Mini-DXpeditions—How to Have Fun, Collect Wallpaper and *Not* Break the Bank

The January/February 2011 NCJ "Contesting on a Budget" column by Ralph Bellas, K9ZO, "Take a Mini-DX-edition" got me thinking. What if your budget isn't big enough to afford a ticket to an island paradise?" In other words, what can you do on a figurative shoestring and still have fun?

I'll tell you one really fun way. For the past couple years, I've been engaging in QRP "DXpeditions" to a rare county for the Michigan and Ohio QSO parties. My overall budget is around \$100 to \$200, depending on whether I freeload off my kids in Ohio and how far I travel from my location in Michigan. This is an almost surefire way to collect some wallpaper, set some records for the county of choice and nearly always be a "rare county" in the QSO party.

I had dabbled in the Ohio QSO Party, mainly with the Queen City Emergency Net since the late 1990s, but not while running QRP. Subsequently my wife and I decided to move to Michigan, to be near our grandkids. Attending a meeting of the Michigan QRP Club reminded me that I

had a Heath HW-9 that hadn't been used for years. Checking the Michigan QSO Party records for QRP operations from various counties, it appeared then (and still does) that Kent County and many, if not most, of the surrounding counties have had few or no Michigan QSO Party operations by stations operating less than 5 W.

Yep, I get lots of razzing about "life is too short for QRP," but I never cease to be amazed at the ability of other ops to dig out a signal from a rare county when I'm the only station in the party operating from it. When I'm taking part in the Ohio QSO Party, there's double value when I operate in counties around Delaware, where our daughter lives, and Warren, where our son lives, since I can fit in visits before and after the event.

Be Prepared

Here's what do I do in my efforts to set new QRP records in rare counties during state QSO parties.

• Check the county records for the state

QSO party (often, but not always, available on the Web).

- Pick a county in which QRP operation has been non-existent or has posted a low score.
- Check *Wikipedia* or a map for a small town with a park (or, if your budget allows, find a motel or rental cabin with surroundings suitable for antennas).
- Arrange with local authorities for permission to operate from the park or consult the management of the rental unit for permission to set up antennas. Officials in every small village or township I've contacted have bent over backward to accommodate my requests to operate from public parks after normal closing hours). It's always prudent to let those in charge know your intentions.
- •Be a good citizen. Leave the place as clean or cleaner as when you arrived.

Several weeks prior to the contest, make a list of all equipment you will need. This gets to be old hat after a while, but



Figure 1 — The N8XX portable setup used for the K6JSS/MCLM Michigan QSO Party operation from Montcalm County

Table 1 — My recent QSO party results						
Year	Event	County	Site	Call Sign Used	Score	Comment
2010	MIQP	Newaygo	Croton Twp Park	N8Q	20,839	New county Record
2010	OHQP	Henry	McClure Park	N8Q	38,308	Plaque winner in category
2011	MIQP	Mecosta	W8LRC rptr site	K6JSS/MECO	29,841	New county record
2011	OHQP	Brown	State game reserve	N1L/BROW	31,408	Plaque winner in category
2012	MIQP	Montcalm	Meijer State Park	K6JSS/MCLM	44,002	Claimed score

remember, there isn't likely to be a ham radio store or even a RadioShack near most rural parks.

If possible, scout the site for the best antenna location(s) ahead of time. If you've never erected an antenna for ARRL Field Day, it's wise to practice throwing a fishing line over a tree. I use a Hyper Dog ball launcher — a specialized slingshot designed for tennis balls — to launch a golf ball with fishing line attached over convenient trees. These are available from various online retailers for \$25 to \$30. Others use pneumatic cannons or bows and arrows. Use whatever seems most comfortable for you.

I've found that 3 or 4 pound test fishing line, lubricated with light silicone oil for ease in sliding over trees branches, works best for me. With the fishing line in place over an appropriate branch, I then drag up carpenter's twine, then 3/16 inch or 1/4 inch nylon rope, and finally the antenna. Sometimes I just throw a lightweight line over suitably located natural antenna supports (a-k-a trees) to facilitate antenna erection on the day of the event. The brown carpenter's twine, available at most hardware stores, is almost unnoticeable unless you're really looking for it - especially at 60 to 70 feet above ground, where antenna radiate best.

My antenna of choice is an 80 meter dipole, fed with 450 Ω "window line," up as high as the trees allow. I've never been questioned about an antenna between trees while I've been operating, except by inquisitive people who want to know what ham radio is all about. If trees aren't convenient, I take along military surplus masts and make an inverted V with the

apex at 28 to 36 feet.

A couple of commonsense tips — obvious to the natives, but not necessarily to the transient: April in Michigan is a crap shoot for weather. It can be spring-like, with temperatures in the 60s and even 70s, but the past two years there were cold with blustery winds. Last year I tore the antenna down in a snowstorm! August in Ohio is generally warm, so take along or find shelter from the sun. On several earlier years quite spectacular thunderstorms erupted around sunset, so plan for anything and everything that Mother Nature can devise.

My QRP "contest station" centers on a Drake TR-5 transceiver (vintage 1984). Yeah, I know it's *not* a contest-grade rig, but it's paid for. The HW-9 doesn't even hold a candle to the Drake. I use a Heath HM-9 QRP wattmeter — recently calibrated against a Bird — to measure power and SWR and a LDG Z-100 auto-tuner. On my Dell Inspiron laptop I run *N1MM Logger* (several folks Elmered me through the rather steep learning curve). A rented or borrowed generator (a 1 kW or 2 kW unit will suffice) sometimes is necessary, but typically I can find a place with commercial power.

Operating Hints

An operating tip I got from Kenny, K2KW, is to call "CQ." Even with 5 W, running is preferable to S&Ping, especially for the first few hours. You'll typically be in a rare multiplier (and possibly the *only* station there). Publicize your intentions in advance, and encourage folks to spot you. It's nice to be on the "almost DX" end of a pileup.

If the event's rules permit, get on a DX cluster and keep track of mobiles for

multipliers. One multiplier can be worth hundreds of points. If conditions are good on 20, 15 and 10, these bands can be a gold mine for working out-of-state multipliers. Usually 40 and 80 are the best places to operate during a QSO party, but this could change, if the sunspots continue to be favorable for the higher bands.

Operate a fair amount of time on SSB. Even though SSB contacts count for 1 point in the Michigan and Ohio QSO parties, each county and state is a multiplier *per mode*, so these contacts can really boost your score. Overall none of my scores (see Table 1) is anything to write home about, but if you're in it for anything but fun, you'd better stay home!

All told, operating QRP from a rare county is a fun way to put a new entity on the state QSO party map and have a ball doing so. Taking down antenna in the sn*w at midnight after the party can be a drag, but, it's all part of the event. Try it! You may like it!

Notes

- 2010: Croton Twp supplied electricity and police patrols and inquired about my wellbeing.
- 2010: The Village of McClure mayor was a former ham, who greeted me with open arms.
- 2011: Lowell ARC's remote receiver site for W8LRC/r was shelter against the snow. K6JSS was part of the QRP ARCI Golden Jubilee event.
- 2011: Ohio DNR granted permission to operate at this nice remote site.
- 2012: Village of Howard City was very receptive to the idea. K6JSS was part of the QRPARCI State QSO Party Challenge

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