

# 13 Ten Thousand Parks and Counting

---

By Clint Sprott, W9AV

## Discovering POTA

It had been a long time since I visited many of the National parks, and my wife Dani (WC9R) had seen very few of them. So, in 2016 when the National Parks on the Air (NPOTA) program was announced, we decided to put a rig in the car and have our own “DXpedition.” Fifty-seven parks and ninety-three activations later that whirlwind year came to an end, and the ensuing calm was a bit of a letdown.

The next year I began hearing people on

the air making contacts from state parks. After making a few contacts with them, I looked up the POTA website, entered a few details about myself, and discovered that I already had credit toward several awards. That got me started in the POTA program in 2018, almost from its beginning, and at an age where it seemed more prudent to focus on hunting than on activating.

## Competitive Juice

The first year or two, I was rather casual about hunting, just checking the spots on the POTA website and making a few contacts every day. The old POTA home page listed the top ten all-time hunters, and I was surprised one day in 2021 to see my call at the bottom of the list. That’s when the competitive juices kicked in, and I decided to try and work my way up toward the top of the list.

Being retired and spending most of my time at home surrounded by computers with a modest radio station just steps away, it was easy to check the spots every few hours and make a dozen POTA contacts every day. However, I had reached the point where most



Figure 1, W9AV operating from the Ice Age Trail during National Parks on the Air.

of the contacts were with parks I had already worked. So, I wrote a small *BASIC* program that allowed me to type in the park number to see if I needed it.

---

---

## W9AV's Gear

I have two stations, one in Madison, WI, and another 50 miles west of Madison near Muscodia, WI. I use them about equally.

### Madison Location

- Icom IC-7600 transceiver
- Icom IC-7300 transceiver
- 2 refurbished Lenovo desktop computers networked together for log sharing.
- SPE EXPERT 1.5K-FA solid state linear amplifier
- G5RV antenna at 30'
- Hexbeam antenna at 30'
- 80-meter half-wave end fed at 20'

### Muscodia Location

- Two Icom IC-7300 transceivers
- Icom IC-7100 transceiver
- Three refurbished Lenovo laptop computers networked for log sharing.
- G5RV antenna at 40'
- Hexbeam antenna at 30'
- 80-meter half-wave end fed inverted L at 30'
- 40-meter half-wave dipole at 40'

I can also run either station remotely from the other for FT8 operation using *AnyDesk* software, making me capable of single-operator four radio (SO4R) operation and occasionally do that with three radios on FT8 and one on CW or SSB.

---

That got me up to the number two hunter spot within a few months, but it was tedious since most spots were ones I didn't need. I was a thousand parks behind the top hunter and not gaining on him. The hunt also consumed several hours a day.

With the help of a programmer friend, Jeff Mattox (not a ham, but he should be!), we reverse engineered the POTA spotting page and wrote a PHP program that pulled the spots off the POTA website, checked to see if any were needed, provided an audible alert ("Needed Park!") in my own voice, and sent the spot to my N3FJP Amateur Contact Log., Every hour or so, an alert would come. I would go to the radio, which I left on all day, and click on the spot, which tuned the radio to the frequency. I would often be the first one to work the station. Getting there before the pileup was a big advantage. Seven months later, in April of 2022, I took the lead and continued to outpace the pack, crossing the 10,000-park mark in November of 2022.

Now the alerts come less frequently because I've worked most of the US parks, and many of the alerts are from Europe and Japan — not workable using SSB from Wisconsin. I have started filtering out spots from spotters outside North America, otherwise I would be disturbed all night. I'm back to devoting only about an hour a day to POTA hunting, and the hunting does not involve spinning the dial. Instead, I click on needed spots in response to an alert and wait my turn. I'm often surprised how a signal can be below the noise, but if you just listen for a while, it eventually becomes strong enough to work. If a particular band isn't working, I've noticed activators will often switch to a more favorable one, so I seldom despair of making a contact.



Figure 2, W9AV at his home station outside Madison, WI.

## Advice for Hunters

If you don't have my advantage of being in POTA from the beginning and you lack custom software, it will be hard to become an all-time top hunter. However, there are hundreds of other awards that are easily within reach of anyone, and many have endorsements for different levels. Try to work parks in all fifty states or work all the parks in particular states. Try to be a top hunter in the current year. It is even possible to get a POTA DXCC. The POTA website automatically tracks your progress and provides downloadable PDF certificates for these achievements, all at no cost to you. Focus on whatever mode you prefer. Phone is still the most popular, but digital is advancing rapidly, and there are plenty of CW

activators. Some of the top hunters rarely or never do CW or digital, although it helps to be active on all three modes.

In particular, FT8 has become very popular, and with the *JTAlert* program (available from [hamapps.com](http://hamapps.com)), you can set an alert for anyone calling CQ POTA and make a dozen POTA contacts every day. There are now programs that will automate such operation, but POTA has ruled out those contacts. As a hunter you needn't check or submit logs, which I find appealing, and there's little opportunity or reason to cheat since there is no required exchange. I usually give a (true) signal report and my state (Wisconsin). I record the signal report I receive and the park number in my log, but there is no requirement to do so.



Figure 3, W9AV operating from his Muscoda, WI station.

Since hunters don't submit logs or other proof of contact, the goal is just to get your call in the activator's log. The activators do all the work, so be sure to thank them for their effort. Generally, hunters and activators are polite, and after a while all the top activators come to know the top hunters. Having an activator recognize your call sign or your voice is a big advantage in breaking a pileup or when conditions are poor.

One advantage of hunting parks is that you don't need fancy equipment. Nearly all my contacts were made with 100 watts and simple wire antennas. A hunter's station is likely better than an activator's, so in general hunters should be able to work anyone they can hear. If there is a large pileup, the average hunter may have to wait for the big stations to make their contact, but most activators continue until they have worked everyone who wants a contact, and that rarely takes more than half an hour. Of course, to work the DX parks and others with poor propagation, high power and a good antenna is a big help. If you miss a contact with a new one, just move on. With the

thousands of parks in the system, there will be many more opportunities.

## Contesting and POTA

Most of my first sixty years as a ham were spent chasing DX and contesting, but my station was not adequate to win a major contest, and new DX entities got very rare after about 300 and mainly depended on occasional DXpeditions. The latest minimum in solar activity and the COVID lockdown curtailed DXpeditions and opened the door for the rapid growth of POTA. In many ways it's like a contest going on all day every day, and new parks are being added and activated faster than any hunter can work them. Rarely does a day go by when I don't work a couple of new parks, and so progress is limited only by time and effort.

Each year, POTA sponsors several events: a New Year's Week of casual contacts, Support Your Parks Weekends, which occur periodically throughout the year, and the annual POTA Plaque Event which now takes place the first weekend of June. This last one is for those who like more serious competition. Hunters and activators can earn beautiful plaques in various categories during the event. I usually become an activator for it since I have a nearby park, and it is great fun to be on the other end of a pileup. Seeing things from the viewpoint of an activator makes you a better hunter since you learn how callers break the pileup and get in the log. Most activators start out as hunters, making it a natural way to get started in POTA no matter your previous interest or experience.