

Shortwave



EDITOR
Alvin V. Sizer
22 Country Way,
North Haven, Ct. 06473
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ON TO THE TOP

BY DON JENSEN

... How Can I Become A Top Flight SWBC DXer?



EDITOR'S NOTE: From the Voice of America up to Falklands and Maldives is a long road. This is the first of a series of six articles exploring the subject of SWBC DXing at the serious level by a DXer who has gone far along that road. Part essay and part informational, the articles proceed from some basic questions to a point beyond which most beginner's manuals stop.

How Can I Become A Top Flight SWBC DXer?

Seldom is this question actu-

ally voiced, but it sums up the intent of a lot of specific questions actually asked by listeners who have progressed beyond the unabashed beginner stage. And it is a good lead-off question for this series.

Unfortunately, there is no one magical answer, no clearcut formula for success. But one word that will be cropping up again and again in this series of articles is experience. Hearing the hard-to-hear stations is the sum and substance of serious DXing on the shortwave bands. And, though it may seem a flippant answer, experienced DXers hear the hard-to-hear stations because they're experienced!

Contrary to popular belief, top quality equipment isn't the solution. Yes, a good receiver will be a big help. It will make serious DXing easier. But the important word there is "easier". An experienced DXer with a mediocre receiver still will manage, over the long haul, to hear most of the real DX. And a novice with a kilobuck receiver still will be asking how he can log those rare stations.

There's none so disappointed as the guy who, expecting miracles, scrapes up enough dough to buy a so-called "pro" receiver, only to find he suddenly ISN'T bagging all those goodies!

Experience--there's that word again--is the answer! But that does not mean just "time served" in the hobby. Time is a factor, naturally since learning takes time. But the effort to learn is critical. Experience is just the practical application of knowledge.

A top flight DXer? Well, when does a DXer "arrive"? If arriving means reaching a pinnacle of proficiency, the answer is, "Never!" No one can ever know all there conceivably is to know about the subject and even the most experienced DXers can never stop trying to learn more.

Individual definitions may vary, of course, but for our purposes let's assume that when a DXer is generally regarded by other DXers as being among the "top ten percent", he's arrived. In other words, you're a top DXer when others consider you one. (CONT. NEXT PAGE)

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still have to ask, you aren't!

Or to put it another way, if you

There's no magic entry point to the "charmed circle", no countries heard/verified total that proclaims it to the membership. It is a matter of your reputation as a solid, reliable, accurate, experienced DXer!

Purely a personal opinion, but it seems to me that a relative beginner who goes all out to learn what serious DXing is about could reach that vague status position in a minimum of about five years. Some, of course, will take longer and some will never reach it at all.

Spoon-feeding information is out. You've got to work very hard to learn as much as you can. Among other things, this means a great deal of reading to build a mental storehouse of knowledge you need to be a real DXer.

When you come across a semi-technical or technical article in FRENDX do you pass it by; skip over it quickly because it's too hard to understand? Or do you make a serious effort to master the subject and then use it as a take-off point for further study?

The guy who complains to the editors that an article is too tough and too tedious, that he doesn't understand it and plaintively cries "Why can't we have more features for the beginner?" is the one who only slowly, or perhaps never, will progress much beyond the beginner stage!

Hard work? Definitely yes! A slow process? Probably! But DXing is only a hobby, a pleasurable pastime, you say. Yes, and a casual approach to shortwave listening is perfectly acceptable if that's your thing. But excelling, even at a hobby, can be pleasurable.

Many SWLs simply don't care to make their hobby more than the casual listening to some interesting overseas programs. I don't intend to knock that approach at all. But if you've ever asked yourself the opening question, "How can I become a top flight SWBC DXer?" you've indicated your interest is more in the direction of DXing than SWLing.

And, if it's a serious DXer you want to be, you've got to work at it!

NEXT MONTH : Hearing those really rare stations.

On To The Top: (2)

By DON JENSEN

As stressed in the first article in this series, there is no substitute for the knowledge gained by experience.

Rare DX depends on "conditions". That goes without saying. But what a DXer comes up with when conditions are right depends, to a large extent, on the storehouse of information and know-how

he has to apply to the given situation. A good place to start is with the bands themselves. Most of the rare DX will be found in the bands below about 7 MHz, the 41, 60, 90 meter bands, plus to a lesser extent, 120 meters and the out-of-band stations. To start with, emphasize 60 meters, the single best band.

Concentration!

Concentrate your maximum listening efforts on 60. Later you can expand your attention, in a similar way, to the other DX bands. Hours: spend dozens of hours, hundreds of hours if you can, learning what there is to be heard under normal conditions, under unusual band conditions. Get to know that span of frequencies like the back of your hand. In order to get the rare ones you have to be able to quickly sort the usual from the unusual signals. When extra good conditions occur, you can't waste time on re-logs of previously heard stations when you could be coming up with new ones.

Can you, at any particular time of day, cruise 60 meters and with a fairly high degree of certainty, tentatively ID within 15 seconds, each of the stronger signals on the band? If you can't, you're operating under a real handicap!

On a good winter afternoon opening to Africa, can you tick 'em off as you tune down the line? Lome, 5047...Bangui, 5038 or 39...Yaunde, 4972...SABC, 4945....? If you CAN do this, the unusual signal should stand out, catch your attention and you can spend your time logging it.

Concentration!

Concentrate on learning as much as you can about shortwave propagation, if not from a "book larnin'" theoretical approach of view, from a practical "What can I hear?" approach. Learn to recognize and take advantage of reception patterns.

Most beginners know you can't expect low SW frequency reception at high noon local time. It is assumed you know why this is the case. There is no black magic in DXing. Propagation of DX signals depends on natural phenomena. The more you know about how and why distant shortwave signals reach you, the better you will be able to determine when to tune. There is plenty of material available for study if you only take the time and effort to seek it out.

For too long DXers have neglected this field of study. Only recently have some attempted to systematically study the matter of propagation of weak DX signals on shortwave.

But, theories aside, careful observation and record-keeping should give you a good working knowledge of practical propagation.

Do you know, for example, the time of day, the time of year, when your chances of hearing a rare station are optimum? Do you know...

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EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the second in a series of articles on SWBC DXing at the serious level. The approach is a combination of essay and "how-to-do-it" and assumes the reader has some experience in the hobby. Proceeding from some basic questions, the articles will push into areas beyond those covered by the usual beginner's manuals.

How Can I Hear Those Really Rare Stations Reported By The Experienced DXers In FRENDX?



COOK ISLANDS---
What could be rarer DX? (Photo courtesy Pacific Area Travel Association).

ON TO THE TOP---(Cont)..... know the great circle path between your receiving location and the target DX stations? Do you know, at any particular time of year, when paths of darkness exist for these stations? Do you know when you can normally expect the 60 meter Latins to fade out and the Asians to fade in in the morning?

Do you know that your best chances to hear the domestic All India radio outlets, and the ultra rare Kashmir, will be from about mid-December to mid-January, but that Indonesian reception has a much broader seasonal "Window"? Do you know that the rare quiet night in mid-summer can bring in good Afridan reception?

Keep records of excellent openings from various parts of the world. Look for patterns, daily, seasonally, geographically.

Geographical patterns can be broad or very selective. When you note the Peruvians coming in with exceptional strength, don't waste time with random tuning. Go after the specific unheard Peruvians you most want. Unusually powerful station signals from Togo? Hunt for other West Africans you need!

NEXT: More tips on hearing those rare stations.

On To The Top



How Can I Hear Those Rare Stations Reported By The Experienced DXers In The Club?

Editor's Note: In this, the third in a series of articles exploring the subject of SWBC DXing at the serious level, Don Jensen continues to probe a question posed above and in the the last article--How Can I Hear Those Rare Stations Reported by the Experienced DXers in the Club? This series of six articles is intended for the listener with some experience who wishes to push on in serious DXing.

By DON JENSEN

As suggested last month, knowledge is the key to success. DXers should concentrate on learning all they can about the major DX bands below about 7 MHz, starting with the best of the batch, 60 meters. Concentrate on learning patterns of propagation; ideally the theoretical hows and whys, but, minimally, observe and learn by actual on-the-bands observation.

This leads to the next point of concentration.

Concentrate on certain stations. One reason experienced listeners manage to hear the really rare ones is because having logged so many stations, they can concentrate efforts on a relatively few wanted targets. The less experienced, needing more stations, often take a scattergun, nit-or-miss approach.

For example, when a good opening occurs for Indonesian reception, the less experienced DXer might spend his time taking a log on RRI, Ambon, 4839 kHz. He "needs" it and is pleased to receive a new one. But the veteran, already having logged and verified Ambon, concentrates on trying for the rarer Indonesians, say the local government station, Radio Pemerintah Daerah Kabuptan Poso!

Ambon may be a good catch, a new logging for you. But wouldn't you be happier receiving Poso? It takes self discipline to pass up a sure Ambon for a chancier Poso, but the odds are that you'll next hear Ambon--and get a reportable logging--far sooner than another crack at Poso!

The choice--and naturally you won't always opt for the chance of hearing the ultra rare one over the sure bet logging-- is tough for the less experienced listener. It means gambling on the possibility of a rare one and, for that day at least, passing by a medium-hard station already at hand. The veteren DXer who has already QSLed the easier station doesn't have to think twice before chasing the really rare outfits when top notch openings occur.

A word of caution here! Don't let the higher stakes--giving up temporarily a sure catch for a gamble--color your judgment. Apply the same identification standards you always do. The weak muddle down in the mud may be Poso...or it may not. Your gamble may not pay off. But if it does...

The decision as to when to play it safe and take the needed logging at hand, and when to gamble on the possible really rare one, is easier if you have a "want" list.

Rare is the experienced DXer who doesn't have his own list of most wanted stations. Check on what others are hearing, particularly the DXers you regard as "pros". Draw up a list of about 10 such stations that you really want to log. In any situation where you're faced with the decision to play it safe or gamble on the rare catch, let your want list establish the priority. (CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE)

ON TO THE TOP---(Cont.) ...Concentrate on these stations when conditions to a certain area of the world are most favorable. If you have no luck, then go after secondary targets. When you knock one off, replace it on the list with one you badly want to hear.

Compile a "book" on each station on your want list. Minimum information, of course, is frequency and the time when it is being received in your area. Comb the bulletin for more tips; schedule, language used, etc. Is there an especially favorable time "window"? Perhaps the normally strong utility on the frequency is off Sundays. Can it be heard only on occasions after a powerful nearby station signs off? What type of programming would you expect to find? Country and western music? Outdated U.S. pops? A French newscast?

In short, get all the background data you can. It'll help if and when you actually do hear the station.

Finally, tune as often as possible for your most wanted stations. Trying for it seven times a week is better than six, six a week is better than four. Make the odds work in your favor!

NEXT: Identifying the rare stations.

How Can I Identify The Rare DX Stations?

By DON JENSEN

This is the Fourth in a Series of articles on DXing at the serious level. The articles proceed from some basic questions and the approach is part essay, part "how-to-do-it". They assume some knowledge of DXing and cover advanced techniques not found in the usual beginner's manuals.

ON TO THE TOP: (4)



OK, you've followed the various tips suggested earlier in this series. You've tuned a signal that may..or may not..be a real DX station. Now you've got to identify it.

This is where the going really gets tough. It's the test that separates the men from the boys, the place where DXing experience really counts.

The first case to consider, strange as it may seem, is just what constitutes an identification?

Identifying a station should be an easy thing, theoretically. Either yes or no, go or no-go! Practically, though, station identification comes in varying degrees of certainty. Although this certainty spectrum is a continuum from total certainty about a station's identity to complete uncertainty, let's divide it into four broad brackets.

POSITIVE IDENTIFICATION-- You're 100 per cent sure of the station's identity because you heard the ID announced. There

are other ways to positively identify a station, of course. For instance, if you hear "Moscow Mailbag" you don't need an ID to know you're tuned to Radio Moscow. Now all this is a snap when you're dealing with strong signal stations broadcasting in English. But our topic is rare DX and identification of these outlets is harder because they're usually weaker, plagued with QRM and broadcast in languages other than English.

TENTATIVE (or Probable) Identification-- No definite ID is heard, or if heard, not fully understood. But various clues in the programming, etc. lead you to believe strongly that you are hearing Station "X".

POSSIBLE IDENTIFICATION-- Again, no station identification heard but some factors lead you to suspect you've logged Station "X". However, those factors might also apply to other stations. In short, your degree of certainty as to identity is rather low.

UNIDENTIFIED-- Here you either have no idea, from announcements or program details, as to the identity, or you have a very low degree of certainty as to which of several--or many-- possible stations you may be hearing.

Broadly speaking, a reception report is always justified when a station is positively ID'd. A report is never justified with an unidentified station. In the mid-ranges of ID certainty, even experienced DXers differ as to when a reception report should be sent to a station. The following represents the author's viewpoint.

If you strongly believe, based on a number of factors I'll discuss in a later article, that you've heard a certain station, coupled with some pretty convincing program details, a report may be sent to the station on the strength of tentative identification. But that report should spell out that you didn't positively ID it. It should mention the reasons why you believe it to have been the station reported. And you should ask that it be verified only if the station authority is convinced it is correct.

Rarely should you report a station on the strength of a possible identification. A report seeking a verification is justified only when you've noted some especially unique factor that could apply only to the station in question. Example: You think your station possibly could be Station "X" and during the course of your logging, a transmitter problem knocks the station off the air at 1413 GMT. It is very likely that the station could determine the accuracy of your report on the strength of this detail.

The sensible rule of thumb to follow in most cases is report those stations which you know or strongly believe you logged. The burden should be on you, the DXer. When in doubt, don't rely on the station's QSL to resolve those doubts.

NEXT: The factors involved in identification.

ON TO THE TOP:

By DON JENSEN

How Can I Identify The Rare DX Stations?

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the fifth in a series of articles exploring serious DXing aimed at the listener with some experience who's ready to move beyond the techniques covered in the usual beginner's manuals. They proceed from some broad, basic questions, such as the one we began to discuss last month: How Can I Identify the Rare DX stations?

If you haven't progressed beyond the "if it isn't in English, I can't ID it" stage, you've got some basic homework ahead of you before you're ready for serious DXing.

Minimally, you should be able to distinguish among the major languages, Spanish, Portuguese, French, German, Arabic, etc. You should be able to recognize the tonal Asian languages, such as Chinese. Foreign languages should no longer all sound alike to you. You need not be a linguist...few experienced DXers are.. but you should be able to pick out words.

If you can't, spend some months on the whole business of learning what languages sound like. There have been articles written on the subject in various journals, hobby publications and books. Seek them out and study. One of the best ways to learn is to study the VOA foreign language broadcasts.

For those of you who are still with us, it should be obvious by now that a very experienced DXer, because of his accumulated knowledge, may well be able to positively identify a station that a less experienced DXer might not be able to ID at all, or, at best, consider a tentative.

But even the best of the "pros" frequently come up short of ID certainty. And, as I suggested last time, under certain conditions, one can send a report on the strength of a tentative ID.

A tentative, you'll recall, is when positive identification isn't possible, but a whole series of factors surrounding the reception strongly lead the DXer to believe he's hearing a certain station.

But a word of warning! Tentatives are tricky and dangerous. Most mis-identified stations that crop up in club bulletins result because the DXer lacks information or experience, is careless, or jumps to hasty conclusions due to wishful thinking.

A DXer, anxious to log a rare one, is easily tempted to conclude, "Well others are hearing it so it must be Station 'X'!" Leap to such conclusions at your own peril!

The measure of a top DXer is his reputation, especially among other experienced DXers. A reported rare station almost always prompts a frantic hunt by others. If you were wrong in your ID, it will be discovered quickly enough. Everyone makes mistakes now and again. It is embarrassing but not fatal to a reputation. Your error may not be challenged in print but be sure it will be noted by the more experienced DXers. If you later find you erred, a correction to the editor helps mitigate the mistake. Pretending it didn't happen is a mark against you.

To make a mistake occasionally is human. To be wrong regularly earns you the wrong kind of reputation. Before long you're marked as unreliable which is the worst of all possible curses in DXing. Then no matter what rare loggings you claim, no matter how high you climb on the scoreboard, a tinge of doubt will always be attached to your reports.

Tentative IDs, to return to the subject, are the result of piecing together a number of separate factors that, in composite, convince you of a station's probably identity. The number of bits that "fit" can vary, but the more that do, the surer you can be. Too few "fits" and all you've got is a "possible", or perhaps even an "unidentified". And the experienced DXer has the edge since he's accumulated more know-how and background info to test for "fit".

The factors? Frequency, naturally. Time? Does your reception match the schedule? Propagation? Is reception possible, or likely, at the time you are hearing it? Does your reception match the language and programming known to be used? Can you, for one reason or another, eliminate from consideration other stations known to operate on the frequency at that time?

Other clues? You heard no country reference, but did hear a Spanish commercial for Cerveza Carta Blanca. In which country or countries of Latin America is that brand of beer distributed? Can you identify the national anthem heard at sign off?

What does the music tell you? Can you distinguish between Mexican and Brazilian music? Between that of Peru and the Dominican Republic? What is high life music? Gamelan?

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ON TO THE TOP (Cont.)--- What is a sitar and what does it sound like?

There are dozens of clues, factors that can help you to identify a station. There's no practical way they can be taught, except by experience. But if you're alert to the basic techniques, you can begin to file away in your mind these scraps of information that will help you in identifying stations.

Naturally, none of these clues alone is sufficient to justify even a tentative identification. Enough of them, however, may make a strong enough case for a tentative ID.

But, again, be careful!

NEXT: Getting rare stations verified.

ON TO THE TOP: (Last)

By DON JENSEN

How Can I QSL Those Rare DX Stations?

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the last in a series of articles exploring serious SWBC DXing. It is aimed at the listener with some DXing experience who is ready to progress into areas not usually treated in beginner manuals.

The major stations you've already verified often seek listeners' reports knowing something of the DXers' special language and going out of their way to please. Rare DX stations, by their very nature, don't get many reports. They usually aren't trying to reach North American audiences. Their staffs often don't know what a QSL is, much less why a listener is so interested in receiving a confirming letter or card. These stations, in short, are much harder to verify.

It is assumed you know the basic report writing technique. You include the necessary bits, the frequency, time, date, program and reception detail and the request for verification. When dealing with the rarer stations, it is more important to write in the language of the station unless you have reason to believe that someone at the station knows English. If you include mint stamps or IRCs with your reports only on rare occasions, plan to do so regularly when writing the lesser-heard stations.

It is important to get your report into the hands of someone who is known to reply, so keep track of verie signers, the names of persons who sign other DXers' reports.

Often your first report won't bring a response. Use periodic follow-ups, or new reports to non-repliers. It can take a year, five years, ten years to get a verification from some rare stations. Persistence is necessary.

But beyond this, what? The serious, experienced DXer who is interested in QSLs develops additional reporting techniques, tricks or ploys, if you will, to get verifications from the rare, really hard-to-QSL stations. Not infrequently DXers guard these secret methods jealously. These little extra techniques are, to a degree, perishable commodities. Their usefulness may decrease with usage, so, understandably, veteran DXers tend to keep quiet about their best ploys. Eventually, you, too, will develop your own series of reporting tricks that work for you.

In essence, though, what most of them amount to is an attempt to bring special attention to your report, strike a note that will interest the recipient, and move him to action he might otherwise not take, that is, reply to your letter.

Anyone familiar with the field of advertising will recognize in this the basic rules of promoting a product. It may come as a shocker to hear, but many of the same approaches used to peddle soup and soap apply to reception report writing.

In advertising it is A-I-M-A, Attention! Interest! Motivation! Action! You have to be a public relations man trying to sell the idea of the station replying to your report!

No, honesty doesn't go out the window. Candor is perhaps the most effective sales technique. It doesn't mean you come on like gangbusters with the hard sell. Soft sell is usually more effective than high pressure. You still need a good product, the solid core of a good reception report. But the more you know about your "market" the better you'll be able to tailor your approach to the situation.

These special techniques you'll have to develop yourself. Your own personality, style and accumulated experience will guide you if you're receptive to the basic idea. If you're rigid, insist on a basic master report format you'll always follow, if you take the position, "If they don't like the kind of reports I write, to H--- with 'em," if you're not willing to try, try again if your first report, your first ten reports fail to bring a response, you'll miss a lot of fine QSLs!

I'd be remiss, at this point, if I didn't note that some veteran DXers aren't gung-ho about QSLs. They maintain that a QSL isn't always proof positive of reception; that some stations confirm without actually checking reports for accuracy. They're right, of course. Yet, I maintain that generally a QSLed report is better than a non-QSLed one if only because the DXer tends to be more careful about identifying the station when he tries to garner enough details to justify a report. Plus there's the thrill of receiving that rare letter from Lower West Bengalstan or whatever.

To sum up this series of articles, the key to successful DXing, as opposed to SWLing, is know-how and knowledge gained through experience and the effort to learn as much about the hobby as you can. If it has struck you that the articles have been short on actual "how-to-do-it" techniques and long on generalities, it is because there is no short-cut method. All any article, series of articles or book can do is to point you in the right direction. If these have done that, and you carry through, then you are on your way to the top. ---End of Series---