Microwave operators took to the air on August 17–18 and September 21–22, 2013 to see what they could accomplish on frequencies of 10 GHz and up. Beforehand, it’s fun to plan where to go and who to attempt to contact. Then, when those weekends arrive, it’s time to put the plan into action — first by loading the car. Some operators went to mountaintops or seashores to find an unobstructed horizon; some went to the flat farm fields of the plains.

Wherever the operators are, they marvel when signals are surprisingly loud, usually in the early morning and late evening. When conditions get tough or distances quite long, they utilize all their skills to eke out a contact from the noise. It all starts with a clear horizon; close-in foliage or terrain will either block or severely attenuate microwave signals. However, if one can get even one mile away from obstructions, transmitted signals will energize the dust particles and water molecules above the close-in obstruction and will then scatter in all directions. Fortunately, some of the signal scatters in the direction of the station one is trying to work.

Single sideband (SSB) is preferred for the ease and speed of making a contact. As signals get weak near the noise level, repeats and well-articulated phonetics help to get the message through and complete the contact. When signals get weaker still, switching to CW gives margin above the noise to still get a signal and message through. When CW is so weak as to tell a signal is there, but not make out what is being said, some switch to digital modes like JT65 and JT4 and crawl into the noise to find the signal. Not many microwave operators are using digital modes when portable, but the number is growing every year.

Looking Ahead

Those who microwave contest know it is fun — primarily because it provides a challenge. I challenge all microwave operators to get on the air for the 2014 event and, more importantly, share the fun by bringing along a new operator. I also encourage you to try new things or new locations. Start making plans to be on-the-air August 16–17, 2014 and September 20–21, 2014. Be sure to check out an expanded web-only report at www.arrl.org/contests — look for the 2013 10 GHz and Up listing.