

Public Service

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“It Seems to Us”

We’ve Got Spots!

“As the saying goes, ‘Better late than never.’
At long last, Solar Cycle 24 is off and running!”

It’s difficult to believe now, but four years ago one group of “solar weather forecasters” was predicting a sunspot peak in October 2011. If you are among the countless amateurs who keep track of ionospheric propagation conditions you now know that they were wildly optimistic. When that prediction was made we were in a trough of solar activity whose end already was overdue but would continue for another two years. Many of us with experience from previous sunspot peaks began to wonder if we would ever see their like again.

October 2011 did not turn out to be a peak — at least we hope not! — but it was a very, very good month for HF radio propagation. There were glimmers of improvement in 2010 and brief periods of excellent conditions this past spring, but it was the fall 2011 operating season that finally brought consistent global DX to the 10 and 12 meter bands. The excitement may have died down a bit by the time this issue of *QST* makes it into print and into your mailbox — band openings grow shorter along with the hours of daylight — but as of mid-October we’re feeling a bit giddy.

Greater solar activity expands the useful HF radio spectrum but it is 10 meters that benefits the most. The band is special for a number of reasons. It is the widest HF amateur allocation, so crowding is less of a problem than elsewhere. Every FCC-licensed amateur has privileges on 10, including Technicians and Novices who can operate SSB between 28.3 and 28.5 MHz, RTTY and data in the lower part of the band, and CW all the way from 28.0 to 28.5 MHz. A quarter-wave vertical antenna element is just eight feet long and a half-wave dipole is just 16 feet from end to end. Small Yagis are relatively easy to manage and work pretty well at modest heights. Even with low power and a compromise antenna you can make a lot of memorable intercontinental contacts, although you may have to wait in line for the juicier stuff.

For Generals and above there is plenty of room above 28.5 MHz. There is even some FM activity at the high end of the band. Generals also have full use of 12 meters, which opens earlier and stays open longer than 10. On some days the maximum usable frequency (MUF) may make it to 25 MHz but not quite to 28 MHz; those are the days when you’ll be glad you thought to check 12 meters!

If you’re new to DXing and have been working

toward DXCC or the DXCC Challenge you can fill in a lot of the blank spaces on your list in a hurry on these two bands — but it would be a shame if that’s all you do. Ten meters in particular lends itself to more leisurely chats with new friends and old, half a world away. Especially after such a long famine it’s tempting to gorge ourselves on DX, working every station we hear and moving on to the next as quickly as possible. That’s not likely to give us the most satisfying meal. You can’t force someone into an extended conversation — a “ragchew” in traditional parlance — but if you find yourself in contact with someone who wants to chat, take advantage of the opportunity to learn a bit about someone you may not ever meet in person who lives in a place you may never get to visit. Who knows? Your initial on-the-air acquaintance may grow into an opportunity to do both!

It also behooves those of us who have “been there, done that” to give our newer brothers and sisters a chance. No one who was first licensed for HF operation in the past six or seven years has had the chance to experience conditions as good as they are right now. They have a lot of catching up to do! Remember that Technicians and Novices have limited frequency privileges and a 200 watt power limit; on phone, move up the band if you can.

If you have no new worlds to conquer on HF, six meters beckons. Thanks to the fact that it is now included on most HF rigs there has been a tremendous surge of interest in the “Magic Band.” Even if the peak of Cycle 24 turns out to be less lofty than its recent predecessors there will be some outstanding days when the MUF gets up to 50 MHz, or close enough to allow for skew-path propagation.

How long will these conditions last? As we have discovered, predictions are unreliable — but for what it’s worth the consensus appears to be that the peak will occur sometime in 2013 and will be lower than most recent cycles. Enjoy them while you can!



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