2013 ARRL September VHF Contest

Propagation forecasts were nothing special, but tropospheric ducting held some pleasant surprises for contesters.

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Good band conditions and increased activity levels are key ingredients for a successful VHF contest. While submitted logs were up, a number of stations across North America observed that activity seemed modest. In actuality, the numbers (see the table titled, “Participation by Year”) show submissions were actually up over 10 % this year!

2013 marked the first year of two new VHF+ contesting Single Operator categories — FM only (SOFM) and Three-band (SO3B). SO3B proved to be fairly popular in the initial go-round while the SOFM category still has a good deal of potential upside.

From the standpoint of band conditions, many anticipated a fairly blasé weekend based on the various propagation tools available. According to forecasting tools like the Hepburn tropospheric map (www.dxinfocentre.com/tropo.html), nothing all that exciting was expected. Even during the contest, the live Automatic Packet Reporting System (APRS) maps failed to show any enhanced tropo conditions. Likewise, solar reports also indicated that nothing unusual was to be expected. Those looking at these reports on Saturday, before the start of the contest, would not have anticipated any enhancement. Fortunately, that was not the case for much of the eastern half of the country, particularly in the Southeast and Middle Atlantic areas.

Band Conditions
After last year’s great E-skip and TEP openings on 6 meters during the contest, there was hope that perhaps this year would bring a repeat. It was hoped that the Sun would act up and give us an aurora as we neared the solar maximum. Alas, neither was in the cards for the weekend, so that focused hope on some tropo enhancement.

In California and the Pacific Northwest, several contesters noted coastal tropo that enhanced signals during the contest. Both areas enjoyed some signals that were stronger than normal, though there were no reports of great distances being worked via this mode.

During a noontime team meeting of the AA4ZZ group on North Carolina’s Boone Mountain in EM96 before the start of the contest, Roger, W4MW, announced that there might be tropo even though the Hepburn map showed nothing was expected. Roger had looked at the weather maps to determine his own forecast for the bands.

At the same time, George, AB0RX, was setting up his portable station on Missouri’s Taum Sauk Mountain in EM47, the highest point in the state. All of his antennas are homebrewed from The ARRL Antenna Book. As it turned out, Roger was correct and both stations were in the right place at the right time to enjoy some great tropo on 144 MHz and up.

AA4ZZ started working tropo Saturday night on 144, 222, and 432 MHz. The band was open primarily in two directions — to the west as far as Oklahoma and Kansas, and to the Northeast as far as New England. Their best DX and some real excitement was working Todd, K0KAN, in EM19 who noted it was the “absolute highlight of the weekend for me. I heard AA4ZZ calling CQ on SSB. When they had difficulty with my call, I called back on CW. We worked on 2 meters and then moved to 432 and then to 222.” On Sunday morning the tropo moved around as AA4ZZ worked W9s and W0s, as well as some W2s and W5s. On Sunday evening they managed to work K1TEO in FN31 on 222 and 432. In the end, the AA4ZZ team worked 68 grids on 144 MHz, 55 on 432 MHz, and had many 500+ mile QSOs.

A little to the south in EM85, the Limited Multioperator group at W4NH in Georgia probably experienced the best tropo of the contest. They also started working the tropo Saturday night with QSOs to the west as far as Oklahoma, even more toward VE3, W2 and W3, and even one into southern New England. Conditions continued to be excellent, with perhaps their best opening coming in during the last hours of the contest as they were pounding into New England. Their best DX was almost 1000 miles to K1WHS in...
Maine late in the contest on 144 MHz, while on 432 MHz they contacted K1TR in FN42 at about 900 miles. I can attest that they were a solid S-9 for the last several hours of the contest at my own location in Southwestern Connecticut, and easily worked through 432 MHz. The bottom line was 76 grids on 144 MHz!

Meanwhile, in Missouri, AB0RX had beautiful weather, and a pleasant surprise on Sunday morning as he worked long-haul contacts to the East, as far as W2LV in FN21. The opening lasted about 2 hours at his location. “I’ve been operating VHF for about 7 years now and those 2 hours were the best tropo conditions I have ever experienced.”

Another station in the right place was K8GP operating from FM19 in Virginia. The tropo reached them early Sunday morning and until mid-afternoon they were working DX to the Southwest on the bands. On 2 meters they made QSOs to Alabama, Tennessee, Missouri, and Mississippi. Their best DX at 2 meters from Texas and Arkansas toward Southwest on the bands. On 2 meters they reached them early Sunday morning and until mid-afternoon they were working DX to the East, as far as W2LV in FN21. The opening lasted about 2 hours at his location. "I’ve been operating VHF for about 7 years now and those 2 hours were the best tropo conditions I have ever experienced.”

Sunday morning DX QSOs were made on 2 meters from Texas and Arkansas toward Indiana, Illinois and Ohio. Late in the contest the tropo drifted to the Northeast. K1TEO in FN31 (CT) worked into Tennessee, South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama — a QSO with W42RZ in EM63, a path of over 900 miles. Jeff noted that signals were strong from the stations worked but not many.
seemed to be on the Southeast, perhaps having given up earlier in the contest before the tropo arrived. Or, as AA4ZZ noted, it is possible that the poor forecasts on Hepburn and the APRS maps caused many to miss the tropo. This entire event was a great example of why checking the Internet for band conditions, while helpful, is not always accurate. Expect the unexpected on VHF — the only way to know is to make noise!

**New Single Operator Categories**

2013 marked the addition of two new Single Operator categories for VHF contesting. The Three-band (SO3B) category saw 37 participants in its initial September contest. Jim, N1ZN, earned a narrow victory over K9MU. Close behind were AC6HU and KV2M. With many rigs equipped for 50, 144, and 432, this should be a popular category going forward. Who is up for topping Jim’s category record in 2014?

Many VHF+ contestants began their operating on the FM part of the bands. For the first time, there was an FM-only (SO-FM) category of competition in 2013. Participation was minimal in this event as only seven logs were submitted. Hopefully word will spread among the FM fans on the VHF bands and bolster the activity in the future. In this first competition, W2EV from Western New York was the top scorer.

**Club Competition**

More than 40% of entrants (24 clubs) participated in this aspect of the competition. After a very close 2nd place finish in 2012, the Potomac Valley Radio Club returned to the top spot in the Medium Class with a convincing win. Registering 1,235,925 points, they topped the Southern California Contest by nearly 14,094 points.

Roger, W4MW, turned out to be a secret weapon for the AA4ZZ team, suggesting that tropo propagation was quite possible even though the prediction tools said just the opposite. Turn on those radios and call CQ! [Paul Trotter, AA4ZZ, photo]
Club, who also cracked the million point level. These totals are significantly higher than last year — a tribute to the hard work of both clubs. The perennial January Sweepstakes winners from the Mt Airy VHF Radio Club improved their score by almost 100k to take 3rd place, followed by last year’s champs from the North East Weak Signal Group. Contest Club Ontario had a nice jump in their score to retain 5th overall followed by the Society of Midwest Contesters, who had a showed a nice jump in entrants and score from last year.

The Badger Contesters from Wisconsin dropped down to the Local Class and took the top prize with the same number of entrants but a higher score. The Bergen ARA from New Jersey had huge improvement in results and moved up to 2nd followed by the Chippewa Valley VHF Contesters.

**Conclusion**

The introduction of operating aids available on the Internet — propagation forecasts, live propagation information, chat pages, etc, has been a great help to VHF+ operators in recent years. During contests, some of them cannot be used but others are allowed, such as the propagation forecasts like Hepburn and WWV solar reports. However, sometimes these tools do not show the full story of what is happening on the bands. There is some chance that we are more likely to miss enhancement on the bands because when we check the computer the tools say nothing is going on and we never turn on the rig.

The September 2013 contest was a great example of why the Internet information can never replace actual on-the-air checks. None of the great tropo ever showed up in the tool forecasts or real-time predictions. But savvy operators were there to enjoy some really good DX and fun during the contest. Or, you can invite Roger, W4MW, to join your team to let you know when the band will be open! Make your plans now to be active on September 13 – 15, 2014.

Thanks to the AA4ZZ, W4NH, and K8GP teams for sharing their log information, along with ABØRX. And special thanks to Andy, K1RA, who worked really hard to create the maps available in the online report. Also to Curt, K9AKS, for updating the September contest records. Thanks, OMs!

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**Radiosport**

**The 2014 ARRL April Rookie Roundup — Phone**

*1800 UTC – 2359 UTC Sunday, April 20*

- Get ready for the ‘RR! This 6-hour event is aimed at amateurs who have been licensed for 3 years or less. Rookies work everybody; Non-Rookies work only Rookies. If you were first licensed in 2014, 2013, or 2012, you can enter as a Rookie.
- Rookies can enter as a Single Operator or invite some Rookie friends over and operate as Multioperator. Up to five Single Operator Rookies can also enter from their individual stations and submit their total score as a team!
- This is a great way for clubs to get their newer members on the air. Be a good Elmer!
- All scores must be submitted online by 2359 UTC Wednesday, April 23. No late entries will be accepted.

**Complete rules, logging sheets, and links for submitting your score can be found at**

[www.arrl.org/rookie-roundup](http://www.arrl.org/rookie-roundup)

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Rookies aren’t just in the US and Canada! Ali, HZ1TT, in Saudi Arabia made plenty of QSOs in the 2013 SSB Rookie Roundup. [Ali Al Dubie, HZ1TT, photo]