

THE COMPLETE DX'ER

CHAPTER 1

A Night on the Bands

Dinner is over, the dishes are washed, and my wife is at a meeting. I don't have any homework from the office. It's a fine night for DX'ing. I get a fresh cup of coffee, and head downstairs to my basement shack.

I think about how nice it would be to have a shack upstairs, with windows, but it really isn't important, especially when band conditions are good and the DX is rolling in. Conditions were pretty good this morning; I had a brief look at the bands before I headed for the office. Long path on twenty meters was good into the Middle-East, but there was nothing on I needed.

I turn the gear on, then go through my start-up check list. Let's see here. Antenna at 45 degrees for the Europe and Middle-East short path, OK. Linear tuned up for twenty meter CW. I log onto the net for packet coverage and look over the screen. Hmmmm. Good solar flux, low A and K indices. A lot of DX stations being called in, mostly eastern Europe and western Asia on 20 meters, with the Far East on 15 meters. I look the list of recent spots over carefully – nothing I need is showing, but it is clear the bands are hot tonight.

I glance at the calendar. It's May 13. But my digital UTC clock shows it's 0037, which means the UTC date is May 14. I note the UTC date in the log. I'm always careful to write the UTC date into the log, having learned my lesson when I almost didn't get a T31 QSL I desperately needed. Only a friendly QSL manager willing to search through the logs saved me, when he found me in the log a day later than my QSL showed.

I settle the headphones over my ears, set the transceiver dial at 14,000 kHz and begin tuning the band.

The first signal I hear is a CQ, with a trace of flutter on it. I listen; it's a UK9 calling CQ. Nice S-6 signal, which isn't bad considering my antenna is on Europe. But I don't need Siberia, so I keep tuning on. There's a high speed CW signal, rather strong, sending in German. Pretty fist, too. Ah, he's turning it over to the other station; OK, it's DL1BU QSO'ing a YV1. And there's the YV1, not as strong, but good copy, and replying in German as well. It must be pretty late in Germany; yes, about 2:30 AM local time. I move up the band some more.

Next, I come across a VE3 calling CQ, and just above him a W5 calling VU2BK. Let's see if the VU answers him, and how strong he is. I turn the antenna straight north in anticipation. The W5 finishes his call. The VU comes right back, nice, strong, steady S-7 signal. The band IS good tonight. Wonder how fifteen is? But I'm not going to even peek until I see just what's happening on twenty first... I keep turning the knob.

Wait, what's happening here? At least six or eight stations are calling somebody. I wonder who? They are all signing their calls only, going pretty fast, too. OK, someone's coming back. Not too strong, but good copy. Yes, that must be who they're after; yes, now he's giving a QSL manager, a G3 station. There - he's signing his call. OK, it's ZC4BI, the British Bases on the island of Cyprus, which counts separately from the regular Cypriote stations for DXCC. Not a bad catch, but again one I don't need. I look over at the packet screen – yes, he's been called in – twice in fact, with two different stations reporting him. I continue tuning.

It must be near morning now in the Middle-East; perhaps something good will show up from there. Sure would be nice to tie into an A7 in Qatar, or an A9 in Bahrain, or to catch the ever elusive YI1BGD calling CQ from Baghdad. There has been reported activity from all three countries, but you surely couldn't prove it by my log. Those fellows seem to do a lot of their operating in the cool hours of the early morning, and tonight the band certainly has the propagation to carry the path if one of them does show up.

I hear a raucous CQ, T7 with a chirp. OK, it's an LZ. A lot of those fellows are still using homebuilt gear, and aren't always able to get the parts necessary for a clean signal. But times are changing, and more and more east European stations are equipping themselves with the latest gear and have signals to match. Already, the signals from obviously homebrew rigs are fewer and fewer, and when they are gone I will miss them. They always add character and excitement to an open band.

The LZ has another station calling CQ just above him; it's a 4L4, a Georgian. The path into the Middle-East is in fine shape. Maybe I'm going to get lucky. I glance around at the gear, focusing my eyes for a moment on the equipment. Hey, the antenna is still pointed straight north, from when I was listening to the VU2. I ease it back around to 45 degrees. The 4L4 comes up part of an S unit. I continue turning the knob, slowly, a bit at a time.

I come across a station using the Cyrillic Morse letters that are not used in English Morse interspersed with International Morse characters. Probably it's a Russian. Yes, he turns it over; it's UK9CBB working a UW3. A night like this is pure joy to listen to, with stations from all over the world coming through. My receiver dial is a magic carpet gone mad, with never an idea of what lies on the next kilohertz, only the knowledge that whoever I will hear there will likely be far away, in a strange land. Even if I don't find a new country - and I rarely do - listening to an open band is always exciting.

There's a VE3 calling CQ. Here's a PY signing clear with a ZS6. There's a weak CQ. OK, it's a WB5. Wait a minute. He's too weak to be in W5 land. Besides, he has that sound on his signal that only comes on signals from a long way away. Darn, he quit. But it was some prefix followed by WB5BJL. Almost had it but a burst of QRN got him. Maybe he'll come back and call CQ again; I don't hear anyone calling him. Wait - there is another station just off his frequency - hmm - a YO calling CQ. I listen for at least another minute, but no sign of the WB5. Guess he heard that YO too and figured the frequency was QRM'd. So he probably moved. I quit waiting and start tuning higher up the band again.

I find a UN7, and an HA. Then an ISØ. Years ago, they were pretty scarce; I remember my early years of DX'ing, when an IS1, as they were in those days, was rare, and it took me several years to snag one. Hey, there's that WB5 again, a little higher up the band, calling CQ. OK, this time let's get his whole call. He's in the clear. Yes, it's something 7 slash WB5BJL. Hey, it's A7/WB5BJL! An A71! Qatar! A new one! If I get him, that is.

I punch the spot button on the transceiver, and quickly zero his frequency. I confirm that my rig is in transceiver mode, then punch the synch button to lock both my transmit and receive frequencies together in case I need to go split. (On many transceivers this is marked "A=B.") I hit the linear power switch. The filaments of the 3-500Zs come to life, the plate voltage rises, and I switch to full power. The whirr of the blower becomes faintly audible. The plate voltage needle settles at 3500 volts; I'm ready. He's still calling CQ. Hope no one else has spotted him. He's pretty weak. Hope he can hear me. I carefully re-check to be sure I'm dead on his frequency. Yes, I'm ready.

There, he signs. I start calling him, with one hand on the transceiver output level. I don't want to overdrive the final. Oops, too fast on the keyer. I drop the speed a bit, trying to match the speed he used in calling CQ, as I make my call, "WB5BJL DE W9KNI W9KNI AR." I listen, holding my breath. Darn, he came back to someone else, an HB9. OK, let's copy it...

".579 579 HR QTH DOHA DOHA QATAR ES NAME RALPH RALPH BT PSE QSL VIA HOME CALL HW CPY? HB9AMO DE A7/WB5BJL KN". OK, if he's for real it definitely is a new one for me. I look for the HB9 and find him about 400 hertz higher than the WB5. I hope and pray the HB9 isn't punching the call into the packet system and waking the whole of Europe with his catch. But no, he's not making any big deal of the A7 part of the call sign, any more than I did when I called.

The HB9 doesn't seem interested in a ragchew with the WB5, thank goodness. The quicker I can get this fellow the better, before a pile-up forms. The HB9 passes his QTH and name, and only a 559 signal report. Good, the A7 isn't strong in Europe. That should improve my chances; it means there's less chance that a horde of Europeans will find him. I decide not to try a tail end call; it may upset the WB5, and may alert some other DX'er tuning the band. To any knowledgeable DX'er, a tail end call being dropped is a strong hint that something might be up. At this point I don't know that any one else is waiting in the wings, but there sure is no reason to help attract attention. I change to "split mode" and zero my transmit frequency on the HB9. I wait, listening to the HB9. As I do so I am hoping a mob of hungry DX'ers is not doing the same thing. If ever there is an occasion where I get paranoid, this is it. There, the HB9 is saying 73 and turning it back to the A71.

I tune back down to the A7's frequency. Yes, he's sending his 73's, and signs clear. They exchange dit-dits, and I call, "WB5BJL WB5BJL DE W9KNI W9KNI AR". There is certainly no sense in adding the A7 part of his call; the WB5 knows what the rest of his call is, and if I don't snag him on this call, I don't want to be attracting competition. I'm not just your ordinary dummy. I finish my call and listen, again holding my breath. Darn, he's not coming back

to anyone, but there was no one else calling when I finished my call. Wait, he's transmitting; "W9KN? W9KN? PSE AGN DE A7/WB5BJL KN". All right! I start calling again, "WB5BJL DE W9KNI W9KNI KNI KNI W9KNI AR". I hold my breath again.

Yes! "W9KNI W9KNI DE A7/WB5BJL R GM OM ES TNX CL BT UR RST 569 569 HR IN DOHA DOHA QATAR ES NAME IS RALPH RALPH BT TNX FIRST W QSO BT QRV YESTERDAY BT RUNNING 100 WATTS AND LW FROM HOTEL ROOM BT QSL HOME QTH OK BT HW CPY? W9KNI DE A7/WB5BJL KN". As soon as I hear my call I enter the UTC time, another habit learned from hard experience.

"R WB5BJL DE W9KNI R FB RALPH ES TNX QSO ES FIRST A7 NEW ONE FOR ME BT UR RST 559 559 HR NR CHICAGO NR CHICAGO ES NAME BOB BOB BT RIG HR 1500 WATTS ES SKYHAWK TRIBAND YAGI BT QSL OK VIA HC BT WX HR 66 F TODAY ES CLR BT HW CPY? WB5BJL DE W9KNI KN".

"R OK BOB ES TNX INFO BT WX HR HOT HI HI GOING TO BE 120 DEGREES TDY OK BOB TNX QSO QSL SURE 73 ES KP COOL W9KNI DE WB5BJL/A71 SK".

"R A7/WB5BJL DE W9KNI R FB RALPH ES TNX INFO ES NEW COUNTRY BT VRY EXCITED BT QSL SURE ES BEST DX 73 DE W9KNI SK". Whew! A new one! HOTTTTTT DOG! I glance at my computer screen – no sign of him on packet. Gleefully, I finish the log entry, then start typing in his call for the spot. But before I hit <ENTER> to send the spot, I listen. There is a single signal calling him, yes, a WØ. Someone else who found a good one by tuning. I decide to wait a moment. The WØ finishes his call, and the A7 is coming back to him. I wait to see what happens. Glad the Ø got him OK. This calls for a celebration; I decide to get another cup of coffee.

By the time I get back downstairs, the A7 has a pile-up calling him – I glance at the packet screen and see that the WØ called him in, and now the pile-up is growing geometrically. Well, with that mob on frequency, and the A71 already in the log, there's nothing left there for me, but conditions are still good. I better keep moving. Maybe I have the hot hand tonight. I start turning the knob again. Onward, ever onward.

Hmm. There's a UL7 with a 589 signal. What time is it? OK, it's 0217 Zulu. Gosh, it was pretty early in the morning for that A71. I'm still grinning over that one; a rare country gracing the log, an all time new one for me. Sure am glad I dug that WB5 out of the mud. I'll get the QSL off tomorrow. What's that weak CQ? OK, a YU3. There's another CQ above him. Ah, it's 3B8DA. Guess the sun must be rising in the Indian Ocean, OK. Nice signal, too. But another one I don't need. Keep turning the dial.

I finish going up through the band, move back down to 14,000, and begin tuning higher again. What's that? "5NN K". Clean, sharp fist, about 30 words per minute. There it is again, "R SK UP 5 K". This sounds promising. Let's see who it is. There's no one calling him on his frequency. No, there's a station – a K3 - signing his call. And a traffic cop telling him to QSY. And there went the DX station, but completely buried by the cop. Oh, if only those traffic cops had enough sense to hand out their citations a half kilohertz off.

Ah, the cop has quit. And there goes the unknown DX again, "N4AR 5NN K". I punch the synch button, locking my two VFO's together, then pop the "A" VFO five kHz. and look for N4AR. I don't spot him within a few seconds, so I throw the VFO switch back to the "B" VFO. Yes, there's the DX station. "R SK QRZ UP 5". I flip the VFO switch again, looking again five kilohertz up. Wow, what a mob scene. It seems like there must be hundreds of stations calling, but who are they chasing?

I look over at the packet screen and instantly get my answer – a T5. Huh. I never should have missed that. Then I realize my computer audio level is turned down, which I had done earlier during a phone call, and never restored, so I never heard the logging program alarm for a new one. I flip the VFO switch again to the T5's frequency. Yes, he's transmitting again. "K8CW 5NN K". I jump back up again. There are still plenty calling him, and within the few seconds I allot myself, I fail to find K8CW. I switch back down. Yes, there he is again. "R 73 QSL DJ6SI QRZ DE T55SI UP 5 K". OK, great. But what the heck is a T55? I punch a few keys for my spotting program and there it is. Somali Democratic Republic. Hey! That's what used to be a 6O1. And I need that one too!

He comes back to another station. I miss the call of who he is working, so I wait, with my transmit frequency now set five up, as instructed. There, "R SK UP 5 K". I start to call. No, that's too slow; the keyer is still fairly slow for

the WB5/A71. I quickly crank the speed control up a bit. I finish my call and listen again. "1HZ 5NN K". I missed the prefix of who ever he's working now. This fellow is a fast worker. I jump the receiver back up five. No luck. I tune a little higher, but still nothing. Then I jump back to his transmit frequency; at the speed he's logging QSO's I can't afford to hang around waiting.

"UP 5 K". Yes, he was just finishing. I call again; "DE W9KNI K". and listen again. Yes, there he goes; "W2BA 5NN K". I know 2BA; he usually has a good signal, and he uses a bug instead of a keyer, so his fist is a bit more distinctive. I flip the VFO switch to look for BA's transmit frequency. Nothing at five up. I start checking higher in the band. I take a very brief look up to around ten kHz. higher, but still no luck. I flip the transceiver VFO back to the T55's frequency.

Yup, there he goes, "R 73 JACK SK QRZ DE T55SI QRZ UP 5 K". I move my transmit frequency ten kHz above him, and call blindly, "DE W9KNI K". I don't give him my call two times; clearly he is going with people who sign their call only once; which is one of the characteristics of a really good DX'pedition operator. I listen again. "W4QQN 5NN K". I pop back up again, looking for W4QQN, checking around ten kilohertz higher. Nothing.

This is getting ridiculous, not to mention frustrating. I know I could have heard W2BA if I could have found him, and the same is true of W4QQN; he's no slouch with a signal either. Clearly the DJ6 is listening other than the stated five kHz.up. In fact, I decide, he's probably listening up rather more than five, since I'm pretty sure he's not listening less than five. The "five" must be an indication that the minimum is five, and especially it means, "Don't call me on my frequency." Wish some of the traffic cops would take notice of that as well.

I glance at the packet screen – there is another entry for him, and a note "QSX up 14". I skip back to his frequency. Yes, there he goes, "R SK QRZ UP 5 K". I bump my transmit frequency to a spot 14 kHz above him and drop in my call, "W9KNI". I listen. He comes back; "WB4OSN 5NN K". I switch back to my transmit frequency and start quickly tuning higher. Hah! There! "5NN 73 DE WB4OSN SK"! I switch VFO's, leaving my transmit frequency on WB4OSN's frequency. The T55 signs clear, and I call, then listen on the T55's frequency. There, he comes back, "W4QM 5NN DALE K".

I switch back to my transmit frequency. Nothing. I tune a bit higher. Yes, there, about one higher, "4QM SK," almost twenty kilohertz above the T55's frequency. I switch back to the T55, and call when he clears. I finish my call again, and listen. "K4KQ 5NN K" I switch again to listen on my transmit frequency. Yes, there's K4KQ, about three quarters of a kHz. above my transmit frequency. Hmm. It looks like the T55 is moving up after every contact. I can play that game; I move up three quarters of a kilohertz above 4KQ. I switch again to the T55's frequency. Yes, he's transmitting, "UP 5 K".

Again I call. I listen; he comes back. "K5LM 5NN K". I go back up with my receiver to my transmit frequency. Yes, there's K5LM, virtually dead zero on my transmit frequency. I set up another three quarters of a kHz. higher. He clears. I call. He comes back again to W9VNE. I listen. Again, I'm almost dead zero on VNE'S frequency. I start to feel confident; I'm almost sure to get him within the next few calls, now that I've figured out his listening pattern. I hop back to the T55's transmit frequency.

"R SK QST QST MUST QRT NW FOR BED BT WILL BE QRV AGN TMW 73 DE T55SI SK CL".

ARRRRRGH!! Curses, foiled again. The story of my life, a minute late and a call short. But I quickly cool down. Who am I to complain? I've already gotten a new one tonight, a nice rare one, and besides, the T55 said he would be back on again tomorrow. And, I've got his pattern figured out pretty well; hopefully it shouldn't take long to nail him when he does come on tomorrow. He certainly is a fine operator. And Hope Springs Eternal.

I start tuning up the band again. It's pretty cluttered above the T55's frequency; there are still a lot of stations calling him that didn't get the message. But soon I'm clear of them, and the band is quieter. I glance at my clock. Huh, it's already nearly 0300 Zulu. The sun is definitely up now in the Middle-East, and must be so as well in Somalia, where the T55 is. Guess he must have been up all night, and intends to sleep during the daylight hours.

I hear my wife's voice upstairs; guess she must be back from the school meeting. I decide to go upstairs to chat with her a few minutes, and to brag about my new one in Qatar. I'll have to get the atlas out and show her where it is...

...In about 20 minutes I'm back in the shack. I decide to start tuning again from the bottom of the band. The band seems quieter now. I hear no Europeans at all. Though most of them are certainly in bed, I would expect to hear one or two if we had propagation, so we must have lost the path while I was upstairs.

I slowly work my way up the band, but it does go faster with fewer signals to check out. I keep hoping for a good African or someone in the Middle-East, but I seek in vain. Guess we really have lost the path. No, there's 9J2BO working a G, but that path is considerably easier to hold than one to the further north areas. I listen, but when the 9J2 turns it back I can't hear a trace of the G station.

I swing the antenna further to the south, for a quick look for FT5WK on Crozet, who the bulletins have listed once or twice in the last few months. I don't have much hope, though; the fellow has shown only rarely, and in a very inconsistent pattern, the kind that makes a DXer's nightmare. I decide to move the antenna to bisect the paths to the VP8/LU-Z islands and the paths to the FT islands. A move across the band yields nothing, however. It's getting late, now, 0348 Zulu, 10:48 PM CDST, and I have to rise early tomorrow for a breakfast meeting. Time to pull the switch. I turn off the gear, log off the net, and disconnect the antennas for lightning protection.

I leave the shack with a grin on my face. The A71 was a fine new one I did not expect, and almost a sure QSL. Too bad I didn't nail the T55, but I wasn't expecting to work him either, and he'll be back tomorrow. And I already have a handle on his operating pattern, which is sure to help. Even if propagation is off, that should be a decent path, and I should be able to manage it OK. At the top of the stairs, I switch off the basement lights, feeling rewarded. Besides, it was fun.

To purchase the entire book, "The Complete DX'er" by Bob Locher, W9KNI, visit our web site at <http://www.idiompres.com>