



# Parks on the Air

The pandemic restrictions notwithstanding, hams have been taking radios to state and national parks in ever-increasing numbers. What's the motivation? The Parks on the Air program!



**P**arks on the Air, simply known as POTA, had its beginning with ARRL's year-long National Parks on the Air activity in 2016. The event was so popular, many hams didn't want it to end. Several enterprising amateurs responded by creating POTA and launching it with a website at [parksontheair.com](http://parksontheair.com). They also established a large collection of attractive awards.

To say that POTA took off like a rocket would be an understatement. As of 2021, more than 8,000 hams have registered on the POTA website, and over 2 million contacts have been logged.

There are thousands of POTA-eligible parks, wildlife areas, and historic sites throughout the world. POTA assigns unique numbers to each destination, with US parks and other sites carrying designations that begin with the letter K, such as K-1710. The website has a list of POTA parks, as well as a sophisticated map that shows their locations. You'll quickly see that regardless of where you live, there is at least one POTA park

within a reasonable driving distance. Some hams live in areas where they are virtually surrounded by eligible parks. Here's how you can get in on the fun.

## The Activators

The hams who take their equipment to the parks are called *activators*. They typically set up portable HF stations within the park boundaries and operate for the day, or perhaps only for an hour or two. In many instances, the activators use mobile stations and they simply operate from the park's parking lot. The goal is to make as many contacts as possible; at least 10 contacts are required to for the visit to qualify as an activation.

When they are finished, hams upload their logs to the POTA website and their exploits are added to the competition leaderboards. It's also common to see activators posting photos of their adventures on the popular POTA group on Facebook ([facebook.com/groups/parksontheair/](https://facebook.com/groups/parksontheair/)).

POTA activators come from all walks of life and all ages, but they all love the outdoors, and they love amateur radio. POTA gives them the best of both worlds.

## The Hunters

Not all POTA participants are found in parks. In fact, the activators are in the minority when it comes to POTA enthusiasts. Instead, the vast majority of POTA people are *hunters* — ordinary hams operating from their homes. Some may never set foot in a park!

Hunters hunt the airwaves for POTA activators every day of the week. Most check the "spotting" page on the POTA website, where activators (and hunters) post announcements (or *spots*) of current activations. You'll also see POTA activations pop up on general spotting websites such as [dxwatch.com](http://dxwatch.com) and [dxsummit.fi](http://dxsummit.fi). (Look for "POTA" in the comment text.)



Audrey Hance, KN4TMU, operating from Panther Creek State Park in Tennessee.

## The Fun of a POTA Pileup

The hunters tune to the activator's frequencies and, if they can hear them, they join the crowd of stations — called a *pileup* — that are trying to contact the station that's in a park. Sometimes the pileups can be pretty wild, with a dozen stations calling at once, but that's part of the excitement. If a hunter doesn't get through on the first call, persistence pays off — chances are, the activator will eventually hear them. The activators depend on hunters for successful operations of 10 contacts or more, so they do everything they can to contact as many stations as possible in the pileups.

When you're listening to a POTA pileup, you may occasionally hear someone call out, "Park to park!" That's an activator who has decided to become a hunter from his or her park, making contact with an activator in another park. Park-to-park contacts count as bonus points for activators, so they are always eager to make those contacts.

## Typical POTA Bands and Modes

Most POTA activations take place using SSB, but you'll also run into activators operating CW. On occasion, you may even hear activators operating digital modes such as FT8. Activators seem to prefer the 20- and 40-meter bands, with a few popping up on 30 and 17 meters. As conditions improve with the new solar cycle — Cycle 25 — look for POTA activity on higher bands, including 10 meters.

You'll notice that POTA operations usually end at their local sunset times. That's because most parks and other sites close to the public at sundown.

## Getting Started

If you want to join the ranks of the POTA hunters, you just need an HF station at your home. If you don't currently hold a General or Amateur Extra license, consider upgrading, so that you can use the frequency bands where POTA activators tend to congregate.

Fire up your equipment in the late morning and check the POTA website spotting page for activations. POTA activations are more numerous on weekends, but you'll hear them on other days as well.

If you hear an activator, toss out your call sign and see if you can make contact. Most contacts are brief — just a signal report and your location, although some activators may chat for a bit if they aren't buried in callers.

You can help the activators by posting a spot on the POTA website (if someone hasn't done so recently). If you have access to a DX spotting site on the internet, post a spot there as well and add "POTA" to the comment text.

Hunters who register on the POTA website (registration is free) are eligible for awards based on the number of parks they've contacted, the number of states they have contacted, and much more. Hunters do *not* have to upload logs to the POTA website. All that's necessary for a hunter to receive credit for a POTA contact is for their call sign to appear in an activator's log.

To become an activator, you'll need HF equipment you can operate using batteries or solar power, and an antenna that you can set up and take down easily. As mentioned before, the alternative is to operate from your vehicle, although not all parks have parking lots.

Parks on the Air is great fun, and it's a friendly community. Turn on your radio at home and start hunting — or head to a park and become the hunted!