

650-1-1

THE RIGHT STUFF

To be a DXer
by Glen Kippel

To be a successful DXer, a number of items are necessary. Some are optional, but most are absolutely essential to the hobby.

To begin with, a radio receiver is usually necessary. Unless, of course, you happen to have a very sensitive gold filling that could possibly demodulate radio waves. A communications receiver is generally considered superior to others. More than one receiver is nice to have, as one could be running into a recorder while you are hunting up another station with the other.

You will also need an antenna. Portable radios (and some others) have a built-in antenna. This has some directional effect, and rotating the radio will sometimes cause a strong station to fade out, revealing other stations. An outside antenna will give increased signal pickup and is generally necessary with a communications receiver.

A cassette or reel-to-reel recorder is a handy device to have for recording what you hear. It is especially useful to play back that ID you didn't quite make out the first time. The simplest way to connect it is across the volume control -- across the terminals that are farthest apart. If it doesn't work the first time, reverse the connections. This mode of hooking up a recorder will provide a constant level unaffected by the setting of the volume control. Use shielded cable, of course, and if you are plugging into the MIC input on the recorder, an attenuator (Radio Shack 274-300) will be necessary.

You will definitely need a few pens and a couple of spiral notebooks. Use one as a chronological list of what you hear. Write the date, time station, and programming notes and other remarks. The other notebook should be divided up by two 10 kHz channels per page, both sides of the page. This will be a listing-by-frequency of what you hear, and it will be one of the most valuable tools you will have. List the frequency, call, slogan, city, state, country, and format info, and perhaps the time you heard it.

If you want to, you could replace this notebook with a computer system -- at considerably more cost. You could go bonkers and get an AT with a megabyte of RAM and a hard disk, but a practical system would be an Atari 800XL or 130XE, disk drive and a printer. You will need a color or monochrome monitor or use a black and white TV that you don't have much other use for. I use a data manager XL for a database and it works pretty well. Synfile+ is also decent and sells for under \$35. The whole system comes in at about the same price as an IBM-compatible software package such as Dbase III.

You will need to know what those stations are out there, so a few current station listings are pretty important to have around. For foreign DX (and to a more limited extent, domestics) the World Radio TV Handbook is a must. For stations in the US and Canada, a listing such as the NRC Log or Broadcasting Yearbook is preferable as it lists all the low-powered stations that aren't covered in the WRTH. Of course since stations keep coming on the air, you will need to be a member of the IRCA to keep up with the latest developments.

Headphones are useful so you can listen to the din of 174 stations on 1400 kHz and not disturb the rest of the family. Stereo headphones may have too broad a frequency response and will give you a good deal of noise in addition to the signal you want to hear. Headsets designed especially for shortwave listening/DXing are better. Mine have been cobbled up from a Navy surplus headband and a pair of Western Electric U-1 units, the same as are in most telephones, and are the best I've ever used.

You probably will need a table to hold up the receiver, notebook, etc and a chair to hold you up. However, I started out DXing with the receiver on the floor and survived, so you could too.

Proper lighting is helpful so you can read your log, station lists, etc. If having a bright light on in the middle of the night is bothersome to the rest of the family, use a desk lamp with a low wattage bulb. Better yet, get a variable transformer (not a solid state lamp dimmer -- they generate too much interference) and plug your lamp into it. Sold in most places which cater to the TV repair industry, you could ask for a "Variac" and they would probably know what you wanted. Another technique borrowed from the aviation industry is to use a lamp with a 25 watt red bulb. The red light does not affect your night vision as much as white light. I have used these for years when mixing large concerts and other sound-reinforcement gigs and it works well.

Some snacks are helpful to keep your blood sugar up during long DX sessions, and these will be discussed in more detail in the forthcoming article, "DX Snacks".

Now to the appropriate attire for the master DXer. You will need a good heavy-weight, velour robe to keep you warm during those long late night DX sessions. Cotton flannel pajamas are also a must. Consider some comfortable, well-worn, terry cloth slippers too.

Consider getting a dog to lay on your feet and keep them warm. Remember, the best DX is in the middle of the night, in the middle of winter! And a cat to lie on your lap is nice too, provided it doesn't purr too loudly.

Now you're all equipped, what do you do first? Well, first pick a Saturday or other day that you don't have to work, and start at the bottom end of the dial and tune up, logging each station as you go. Around 10 AM to noon is a good time to do this. You will get acquainted with your local and semi-local stations and add them to your totals. Most of them will be on at night, so you will be able to recognize them and know they aren't really exotic if they happen to be really hard to hear later on.

Your next step is to tune around in the evening, say 8 to 10 pm. You will be able to hear some of the stations on what formerly were clear channels, and get to know how to recognize them. Most of these stations you will consider "pests" later on, but right now you are getting familiar with the band and building your station totals.

Next, try tuning around the band -- especially the top half of the band -- just before sunset to an hour or so after sunset. There will be some stations you will hear at this time that you just can't hear any other time, and sometimes conditions will favor a specific area one day and another the next. East-coast DXers may also be able to dig around between the 10kHz channels we have in the US and hear some high powered Europeans and North Africans. Now we're getting down to some hard-core DXing!

Once your familiarity with the band is pretty good, stay up past midnight some night -- especially a Sunday night -- and see what can be heard. Monday morning is traditionally the time some stations go off the air for maintenance -- changing tubes, sweeping Black Widow spiders out of the antenna tuning units and so on. Not as many stations go off at midnight as they did a few years ago, but the band may be somewhat less clogged up with your local and semi-local stations. This will provide opportunities to hear some otherwise unhearable DX. From the east coast, US stations further west may be heard before they sign off. West coast DXers will have a better chance at logging Hawaii, Alaska, Australia, New Zealand, and the Far East.

Finally, the time just before dawn can provide some really interesting catches, as stations to the east will be signing on, then fading out, allowing stations to the west to appear.