is actually perfect for a working DXer, since it provides fairly reliable time to strong DX before and after work. An hour or so before dawn and dusk until an hour or two afterwards are the times to find the strongest signals along the gray line. When it's dawn here, it's dusk on the other side of the world and vice versa. That phenomenon is known as gray line propagation and is one of the most intriguing phenomena of long distance ham radio communication. Serious DXers all over the world make the sacrifice of rising with the rooster every day and try to catch the dusk openings later on as well.

Sun set and rise times change a bit every day, so DXers must understand how to use astronomical data published by the U.S. Naval Observatory and available at http://aa.usno.navy.mil/data/docs/RS_OneDay.html#forma . Factoring into that thinking an adjustment for seasonal changes make it more exciting as well as provides different propagation advantage as sunset/sunrise times change from summer to winter and back. As serious DXers like Charlie know that being able to apply knowledge of astronomical behavior to his benefit in chasing and working those elusive signals before the others in the chase is one of DXing's greatest satisfactions.

On most mornings, Charlie starts his scanning on 40 CW, swinging his beam between 270 and 330 degrees, listening over the hemisphere of earth which is covered in darkness and still benefits from ionospheric layers compressing and combining without the affects of solar energy. It is rare to find useful and interesting openings listening over the sunlit hemisphere of earth due to higher absorption and poorer daylight conditions on lower frequency HF bands. At this time of year, the other end of the gray line terminator (dusk) is on a longitude which includes VK6, YB, and most of Southeast Asia. This can be a very interesting path on 80 and 40. He usually hears signals from the opposite terminator and often listens to them chatting with one another. Now and again, he'll hear a station test and sign with QRZ. Invariably, Charlie will give a call or two. If he cannot attract attention, he moves on. Receiving conditions in late afternoon in SE Asia can be very noisy with static crashes and even though Charlie may hear the DX, he may not be heard by that station at all. However, a quick QSO and signal report will reveal how favorable conditions are. Most times, he'll have his linear tuned up and running although once in a while, he'll only use 100 watts but that's mostly in winter when atmospheric are quieter.

Charlie will operate until about an hour after sun rise. Depending on weather, he'll either take a second cup of coffee out into the yard to read the morning paper or spread out the paper on the kitchen table. Rufus will usually slowly clump his way out of the bedroom as an old hound dog will do and head for the door to check the tower as well as a few favorite bushes. By the time the second (or third) coffee is gone, Mary will come into the kitchen, say good morning and pour herself a cup also.

By mid morning, they're usually cleaned and dressed for the day. Before heading out, Charlie will invariably listen across 20 meters once again. Sometimes he'll include a scan of 17 or 15 meters as well. If home around noon, Charlie will repeat that ritual with special attention listening due north for the far east on 15 meters and again about 2 or 3 PM. At each time, Charlie is ready to pounce on interesting DX. After dinner and before dusk, he'll swing across 20 again listening both east and west. Then, he'll spend some serious time back on 40 CW with the beam east into the dark hemisphere looking toward the dawn terminator, sometimes hearing or working the same stations as he did 12 hours earlier. Many gray liners around the world are regulars like Charlie and know one another quite well even though they've never met and likely won't.

A quick check of 160, 80, 40 and 20 before heading for bed will conclude a normal day in Charlie's DXing routine. When he was working, he would follow the same schedule except for the mid day activity. Charlie is a firm believer in following gray line propagation in order to work that elusive rare DX.

This isn't a rigid script for Charlie's day but it is the general and typical way he spends his time. Like any good ham, he has back-up equipment in case his main transceiver or linear amplifier chooses to misbehave. Of course, he has several back-up keys and keyers also. No cranky equipment will keep Charlie off the air for very long. Of course, being "on the air" is synonymous with chasing DX in his shack.

Many active hams are not DXers, at least not dedicated DXers like our friend, Charlie. Consequently, their operating schedule isn't similar to Charlie's. In fact, most knowledgeable people in this field will only estimate that about half of all licensees are actively on the air at all. What a shame! That calculates to over 300,000 hams who don't have functioning equipment or even the interest to use it. What a terrible shame!

But, being a DXer doesn't mean that you need to be up before the chickens every day and be as dedicated as Charlie. DXing is a way of thinking. If you enjoy the thrill of contacting foreign countries, keep detailed records of your contacts and send for QSL cards and DX certificates, you are a DXer. Of course, some are more afflicted than others but that's the way it is with most things we do. Charlie and others like him will be quick to point out that DX is the king of Amateur Radio and the most exciting sub segment of our terrific hobby. Starting is easy but let me warn you. Once hooked, you're a DXer for life.