

A Year of National Parks on the Air

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National Parks
ON THE AIR
2016

**A look back at the year of
National Parks on the Air, and the
people who made it a success.**

As the clock slipped from 23:59:59 UTC on Saturday, December 31, 2016 to January 1, 2017, one of the most frantic, engaging, and enjoyable days in Amateur Radio came to a close. The last day of ARRL's year-long National Parks on the Air (NPOTA) program, created to help Amateur Radio operators celebrate and promote the Centennial of the National Park Service (NPS), had around 80 activations of NPS units.

Throughout 2016, more than 1.1 million contacts were made from 460 of the 489 eligible NPOTA units. More than 1,470 Activators visited NPOTA units nearly 21,000 times in 2016, helping to bring the history and beauty of the National Park Service to tens of thousands of amateurs worldwide. It was one of the most successful and engaging Amateur Radio on-air events of all time.



The Start

ARRL PR Manager Sean Kutzko, KX9X, wanted to help the NPS celebrate their centennial. He took his idea to fellow ARRL staffer Norm Fusaro, W3IZ, who was then Assistant Membership & Volunteer Programs Manager, and the plan was later unanimously approved by the ARRL Board of Directors at their July 2015 meeting.

Enthusiasm was very high in the days preceding the event. Several operations began at the moment the clock rolled over to January 1 UTC, including a team of



Ten-year-old Hope Lea, KM4IPF, activated many parks during 2016 with the rest of her family. Here she's at Joshua Tree National Park (NP32) in California, using a helium-filled party balloon to support an end-fed wire antenna. [James Lea, WX4TV, photo]

operators at Cabrillo National Monument in California, and the husband-and-wife team of Allan and Bridget Thompson, KV4T and KS4YT, from Hot Springs National Park in Arkansas. Dino Darling, KX6D, managed to get permission for a tri-bander on a 100-foot tower trailer into Joshua Tree National Park to help kick things off with a fine signal across the country.

Facebook Group

A key component of NPOTA's success was the decision to extensively use social media to promote the event. The @ARRL_NPOTA Twitter feed created a lot of buzz all year long, and a number of NPS units followed the feed. However, the biggest social media success came with the creation of an online community on Facebook. The group would serve as a gathering place for activity announcements, updates to the program, and general information. It quickly became much more than that. By January 3, 2016, there were over 1,000 people in the NPOTA Facebook group. That number rose to 1,500 by January 12.

Stay Active Beyond NPOTA

There's plenty for NPOTA Activators and Chasers to do now that the NPS Centennial is over. There are many "on-the-air" programs run by numerous organizations worldwide that will give you plenty of things to activate and collect.

- **Summits on the Air (SOTA — www.sota.org.uk):** SOTA is a worldwide program focused on activating mountain summits. Each summit is worth between 1 – 10 points, depending on the difficulty. Chapters exist worldwide.
- **US Islands (USI — www.usislands.org):** The US Islands Awards Program promotes portable operations from islands in lakes, rivers, and streams, as well as along the coast of the US and its territories.
- **World Wide Flora and Fauna (WWFF — www.wwff.co):** Hugely popular in Europe and Australia, WWFF got some extra attention in the US last year. Many NPOTA units also qualify for WWFF.
- **Lighthouses —** Two groups promote Amateur Radio activity from lighthouses: The Amateur Radio Lighthouse Society (www.arlhs.com) and the International Lighthouse and Lightship Weekend (www.illw.net). August is a big month for lighthouse activity.
- **World Castles Award (WCA — www.wcagroup.org):** Transmit from thousands of castles around the world. There are over 1,000 qualified castles in the US.

These are just a few possibilities. Don't forget about activating grid squares on 6 meters, thanks to the ARRL Fred Fish Memorial Award (www.arrrl.org/ffma). AMSAT (www.amsat.org) would be happy to teach you about activating grid squares via the amateur satellites; it's not as difficult as you may think! And don't forget about the 3,077 counties in the US. Your state likely has a QSO Party where you can mount an expedition to a rare county. Visit www.countyhunter.com for more info.



Patrick Twigg, N9OQT (seated), makes contacts from the Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial (NM15) in Indiana, as Ranger Louis Disinger, W9UHL, looks on. [Mary M. Twigg, W9MAP, photo].

“The Facebook group was very effective in fostering team spirit,” said Activator Steve Masticola, WX2S. Jess Guaderrama, W6LEN, said NPOTA was “the most fun activity in my 60 years of being licensed. This was due in large part to the camaraderie, friendships, and exchanges on the NPOTA Facebook

page.” By the time the event ended, over 5,800 people were part of the NPOTA Facebook group, and the community showed no signs of letting up, even though NPOTA is officially over.

Reception from NPS Folks

While ARRL did their best to promote NPOTA to the NPS community for months leading up to the event, some NPS employees hadn’t heard about it when the first Activators rolled into their park. NPS staff were, generally speaking, very welcoming to the Amateur Radio community after they understood the minimal impact NPOTA would have on their unit. Many saw the benefits of the extra publicity immediately.

Melinda Repko, a Park Ranger at Hopewell Culture National Historical Park (HP15) in Ohio, loved NPOTA: “It was a wonderful way to celebrate the centennial and connect new users to the NPS and Hopewell Culture NHP. Operators were very respectful of the park and our staff. We enjoyed hosting them!” Hopewell Culture even purchased NPOTA pins to hand out to visiting Activators, and an NPOTA banner Activators could borrow while on the air.

“Amateur Radio operators helped spread the awareness of our new historic site, which joined the NPS in 2011,” said Christian Davis, Chief of Interpretation at President William Jefferson Clinton Birthplace Home National Historic Site (NS57) in Arkansas. “We appreciate the collaboration and hope that each interaction sparked a further interest in our site and the NPS as a whole.”

Trails — the Stars of NPOTA

Shortly after NPOTA was announced in October 2015, ARRL received a phone call from Mark Weaver, Superintendent for the North Country National Scenic Trail. “Mark wanted to know why his unit — the longest National Scenic Trail in the country — wasn’t on the NPOTA units list,” Kutzko recalled. “When I explained NPOTA was

based on the NPS list of officially recognized units, and the North Country Trail wasn’t on that list, he said, ‘Let me see what I can do.’” A few weeks later,



NPOTA co-administrators Norm Fusaro, W3IZ (left), and Sean Kutzko, KX9X (right), got to spend time with Stuart Thomas, KB1HQS, at the 2016 Dayton Hamvention. Thomas was NPOTA’s top Activator, putting NPOTA units on the air 503 times in 2016. [Sean Kutzko, KX9X, photo]

with less than 10 days until the event kicked off, NPS added a slew of trails and rivers to their official list. As a result, ARRL added 18 new trails and 29 National Wild and Scenic Rivers to the NPOTA units list. Many of these trails and rivers also intersected with other units, which created lots of possibilities to transmit from two or more units simultaneously. These became known as “two-fers” within the NPOTA community.

Mark Weaver’s work to get the trails and rivers added to the NPS list paid off. It added tens of thousands of miles of territory across several states that could be activated for NPOTA, bringing the program closer to thousands of amateurs across the country. Trails accounted for over 188,000 of the 1.1 million NPOTA contacts, or roughly 17% of the total contact number. The top ten most-activated units, in terms of number of contacts made, were all trails. North Country National Scenic Trail — known as TRO4 for NPOTA — was right at the top; it had the most valid activations of all units (450) and ranked fourth overall in total QSOs (15,421). The icing on the cake: Superintendent Weaver earned his Technician license because of NPOTA.

Women in NPOTA

From the beginning, women were active participants in NPOTA. Emily Saldana, KB3VVE, used NPOTA to learn CW, and was handling pileups from numerous sites with her newly acquired KX3 by the end of the event. Emily also became



Mark Weaver (left), Superintendent of the North Country National Scenic Trail (TRO4), loved National Parks on the Air so much, he earned his Technician license! Weaver, KB8ELY, is pictured with ARRL Michigan Section Manager Larry Camp, WB8R (right). [Tom Bosscher, K8TB, photo]

famous for her “cookie contests,” which helped unite the Facebook community and increase NPOTA activity at critical junctures.

Seventeen-year-old Ruth Willet, KM4LAO, and her mom Sharon, KM4TVU, also used NPOTA to improve their skills. Ruth became an excellent CW operator as well. “On every single one of my activations, I either activated with or borrowed gear from another ham,” Ruth said. “As a result, I learned so much about different mobile and portable stations, and I have a better idea about what I want for my own setup.”

Ingrid Geissler, W7ISG, was NPOTA’s third-best Activator, making 332 activations from 123 different NPOTA units as she and her husband Reinhard, K7RGG, criss-crossed the country in their mobile home. Margie Spangenberg, KK4AGN, made 73 activations as she and her husband Gary, KF4GGK, also did extensive travelling in their RV. Laura Steinberger, WZ8C, could often be found on the North Country Trail with her dog, Shelby. Sisters Janice and Janet Robidoux, KØJA and KØJE, were known as the “Minnesota Twins” and were the top Chasers in the state of Minnesota. Both of them worked 452 units, which tied for 17th among all Chasers nationwide. Numerous YLs were active in NPOTA, including Andrea Slack, K2EZ; Mary Joseph, NØTRK; Mary Twigg, W9MAP;

Susan Frank, W6SKT; Patty Winter, N6BIS, and so many others.

#1MillionQSOs

By October, there were just over 700,000 NPOTA contacts uploaded to ARRL’s Logbook of The World (LoTW). Around this time, the Facebook group started wondering if a million NPOTA contacts could be achieved. It would take a significant effort. It took 10 months to reach 700,000 contacts, so the monthly QSO rate would need to increase significantly. Around mid-October, the hashtag #1MillionQSOs popped up on Facebook and Twitter, and the community took action. By November 1, the level of activity had increased noticeably, and soon there were around 20,000 QSOs a week being uploaded to LoTW. The week of November 23 – 30, which included the Thanksgiving holiday, Emily, KB3VVE, created another of her cookie contests. That was enough to create an incredible burst of activity; 51,156 contacts were uploaded between November 25 and December 4 alone.

On December 16, the NPOTA Leader Board updated to 1,002,144 QSOs. The



Max Gersh, KD9DBF, was one of many newly licensed amateurs who reported NPOTA improved their on-air skills. He put those new skills to good use when he activated Cuyahoga Valley National Park (NP14) in Ohio. [Max Gersh, KD9DBF, photo]

1 million QSO goal had been achieved!

Why NPOTA Worked

NPOTA was successful for several reasons:

1) Accessibility

NPOTA provided a low-risk opportunity for many amateurs to try their hand at portable operating and experience the “other side” of the pileup. Curt McCormick, KC3HJP, who became a ham in July 2016, said: “I worked 167 contacts in 28 states during one of my activations. I was completely amazed that all of these



Kent O’Sell, K7CAR, made 535 contacts on September 15 from this idyllic spot in Crater Lake National Park (NP13) in Oregon. [Kent O’Sell, K7CAR, photo]



Ruth Willet, KM4LAO (left), and Emily Saldana, KB3VVE (right), activated several units on the National Mall on August 30. Many women were active participants in NPOTA as both Chasers and Activators. [Sharon Willet, KM4TVU, photo]

people all over the US wanted to make contact with me. Every time someone said 'thanks for a new one,' that made my 1- to 2-hour drive to a park worthwhile."

2) Skills learned

Participants said NPOTA improved their skills, both as Activators and Chasers. "I became a better operator because of NPOTA," said Max Gersh, KD9DBF. "I learned how to listen and break through a pileup. I got much better at hearing and remembering call signs phonetically. All of the basic operating skills that just take practice were refined."

3) Learning about the National Park Service

NPOTA opened the doors of the National Park Service to many radio operators. Rick Parent, W0ZAP, said, "The NPS is an incredible resource we have available to us as residents of this country, and discovering the many and varied units that are out there for us to enjoy was truly a major highlight for me. I made contacts with many NPS units I'd never heard of before NPOTA! Investigating the 'what' and 'where' of those places was a huge learning experience. I firmly believe that as a result of this event, my support of our National Park Service will be a lifelong endeavor."

4) Great memories

Veteran QRPer Larry Makoski, W2LJ, thought the best part of the entire event was interacting with other hams. He said, "Call signs have become names and faces instead of just random letter/number combinations. And when was the last time a fellow ham gave you cookies or a pizza for working them? Chalk up those innovative ideas for fellowship to NPOTA!"

Activator Highlights

NPOTA ultimately became a story about the people who promoted the National Park Service through their activations. Here are just a few of the countless highlights from the past year:

Noted county hunter Bob Voss, N4CD, activated 262 unique NPOTA units — more than half of all NPOTA units. He put 45,000 miles on his car in 2016.

Fred and Jennifer Harris, N5VDQ and N5LRF, used NPOTA to bring their family closer together after losing their youngest child. Their cross-country trips took "the Harris Herd" to 89 different NPOTA units.

Pete Kobak, K0BAK, met his goal of activating every NPOTA unit in eastern Pennsylvania. This included some very tough urban units in Philadelphia, including the smallest NPS unit, the Thaddeus Kosciuszko House (NM23). He was also the first Activator to transmit from the Statue of Liberty National

Monument (MN67).

Stuart Thomas, KB1HQS, was the only Activator who broke the 500-activation plateau. He averaged 9.6 activations a week.

Members of the Great South Bay Amateur Radio Club transmitted from President's Park on August 5 – 6, netting over 1,300 contacts in a rain-shortened 2-day operation.

The Lea family — James, WX4TV; Michelle, N8ZQZ; Hope, KM4IPF; Faith, AE4FH; Grace, KM4TXT, and Zechariah, WX4TVJ — spearheaded a lot of kids activity in NPOTA, including special events as N4P and WK1DS.

National Parks on the Air was a year of Amateur Radio that no one will forget. It brought the radio community together in a way that no other event has, and taught all of us a lot about the history of our nation. Lifetime friendships were made through it. Many hams took their skill level higher and learned to enjoy radio in completely new ways. Ultimately, people went out of their way to help others move forward in radio through mentoring, helping a Chaser get new units, or sharing Amateur Radio and the National Park Service with tens of thousands of people around the world.

Thanks to everyone who made NPOTA successful.



Tim Carter, W3ATB, could not contain his enthusiasm for the roaring pileup he found when he activated the Lamprey Wild and Scenic River (WR23) in New Hampshire in November. [Jim Cluett, W1PID, photo]