2011 ARRL January VHF Sweepstakes Results

No propagation, no warmth, no problem!

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In 1924, famed English mountaineer George Mallory joined his third expedition to reach the summit of Sagarmāthā in the Himalayas, known by westerners as Mount Everest. At age 37, he believed it would be his final opportunity to stride upon the then-unreached top of the world’s highest mountain. Legend has it he was the one who, when asked why he wanted to climb Everest, gave a simple but immensely profound reply: “Because it’s there.” The attempt cost him his life.

Today’s VHF+ contesters generally don’t have to contend with such perils. However, this past January, many competitors found themselves asking the same question: Why? The winter was one of the harshest on record for much of the country; record snowfalls in the Midwest, bitter cold in the Northeast, and the mere existence of substantial snow at all in parts of the southeast wreaked havoc on many contest efforts this January. As if that weren’t enough, propagation gods struck a deal with Mother Nature and sucked the ionosphere dry of any substantial enhancement. One thinks of Mallory at base camp, huddled in a lonely, cold tent, and can imagine similar thoughts running through the VHFer, calling CQ late on a cold Saturday evening, mentally turning over every virtual rock in hopes of working a new station. The answer for why VHF contesters do it in their world is the same as Mallory’s in his: because it (the contest) is there.

Rick, K1DS, roved through five grid squares in the Northeast during this year’s January VHF Sweepstakes. “Despite the challenges of potential problem weather, roving in the northeast is still a treasure of contacts,” he explains. “The major highways are kept clear, the rover spots I like are not real mountain tops, but rather clear hills or parking areas with a reasonable horizon, allowing for good microwave activity.” Some of the reason is purely practical. “I am restricted by CCRs from having an outdoor antenna. I do have some in the attic, but the contest is much more fruitful as a rover.” When you can have more fun by hitting the road with better antennas than staying home, the choice is made for you.

Stu Turner, WØSTU, made his first-ever foray into contesting a memorable one! Operating from the top of Mount Herman in Monument, CO (grid DM79), Stu managed 88 QSOs on 50, 144 and 432 MHz and earned a slot in the Top Ten in the Single Operator, Portable category. He’ll be back on the mountain for more VHF+ fun!

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Why January?

So why is there a VHF contest in January? Kevin, W9GKA, has researched the history and trends of VHF+ contesting for years. In his work, he notes the ARRL announcement for the first January VHF Sweepstakes in the December 1947 QST saw the need “[T]o help stimulate activity on the VHF bands at a time when it is normally somewhat low.” Indeed, then-ARRL Communications Manager F. E. Handy, W1BDI, made the comment as far back as November 1939 that regular communications on the VHF+ bands didn’t require excellent conditions to be enjoyable: “Poor conditions were reported from some points, but that was the idea, to prove to the doubters that real communication can be accomplished on u.h.f. day in and day out, with average conditions — no exceptional lucky breaks required. It can.”

The development and popularity of the “big three” contests occurred within a very short time frame in the late 1940s. With the creation of the January VHF Sweepstakes, the League wanted to continue the 1930s UHF Marathon tradition of promoting activity on the “ultra-highs” regardless of propagation. Read more of Kevin’s analysis in the Expanded Results version of this article online at www.arrl.org/contest-results-articles.

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Activity

Activity was lower in 2011 than in 2010; 710 submitted logs compared to 761 last year. This is in the lower portion of the average number of logs since 2006, which saw the highest number of submitted logs (793) in recent history. Despite the lackluster propagation often found on the Ultra-Highs in January, many H-Fers are taking a chance with their newer rigs that offer 6 meters and possibly 2 meters and connecting some feed line to the “other” antenna jack on the back. The VHF bands offer propagation and operating challenges that simply don’t exist on HF, and it’s nice to see some HFers dipping their toes in the VHF+ waters.

Alabama Contest Group member Jim, KC4HW, made a handful of QSOs on 6 meters with an HF antenna from EM71. “I used the 40-2CD tuned with the FT2000D; was quite surprised that it worked.” Jim’s working on beams for 6 and 2 meters and should have them up soon. While sporadic-E generally stays dormant during the winter months, there have been some phenomenal tropo and auroral openings in January over the years. Like the new golfer that has a couple of great shots in an otherwise dull round, there were plenty of interesting occurrences in this year’s January VHF Sweepstakes to get the HFers to come back for more.

Single Operator Categories

Nearly 600 logs received were in a single-operator category, or 84% of all logs.

In the Single-Operator, High Power (SOHP) category, perennial winner Jeff, K1TEO in FN31 battled equipment failures and having to dig a tower base out of several feet of snow to effect repairs on a damp power divider. Even so, he cruised to his ninth SOHP victory in ten years. Making effective use of the higher bands was key to his success; out of 880 QSOs, 188 (18%) of Jeff’s QSOs were on 902 and up. 100 QSOs came from Rovers.

Second place this year went to Phil, K3TUF in FN10, moving up a slot from 2010. Phil put in big efforts this past year to install a rotating tower and raise his microwave antennas above the trees. “I called this my test voyage and to that end the voyage was successful, the equipment held up and did not fail.” Dave, K1RZ of the Grid Pirates fame earned third place from FM19. When conditions falter, the “Northeast Corridor” seems to dominate more than usual. This year was no exception; only Jimmy, W4ZRZ in EM63 and Glenn, K8TQK in EM89 made the Top Ten away from the East Coast, earning 9th and 10th place, respectively.

Single-Operator, Low Power (SOLP) continues to be the most popular category in the event; six out of ten entries were in this category. As with High Power, the Right Coast dominated the category’s Top Ten, with one notable exception. The battle for first place was between Phil, WA3NUF in FN20 and Bob, K2DRH on the Illinois side of the Mississippi in EN40. Both gentlemen have a long history entering in the SOLP category, with Bob trumping Phil three out of the last four years. This year, Bob had almost double the multipliers of Phil; however, with the standard conditions, the Northeast population advantage and QSOs on four extra microwave bands proved to be too much for Bob’s high mult count, and WA3NUF bested K2DRH by less than one percent! Fred, N1DPM, a regular “Top of the Box” guy, fought off some equipment problems and earned third place from his Feeding Hills, MA QTH in FN32.

It takes a special breed of HFer to venture out in sub-zero conditions to enter the QRP Portable category. This year, twenty-
two hardy souls packed up their gear and headed for the hills. Not all of the country was beleaguered with bad weather, and the top QRP Portable op probably needed some sunscreen! Wayne, N6NB, set his sights on the QRP Portable category (as he did in September), and moved his operations to the top of Signal Peak, near Newport Beach, CA in DM13. With the assistance of the Southern California Contest Club’s pack of rovers, Wayne decimated the previous record score for the QRP Portable category, amassing 170,000 points. With September and January’s QRP record under his belt, one wonders if he’ll go for June 2011 as well. Second place went to the 2009 and 2010 winner Nick, N3YMS from FM29. Third went to tried-and-true QRP Portable entrant Zack, W9SZ, set up outside near Champaign, IL in EN50. Zack reported he was able to complete QSOs with EM66 and EN44, not bad for no propagation and 10 W.

**Multioperators**

Multioperator contesting can be the best of both worlds: when conditions are hot, you get to share the excitement with your friends. When conditions aren’t so hot, you’ve got somebody to commiserate with. For the most part, this year seemed to fall into the latter category. Sixty multioperator logs were received for the event, or 8.5% of the total. This includes single-ops who decided they wanted to have spotting assistance or internet chat rooms at their disposal, too. The entries were split evenly between the Multioperator category (which allows QSOs on as many bands as you have antennas for) and the Limited Multioperator category (which allows QSOs on any four bands of your choice). The Multioperator category saw good representation from much of the country, and some very familiar calls, as well. Leonard, N3NGE, once again took his great station outside of Morgantown, PA in FN20, gathered a team of great ops, and maximized skeds on meteor scatter and with rovers to amass over 1,250 QSOs and 216 multipliers (including an impressive 39 grids on...
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Rovers and Vince, KØV, earned yet another Top Ten slot.
using KA2LIM), Ken Kent and his group did an "A" somewhere along the line (formerly
Team LIMO, K2LIM. While the team lost
place was Joe, K1JT and his Princeton team. They took advantage of 12 hours of visible
moon and made 58 2-meter EME QSOs.
“Does not make for a high QSO rate, but sure helps the grid count!” Third went to Team LIMO, K2LIM. While the team lost an “A” somewhere along the line (formerly using KA2LIM), Ken Kent and his group did a great job earning yet another Top Ten slot.
Honorable Mention to both Keith, W9RM and Vince, KØSIX for making the Top Ten from the Midwest tundra.

Rovers

If you’re going to operate mobile during the January VHF contest, trying to stay warm is generally a good idea! The SoCal Rovers needn’t worry about winter weather and were able once again to band together and take the top slots in each of the three Rover categories. The winner of the “classic” rover category this year was John, KA9K, who hopped a plane westward and joined forces with the SoCal group. With second op John, N6MU hitching a ride in 'JK's RoverMobile, the team activated nine grids and made an easy go of taking the top spot. Fellow SoCal rovers Andre, K6AH and Bill, WB6BFG rounded out the top three. Outside of California, Rick, K1DS braved bad weather in the Northeast and activated five grids on his way to seventh place.

Limited Rover was won by another SoCal’er, Mike, W6YLZ (with Roozy, KG6OKB as second op). Their 627 QSOs with 83 unique calls led the category. Second place went to Roanoke Rover Representative Steve, K4GUN (assisted, as always, by XYL Kristine, K4LIG), hitting eight grids along the East Coast. Third place goes to Matt, KF0Q, who managed just over 100 QSOs from the frozen kingdom of Minnesota.

The Unlimited Rover category — where anything goes — yielded only five entrants this January. Glenn, KE6GPZ led the category as part of the SoCal group. Eric, KR0VER, along with 8-year old assistant Alisha, activated four grids in Colorado on their way to second place. Mel, KC0P, earned third place from Minnesota. “Cold WX, but much better propagation than last January.” Tim, KD5IKG and Carol, N0HZO rounded out the category with operations in Texas and Minnesota, respectively.

Club Competition

One of the big points historically of the January VHF Sweepstakes has been club competition. Clubs would get all their members active and promote learning and have a lot of fun, all while working towards a common goal. Does the same hold true today? Jeff, K1TEO is skeptical: “A huge thanks to the Packrats who provided over 20% of my QSOs. A few years ago there were multiple active clubs here in the Northeast but it seems like only the Packrats are still at it. Please continue!”

Indeed, the Packrats, aka the Mt Airy VHF Radio Club, ran away with the Unlimited Club title by submitting logs from 66 members, more than double the number of the second-most represented club, the New England Weak Signal Group. The Packrats have been tirelessly promoting VHF+ operating for more than fifty years, and their combination of technical prowess, Elmering and operating skill is mighty tough to beat. Well done to the Packrats for rallying their troops.

The Medium Club category saw entries from 23 different clubs. Top honors go to the Southern California Contest Club, who parlayed their 17 entries from their Rovers into a force to be reckoned with. The New England Weak Signal group managed second place this year, and the Potomac Valley Radio Club earned third place.

The Local Club category had fourteen entries from across the country. High atop the others was the Murgas ARC based in Wilkes-Barre, PA. Second place goes to the Eastern Connecticut ARA, while the Stoned Monkey VHF ARC represented the Midwest well and gets crowned third.

Conclusion

VHF+ contesting, like many other things, depends on what you put into it. It is not the place for guaranteed results, especially in January. Mallory never attained his goal of reaching the summit of Mt Everest, but he kept trying, in part, because the chase was important to him. Band conditions will run hot and cold from year to year, but it’s the pursuit of the fun and accepting the conditions for what they are on contest weekend that keep competition levels strong during this event.

Be sure to plan for the next ARRL January VHF Sweepstakes on January 21-23, 2012. Why? Because it’s there!