

CHARLIE'S WHISTLE

By

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Charlie always learns a great deal at his club meetings and other group activities. Charlie enjoys attending club meetings as well as most any spirited discussion going on between fellow hams, especially those who consider themselves DXers. Last Saturday, Charlie went to offer his help to a spring antenna party at the home of Joe Wilson about twenty miles across the valley from DX Hill on a comparable ridge to DX Hill. Joe is not a new ham but a relatively new DXer, having become seriously interested a few years ago after sunspot cycle 23 peaked a few years ago.

Joe had been a very competitive contester for more than 25 years, having earned several certificates from many international clubs as well as ARRL and CQ Magazine. Over time, he became tired of working so hard every year to always try to make more and more contacts. He finally decided that pulling all nighters wasn't very good for his health as he was nearing retirement age and realized that all along, he enjoyed the DX competitions most of all anyhow. So, for the last few years, he's been working on building up a comfortable and effective DX station, similar to Charlie's, but maybe a little better. The competitive juices have remained with Joe, it seems.

Charlie tries to come and offer whatever help he can at all the antenna parties around DX Hill. Helping someone build a bigger station than his own doesn't bother him in the least. In fact, he thoroughly loves doing it. Charlie believes that he can prevail in DX pile-ups based on his operating ability, not necessarily his bigger signal. At antenna parties, he wisely lets the younger and more agile fellows climb the towers and scamper around on roof tops. But Charlie's experience, advice and guidance are invaluable at any antenna event and always appreciated. Of course, he generally comes armed with enough of Mary's cookies and muffins for a small army, a serious bonus indeed and one universally welcomed.

At every event like an antenna party, club meeting, flea market, hamfest or just about any time when Charlie is in a group of other hams, he is either asked or overhears a question being posed by someone that will make him think and learn about something new and often different. That's one of his reasons why he enjoys participating so much; it's a stimulating learning experience. Joe's antenna party was no exception. In fact, the best question of the day came from Joe himself. While dutifully holding different ropes; Charlie with a pulley rope and Joe tending a guiding rope that would raise and position his new shiny 17 meter yagi on its way up his tower, Joe chatted with Charlie about their favorite topic and wondered out loud, "I wonder why most of the new DX on the air during the last year and most of the big DXpeditions were on the other side of the world. Don't they realize that at the bottom of the cycle, lots of DXers won't be able to hear them?" Charlie just acknowledged Joe and thought about his provoking question.

The most obvious and truthful response that Charlie might offer to the question wouldn't be very polite, however truthful it might be. Joe has made taken a typical American viewpoint, focused on himself. There are millions of Amateur licenses in Japan alone, several times the number in the USA. DXing is an incredibly popular sport in Japan, possibly more popular per capita than in the US. It has been conservatively estimated that there are well over 600 thousand active JA DXers on the air. That is as many as the total number of FCC licenses issued in all of the USA. From the never ending pile-ups we hear from JA, it's easy to believe. Adding the other countries in Asia and Oceania, our US license population is indeed a small minority of the world's Amateurs. Therefore, for the majority of the world's hams, the rare DX of the last year was in their Eastern Hemisphere, relatively close by and not an especially difficult propagation path at the bottom of the sunspot cycle. Therefore, the planning may have been quite well done if that had been the criteria.

We've had operations from VU4 Andaman, VU7 Lakshadweep, FT5 Kerguelen, 3Y0 Peter 1, KH8 Swain's Is, ZL8 Kermedec, 9M Spratly and lots of others in the Far East and Indian Ocean. Sure, there has been some other DX appearing from here in our Western Hemisphere as well but Joe's point is a good one and probably one that others may be questioning. Why were so many of the major expeditions on the other side of the globe? Especially at this time of the sunspot cycle when 15, 12 and 10 meters are dead and lots of the world's DXers might not get much of a shot at working them? Well, it seems entirely obvious to Charlie

that the location of the rarest DX wasn't purposely selected on the basis of being most difficult for the US to work. Charlie thought for a while as they worked, carefully pulling Joe's new four element 17 meter beam up his tower.

In 2005, if we disregard places that don't permit radio operation or even landing in their country like North Korea, Yemen, Desecheo or Navassa, the majority of the remaining top ten most wanted countries were on the opposite side of the world from the USA. In 2006, we've seen Andamans drop from 10th to 37th on the most wanted list, thanks to ambitious and danger filled operations of VU4RBI and VU4NRO, Peter 1 dropped from 4th to 92nd position and of course, Swain's Island was created as a new one and operated extensively by KH8SI and N8S, two operations which will keep it out of the top levels of the most wanted list for a long while.

Charlie then asked Joe, "Say Joe, do you remember reading about a famous bank robber a long time ago named Willie Sutton?" Charlie knew that Joe wasn't born when Sutton was robbing banks in the early 1930s. Joe replied that he knew the name but not much more. So Charlie told him that Sutton was asked why he robbed banks and he simply replied, "Because that's where the money is." Charlie pointed out to Joe that "much of the rarest DX lately has been located in the Indian Ocean and South China Sea. If Willie were a modern day DXer, he might comment that we must work rare DX that's over there on the opposite side of the world because that's where it is. Yogi Berra, I believe it was, once was quoted as saying 'you gotta hit the ball where it is, not where you think it was or wanted it to be...' or something like that."

Charlie can understand Joe's viewpoint as well as the reason for his somewhat narrow perspective. Charlie further recognizes that Joe has never experienced a full sunspot cycle let alone several of them. Therefore, his reference points are limited. That can explain his question and his viewpoint. Joe and his friends can't appreciate the different skills needed to work DX at different points in the cycle.

As Charlie did his part in helping Joe to get a couple of antennas into the air on this beautiful Saturday, he was able to accomplish much more improvement "on the other end of coax cable", with the operator. Getting Joe to see the world of DX from a completely different point of view was a humbling experience for him. When he realized that world DX decisions are made on a broad world stage, not designed around, by, for, about or to primarily benefit US hams, he could see how his thinking had been flawed.

Rare DX is created equally for all. It may gain existence anywhere in the world, where a piece of land or set of rocks no larger than the family car can become the rarest place on earth. As long as the 'Section II DXCC List Criteria' rules are completely satisfied for any proposed piece of permanent "dry land" on earth, a new entity can be born. Last year, two all time new ones were recognized on the world DX stage, Swain's Island and Montenegro. Sometimes, the so called "new entity" is so small or dangerous for anyone to even stand on that no more than five or six people could possibly stand on it at one time. Sort of silly, isn't it? Charlie knows that this fact opens the door for unkind comments to come from hams who don't like DX or the disruption that DXpeditions can cause on the bands. The recent operation to the rarest entity on earth, Scarborough Reef in the South China Sea lasted about a week and 18 world class DXers kept four stations running around the clock working nearly 45,000 hams around the world on CW, SSB and RTTY. Scarborough Reef is a group of slippery algae covered rocks in the South China Sea. Four different sets of rocks provided a nest for each of the four stations. Operators had to jump on and off the rocks from a boat, according to a three shift operating schedule. The entire team of 18 couldn't all fit on the reef at the same time. As was said earlier, sort of silly, isn't it?

Of course, no one lives on Scarborough Reef, not even birds. But, being inhabited is not one of the necessary DXCC Criteria that must be met. Peter 1 Island in the Antarctic isn't inhabited either although it's certainly large enough for more than 18 people to stand on it at the same time. In fact, very few on the DXCC entity list are not inhabited by a regular population. Regardless, they all must squarely meet Section II DXCC List Criteria.

Joe's antenna party ended about 4:30 PM when the last of four yagis was finally aimed and secured atop his neat and solid 65 ft self supporting tower. After months of analysis and study, Joe determined that his beams for 17 to 10 meters needed to be at just about 65 to 70 ft, reserving his 100 ft tower for his 40 and 20

meter antennas which will benefit from the added height. About a dozen hams took part in the antenna party and thoroughly enjoyed the day. Before the crew started packing up to head home, Joe announced that all were welcome to return four weeks later when the fearless climbing duo of Larry and Alex will be placing his 2 element 40 meter and 4 element 20 meter yagis atop his big tower. Everyone acknowledged Joe's invitation and stated that they'd be back. The four weeks between the two events are necessary for Joe to preassemble the large antennas under the tower and prepare the hardware packets for easy installation.

Joe thanked all and said that he'll be sending out an e mail reminder when the date and the time is firm and another confirmation when weather conditions are better known for that day. Charlie added that he would be bringing a good supply of chocolate pecan cookies. The gang cheered in unison and a few added that the cookies guaranteed that they'd be there. Charlie replied that Mary will be very pleased to hear that her cookies are making a difference.

Serious antenna systems like Joe's cannot possibly be installed safely without a crew of helping hands. Not all need be experienced except for the climbing team, however. Having an adequate ground crew is essential and is normally comprised of newer hams and old timers who can share their experience. Obviously, older hams like our friend Charlie are essential to the operation. Hams like Charlie have the experience and wisdom to guide the process, especially when something unexpected happens. Absolutely nothing can replace having someone on scene who has been through this before and can sense a problem before it strikes. It immeasurably adds to safety margins.

The most important part of an effective Amateur station is its antenna. Without a decent antenna, none of the new expensive radios on the market will perform very well. Similarly, with a good antenna that is properly installed, even a simple old flea market treasure can perform like a champ and capture that rare DX. Money spent improving your antenna system will usually pay handsome dividends day in and day out and at any point in the sunspot cycle.

Between now and spring of next year, you should invest some time and some budget dollars into repairs and upgrades to your antenna system. Every penny spent improving your antenna will pay rich dividends. Be ready for the start of sunspot cycle 24. You'll be very pleased with how well your station will perform. Dollar for dollar, no improvements will beat antenna upgrades. Good luck and start planning for your antenna party now.