

CHARLIE'S WHISTLE

By

Bob Beaudet, W1YRC

A repeating issue presented itself to Charlie recently when he walked into his club meeting room a few minutes before the president was scheduled to gavel the meeting to order. He had just placed two still warm blueberry pies from Mary's kitchen on the refreshment table and was fixin' to pour himself a cup of fresh coffee and looking over some pastries that others had brought in. He heard some new hams talking about how poor band conditions were and it wasn't worth their time to even turn on the HF radio. As Charlie made his way to an empty chair near the back of the room, one of the newbies spotted him and called him over, "Say Charlie, we need your help over here. Would you mind joining us and tell us again when the bands will turn around and let us work some DX? You've told us before but the bands aren't any better. We've been waiting and waiting to even hear some DX, but it's just not there."

Charlie is always very patient and generous with his time and information. Of course, he's always happy to help these new hams, but he knew that he had to allow some slack because they were all new hams and inexperienced with regard to DX. They had never seen anything of a sunspot cycle, other than a couple of years worth of Cycle 23's minimum. This surely hasn't been an exciting time for them.

As Charlie sat, one of the newest hams who realized that Charlie was one of the club's biggest DXers, said to him, "So I'll bet you're not working lots of DX these days either, are you?" Charlie quietly took a sip of his coffee and asked what his name was and where he came from because he had never seen him before. He replied that it was Joe and he had just moved from Chicago. Charlie said, "Well Joe, that depends on what you mean by DX. This morning, I worked West Malaysia, Thailand, South Korea, Taiwan and Japan. Around noon, I worked about a dozen Europeans and this afternoon, a couple of stations in Africa and one in western Australia." Joe grinned in disbelief, "Yeah, right. Sure you did. The bands were dead all day. I checked a few times." Charlie nodded without grinning, "Well, I really made those contacts today and most everyday, I do about the same. The bands weren't dead at all."

Another fellow said, "Well, if you heard all those stations, I'll bet none of them were moving your S meter, Charlie." Charlie sipped some more coffee and replied that most of them did and a few were close to S9 on his meter. Then Joe said, "Oh sure, you probably have a beam a hundred feet high and run a kilowatt. Try doing it with a long wire and a hundred watts."

Charlie's old friend Mike had just arrived and picked up a cup of coffee as he overheard that latest part of the conversation. Mike is much blunter than Charlie he and reacted strongly to Joe's insensitive remark. As he came over to sit with Charlie, he replied to the former Chicago ham, "So what? A serious DXer uses a good antenna and has the power available when he needs it. He makes the contact and leaves the frequency for others. Do you think DXers shouldn't do that?"

The new fellow just smirked and said, "It doesn't take any skill when you have all that advantage." Just as Mike was about to go over and rearrange the fellow's head, Charlie grabbed his arm and asked him to stay. "Well son, using a KW amp doesn't let anyone hear more DX than what the next guy can hear and any DXer knows that you must hear the DX in order to work it. Even top DXers have to hear the DX before even thinking about working it. Having a KW transmitter or a beam for that matter doesn't matter a bit if you can't hear the stations. It seems from what you've said that you didn't hear any DX today. Most serious DXers use a directional gain antenna of some kind to hear weaker DX signals. These days at the sunspot minimum, we see a lot of weak signals. Of course, you don't need to use a beam but it makes DXing much more efficient, not as easy as you seem to think but at least a beam gives you a reasonable chance in the pile ups."

The new fellow replied, "Well, I use a long wire and run 100 watts and I can work all the DX I want." Mike jumped in again, "Oh, is that so? What have you worked in the last week?" Still smirking, the teen replied, "Oh, let's see...France, Spain, Costa Rica and Brazil." Mike then asked, "And what did you work today?" The young ham said, "Nothing. The bands weren't any good today." Mike pointed out that Charlie just reported making a couple dozen DX contacts today, many of them on the other side of the world. A good operator with proper equipment can make up for marginal band conditions. Do you understand?"

Charlie stepped in because he could see that his friend Mike's face was getting red and he was probably going to start seriously berating this young fellow for pretending to be such an authority without having credentials. Charlie asked the teen, "What sort of operating did you do when you lived in Chicago?" He said that he lived in an apartment and just got his Technician ticket a year before his family moved here from Chicago. All he had was a 2 meter FM radio and a mobile antenna in his room. He upgraded to Extra just before moving here a few months ago. Charlie calmly asked the young man, "So, what do you have for a station out here?" The new Extra replied, "Well, I borrowed a transceiver from my friend and put up a wire from my house to a tall tree. I think you old timers call this kind of antenna a Zepp. It works really well, whatever it is." Charlie explained that what he had put up sounds like it would be a Zepp. He then asked, "Do you have plans to put up a tower or get an amplifier." His reply was, "No, that makes it too easy. Anyone can work DX that way."

Mike was starting to squirm and turn red again. Charlie knew Mike would rip into this fairly arrogant fellow pretty quickly for making such a cold and uninformed remark. In order to divert Mike away from taking action, Charlie pointed out to the new fellow, "You know, Mike here does a pretty fair job in breaking a DX pile up, usually with only two or three calls at most. Pile-ups don't usually develop when one is chasing popular places like the ones you mentioned; France, Spain, Brazil, etc. Cracking competition for more exotic and distant places can be very tough. If dozens or hundreds of callers are the same signal strength, the DX station has difficulty picking one out of the noise. It's simply more efficient for all involved to use an antenna that focuses your signal in order to make the contact crisply, minimize QRM for others and move off the frequency."

Running power is a personal choice. In Mike's and my cases, we're senior citizens and we need to save as much time as possible when working DX. We can't risk getting too excited and raising our blood pressure. You young folks can better afford it." Most of the group grinned at Charlie's self deprecating humor, but the young Chicagoan remained straight faced.

The fellow quickly observed, "Maybe you senior guys should quit chasing DX and keep ragchewing on 75 meters, complaining about your ailments and doctor appointments." Mike nearly lost it completely, "Son, you know a new ham like you ought to respect someone like Charlie, not just because he's old enough to be your grandfather but because he's forgotten more about ham radio and especially DXing than most of us will ever know. You need to learn quite a lot more about ham radio before handing out advice and obviously, you need to improve your social skills. You've only been a ham for a couple of years and you think you know enough about DXing to debate with Charlie. Then, you tell him to stay on 75 meters and complain. What's wrong with you anyway?"

The young fellow just grinned. After an uncomfortable wait, Charlie spoke up. "Of course, I was kidding when I said that we seniors need to save time, etc. I know that you didn't mean to be impolite. But, you really should spend some time learning more about DXing before recommending what is best for the rest of us. I would never tell you that DXing with a hundred watts and a wire antenna isn't how you should chase DX. Lots of hams have worked all over the world with a setup like that. Band conditions at present normally don't let you work much more than strong single or double hop skip contact. You must know that serious DXers use serious stations plus a lot of skill and experience to work their DX.

Again, the fellow didn't reply. One of the others in the group asked, "Charlie, what is single and double hop skip? I never heard of that." The former Chicago new ham answered for Charlie, "It's really low angle DX that only happens at dawn and dusk." Mike jumped in at that point, "No, that's not right. You're confusing it with grey line propagation and you even got that wrong because low angle signals, although best for DX are not necessarily involved. Single hop is the term we use to describe stations worked that are at the end of a single reflection of our signal off the ionosphere and back to ground. On 20 meters, that would usually be about 1000 to 1500 miles distant from us. Double hop means that the signal reflected back to earth and back to the ionosphere again. Those can be distances up to 3000 miles or more. Making a contact with the other side of the world may require that your signal makes several up and down trips. With every reflection, a little signal is lost to absorption, so you must start with a pretty strong transmitted signal to compensate for that. That's why it would be very unusual, except in extremely favorable band conditions, to work DX like that using low power and a wire."

The pompous Chicagoan shrugged and said, "Yeah, I knew that." Charlie, Mike and everyone else in the group knew that he didn't. As gracious as we know Charlie to be, the young fellow had annoyed him just a bit, not for his lack of knowledge but his attitude. Despite that Charlie offered, "Look son, you'd benefit from some mentoring. I'd be very happy to help you. Could you come by DX Hill for a few afternoons?" Instead of

replying and to everyone's surprise, the fellow just got up and left the meeting without saying a word.

After a few seconds, one of the group observed, "Charlie and Mike, I've known Joe since he moved here a few months ago. He likes to be an authority on just about everything and honestly does know lots of different stuff. He doesn't like being corrected by anyone. We sort of ignore him when he gets too hard to take. But, if the offer holds, I'd sure like to come to DX Hill and see how to become a DXer." The others in the group said that they'd like to come also. Of course, Charlie welcomed them all.

As we know, DXing at the bottom of the sunspot cycle can be very challenging. Signals are rarely strong and one needs to listen to lots of noise and be patient to work the limited DX that can be found. The upper bands like 15, 12, 10 and 6 meters are rarely open except for occasional contacts. Checking any band by just spinning the dial across it will invariably tell you that no DX is there but if you carefully tune and listen for weak signals, you may be rewarded. Charlie works DX nearly every day by careful listening and so can you. A good DXer is an even better skilled short wave listener. Good DXing!