

# Working DX should be fun – shouldn't it?

## How we can all improve our operating for the benefit of other amateurs



DXpedition to French Polynesia 2010 – VE2TZT, FO5JV, F6BEE & FO8RZ. Photo: G3TXF.

*"...The desire to work DX is high, and that makes one eager to find ways to build a station as efficient and competitive as possible. It doesn't have to be 'megabig' to be successful. Above all, good operating practice delivers the key to success".*

**Mark, ON4WW**

**CHASING DX.** Working DX is for many people one of the most fascinating aspects of our hobby. Despite global telephone systems and the internet there is still a thrill in contacting someone far, far away or in some unusual place, using just your own skills as an operator. It isn't for everyone – but then part of the magic of amateur radio is that you can choose the activity that interests you. Here we would like to reflect on one aspect – chasing and 'working' distant and rare stations on the HF bands, known as DXing.

Over the years, the DX scene has changed greatly. In the 1960s, for example, you might expect regularly to work operators living and working in some remote spot for whom amateur radio was a unique way of 'talking home'. These days there is a far more focussed approach – more competitive, more technically advanced and more accessible – supported by both mobile phones and the internet.

For many, DXing remains absorbing because it tests skills: the most successful DXers are great operators who have also optimised their stations and antennas.

The challenge today is to still get the maximum of fun and interest out of our hobby. But something has changed.

**CHANGE FOR THE WORSE.** Many people would agree that working DX these days is less fun than it used to be – too much noise, interference (QRM) and the generally chaotic behaviour of many DX pile-ups. We all have our own theories about the causes. There isn't one simple reason and the problems exist worldwide, to a greater or lesser extent. It may be unpopular to say so, but poor operating practice is not confined to the inexperienced. These issues involve everyone, both 'experts' and newcomers alike.

So what can we do about these problems? Doing nothing or just moaning continues to be a popular option. Taking legal action against licence violators is also possible but is often difficult to pursue. Deliberate QRM, misuse of high power, the 'Band Police' etc are major symptoms of the problem – not the cause. We all know that the only real chance of improvement will come through improving the skills and attitude of those in the hobby

– a slow and difficult task. If we accept the challenge we might, just might, kick-start a change for the better.

**BACK TO BASICS.** What are we trying to achieve when we chase DX? The bottom line is getting that QSO in the log – two stations exchanging some simple information. That requires two stations who can *hear* each other. No surprise there, but this is where much of the problem lies. The DX station needs to be able to hear one station sufficiently well to work it. The non-DX station needs to be able to hear the DX station well enough to be sure of getting in the log. How is it possible to make that easier?

First of all, the DX station will usually go to 'split' operation, transmitting and receiving on different frequencies. Typically that would be up 1-2kHz for CW and up 5-10kHz for SSB. The aim is to ensure that the DX station is in the clear. The non-DX stations then transmit on and around the 'receive' frequency (known as the QSX slot) making it easier for the DX station to identify a call sign to work. That is how it should work but often it does not – especially, sorry to say, when propagation favours Europe. In practice, the DX frequency is often ruined by callers who have not bothered to listen for long enough to find out what is going on. Meanwhile the QSX slot becomes a non-stop roar of callers. Some callers continue even when the DX station is transmitting. That is particularly strange when the DX station is totally in the clear – presumably they cannot hear and have discovered the frequency from the internet. Sheer lunacy!

**INTERNATIONAL ACTION.** Some of the most experienced DX operators have now got together to try and do something about this sorry state of affairs. Mark, ON4WW and John, ON4UN wrote *Ethics and Operating Procedures for the Radio Amateur* last year. Randy, W6SJ, wrote about 'DXEtiquette' in QST March 2010. Roger, G3SXW and Gary, ZL2IFB, have both also published good advice.

It was also recognised a few years ago that this is a two sided problem: the DX operator has a role to play too. Wayne, N7NG wrote about this in *DXpeditioning Basics*. But today we are concerned with the DXer. We will return later to the DX operator. Recently Bob, G3PJT and Randy, W6SJ, in conjunction with others, published a *DX Code of Conduct* for use either in self-education or as a sharp reminder of some simple rules to follow so as to get more fun out of working DX (Last Word, RadCom May 2010).

*"...Most DXpeditioners want to put on the very best show possible. When the skills of the operators on both ends of the pileup are up to the task, the operating is a joy to hear. When the skills are lacking maybe it's better to turn off the radio".*

**Wayne, N7NG**

"The problem of chaotic pile-ups is getting so bad that folks are finally paying attention."

Roger, G3SXW



Expert DXer Fred Handscombe, A65BD/G4BWP skips through the pile-up at 9L5A in 2009. ZL2IFB is in the background. Photo: AA7A.

#### DX CODE

1. **I will listen, and listen and then listen again before calling.** This seems so obvious but it is the most vital thing to do. Careful listening rather than rushing to transmit will get the DX into the log. We need to listen to find out whether the DX is working split and, if so, where is he listening? Then we need to listen to the calling stations in order to work out what the DX station is doing. He (or she) is probably working gradually up or down the pile-up on the QSX slot – and you need to know the best spot to call. But ask yourself: "Do I really need to work this bit of DX, right now? Can I wait a while for the pile-up to subside?"
2. **I will only call if I can copy the DX station properly.** We also need to listen to optimise how well we receive the DX – to be sure we will hear any reply to our call – and to avoid causing interference by transmitting at the wrong time. It is hugely frustrating as a DX station to be called by a station that is unable to hear you and causes incessant QRM.
3. **I will not trust the Cluster and will be sure of the DX station's callsign before calling.** Cluster spotters often get callsigns wrong and, more importantly, the DX will not want to be slowed down if you ask what his callsign is. You should never call if you do not know the DX callsign. How are you going to log a blank? By the same token the DX station must send its call at regular intervals (not all do this!).
4. **I will not interfere with the DX station nor anyone calling him.** Sadly, this covers a multitude of poor operating practices, including stations talking to each other over the DX signal. In Europe particularly we are afflicted with 'policemen'; people who keep jumping in to tell callers that the DX is listening 'up' – sometimes adding a gratuitous insult. This rule is quite simple – if working split, don't ever transmit on the DX frequency for any purpose whatsoever.
5. **I will wait for the DX station to end a contact before calling him.** It may seem clever to nip in as the previous contact is ending but DX stations don't like it – it breaks the pattern of operating, which is what helps everyone to know when to transmit and when not. Do not 'tail end'.
6. **I will always send my full callsign.** This is essential for CW and SSB, because incomplete calls require an extra transmission and slow down the pileup.
7. **I will call and then listen for a reasonable interval. I will not call continuously.** Continuous calling is selfish and arrogant. With a computer it is so easy to send continuously – you just hold down the key on your PC. It goes totally against the principle of listening and listening again. More significantly it greatly raises the QRM floor – making life virtually impossible for the DX station.
8. **I will not transmit when the DX operator calls another callsign, not mine.**
9. **I will not transmit when the DX operator queries a callsign, not like mine.** Not exactly rocket science: in life outside amateur radio it would simply be considered rude to answer when someone else is asked a question! Again, it raises the floor level of QRM and slows things down. DXers soon get the 'feel' of when the DX station has come back to them (by the callsign but also through the timing of the response). Pretending you have been called is just silly. Also, knowing the DX operator personally doesn't give you the right to just jump in and maybe deny someone else a QSO.
10. **I will not transmit when the DX operator calls geographic areas other than mine.** We need to recognise when the operator is calling a geographic area (ie NA for North America, AS for Asia etc). Then we have to accept that the DX operator has decided to give that area priority and we should not call until the pattern changes. A small detail but when a DX operator is working, say, North America and fails to send or say so at the end of each transmission, stations from elsewhere often jump in. Don't: it is polite and sensible to wait for some clear instructions from the DX operator.
11. **When the DX operator calls me, I will not repeat my callsign unless I think he has copied it incorrectly.** This is to reduce time and thus allow more time for others. If you repeat the callsign, the DX station will listen very carefully (thinking you are correcting it) – unnecessary hassle if all is well.
12. **I will be thankful if and when I do make a contact.**
13. **I will respect my fellow hams and conduct myself so as to earn their respect.** These are both about behaving well – DXing is very competitive and works best with some politeness, mutual respect and even, dare one say, a bit of humility!

#### WORKING TOGETHER FOR IMPROVEMENT.

Now having read this far we can hear you saying: 'Yes I know all of that, just good operating common sense. You need to tell everyone else'. Well let him who is blameless cast the first stone! And before you say UK operators are indeed blameless, some of the poor operators are located right here – and some of them are very well known indeed.

There is a very strong feeling among some of the most active and successful HF operators that we need to work together and over a period of time to improve standards of operating. So now read the DX Code of Conduct again, sign up to it on the DX Code website and, whilst you are at it, also put the code on your QRZ.com page.

We need to remember it's a hobby and the starting point is demonstrating and encouraging good practice by operators all over the world and indeed also by those at the sharp end of DXing. We need to help and encourage new entrants to the hobby – we all have to start somewhere and we learn by mistakes. In amateur radio it has been normal to learn by example – as true now as ever. Good practice encourages good practice. Let's work together to raise standards worldwide.

*"The global ham radio community shares the same HF bands, so it's important that we all get along together and play fair. The DX Code lays out the rules, making it a level playing field when chasing DX. I hope all DXers will respect the DX Code and help everyone enjoy this fine hobby."*

Gary, ZL2IFB

#### WEBSEARCH

DX Code of Conduct website: [www.dx-code.org/](http://www.dx-code.org/)  
Ethics and Operating procedures for the radio amateur  
ON4UN and ON4WW:

[www.ham-operating-ethics.org/index.html](http://www.ham-operating-ethics.org/index.html)

Modern Pile-Ups, *The DX Magazine*, G3SXW:

[www.dx-code.org/g3sxxw.pdf](http://www.dx-code.org/g3sxxw.pdf)

Pile Up Tips, ZL2IFB:

[www.g4ifb.com/html/dxing.html#PileupTips](http://www.g4ifb.com/html/dxing.html#PileupTips)

DXEtiquette, QST March 2010, W6SJ.

*DXpeditioning Basics*, N7NG, ARRL and INDEXA 1994.

Suggestions for DX Pile Ups, *QRZ-DX News*, N4AA

[www.dpxub.com/dx\\_news.html](http://www.dpxub.com/dx_news.html)

#### THE AUTHORS

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Bob is a well-known DXer both at home and on many DX trips. He is President of the First Class CW Operators Club.

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Nick has been very active as 5X1NH during the past three years.