

How to Become a POTA Hunter

With a focus on hunters, WJ1B describes the accessibility, rules, and perks of this popular ham radio program. A version of this article is featured in *The Parks on the Air® Book*, a new ARRL publication featuring expertise from 14 Parks on the Air (POTA) operators.

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POTA is quickly becoming one of the best-known amateur operating programs. While not affiliated with ARRL, POTA is an outgrowth of ARRL's National Parks on the Air, which launched in 2016. POTA's success is partially due to how easy it is for any ham to participate. Within this program, there are two types of stations: *activators* and *hunters*. According to the POTA website (see www.parksontheair.com), "an activator is a licensed amateur radio operator in a park on POTA's designated list [who] contacts other licensed amateurs," and "a hunter is any other licensed amateur radio operator who contacts an activator at a park."

To participate from your station, the basic requirement is to work activators in the parks listed on the POTA website; a map of eligible parks is provided at <http://pota.app/#/map>. Each park is labeled with a unique reference code consisting of a letter and four or five digits. All US parks begin with the letter K. For example, Sleeping Giant State Park in Hamden, Connecticut, is designated K-1717.

There are no restrictions on bands, power levels, time of day, or modes when making POTA contacts. To be a POTA hunter, you simply need an operable station. While most POTA activity takes place on the HF bands, local VHF and UHF POTA stations often participate as well. Activators are mostly located in US parks, but parks in other countries continue to be added to the program.

POTA operators are urged to follow the DX Code of Conduct. While some activations create sizable pile-ups, operations are usually well controlled, as they tend to be less competitive than those in rare DX entities. An important distinction is that hunters do not need to submit any logs. Only activators submit logs to POTA.

Bands and Modes

Any amateur band can be used for POTA contacts, but most activators are on 20 meters because portable 20-meter antennas can easily be erected in a park or



An example of a Parks on the Air (POTA) Bronze Certificate. POTA hunters can earn various awards by contacting park activators.

vehicle. The 20-meter band tends to have good propagation during the day, though 40 meters is also heavily used during the day or night. With better propagation as of late, there are more POTA stations on the HF bands and the 6-meter band. Most activators operate in the General-class portion of the amateur bands to attract more hunters.

POTA stations are permitted to use all modes, but most activations use single sideband (SSB) or CW. FT8 and FT4 usage continues to increase because these modes support low-power operating, which is helpful for activators who are running their stations on low power and compromised antennas.

Locating Activators

The best way for hunters to locate activators is by consulting the POTA website. To qualify for POTA awards and take full advantage of the program's features, hunters must be registered on the website.

Activators can help hunters by uploading information about their upcoming activations to the POTA website. While it looks similar to conventional DX spotting networks, the POTA spotting network lets hunters control the presentation of spotted stations. Activator searches can be filtered by band, mode, frequency, time, park, and other sorting terms.

Working Activators

Working a POTA activator is like working a DX or contest station, but in a less hectic operating environment. However, it still requires patience, good listening skills, and persistence. By using the POTA spotting network, you will know the activator's call sign and operating frequency in advance. Once you locate an activated park, the next step is to determine the activator's operating style. Calls are generally made on or close to the activator's frequency. There are no split operations in POTA, and FT8 and FT4 operations are usually conducted in their standard modes.

To initiate a POTA contact, say or send your call sign after the activator calls CQ, asks for your call sign, or ends their previous contact, depending on their individual operating technique. There is no need to send the activator's call sign. Don't assume that your signal is not getting through if the activator doesn't answer right away; they may be calling you back, but you may not hear them because activators use less RF power and less-efficient antennas. Signals may also fade as band conditions change. Don't hesitate to call a weak station, as they may be hearing you better than you're hearing them!

In some instances, you may need to call again because parks can be distracting environments for activators. Weather conditions change, curious park visitors ask questions, and park staff stop by to check in with the activator. Activators sometimes pause for a short time to change their batteries or make other adjustments, so keep listening and calling.

Once the activator acknowledges your call, your exchange should be an accurate signal report and your state or DX location. You can also thank the activator for putting the park on the air. Overall, ragchewing is not commonplace during POTA contacts, but if the activator is not busy, there may be some other information exchanged about the park or the activator's station. Hunters get credit for working a park only once on a given band on any given day. Keep track of your contacts to make sure you are not working a dupe.

If you are on SSB, use standard phonetics. Ensure that you copy the activator's call sign and not the call sign of another hunter. On CW, POTA contacts are sent at 13 – 22 WPM at most. It's best practice to match your CW speed to that of the activator, or to go slightly slower, as their park may be a difficult receiving environment. States are sent as their two-letter abbreviation — for example, "CT" on CW or "Charlie Tango" on SSB if you are operating from Connecticut.

Activators earn special awards for working another park, which is known as a *park-to-park* contact. You may hear stations calling "park to park" on the airwaves. These contacts can be difficult to complete, and it is discourteous to transmit when one park is trying to work another park. After completing a POTA contact, spot or re-spot the activator on the POTA website to show other hunters that the park is still being activated.

Logging

Hunters do not need to submit logs to confirm contacts; the activator alone is responsible for submitting logs directly to the POTA website. You can view your

The screenshot shows the 'Active Spots' section of the POTA website. At the top, there is a search bar and navigation links for 'SPOTS', 'ACTIVATIONS', 'SIGN UP', and 'SIGN IN'. Below the search bar, there are filters for 'Band', 'Mode', 'Program', 'QRT', and 'Hunted'. The main content area is a grid of spot cards, each representing an active POTA spot. Each card includes the call sign, park name, location, state, frequency, mode, and last heard time. For example, the first card shows K2QB at K-2011, Beaver Island State Park, US-NY, 14042.0 kHz (CW), WA7LNV-#, RBN 11 dB 26 WPM via WA7LNV-#, and last heard 4 seconds ago at 16:39 UTC. Other cards show similar information for K2JVB, W8RKJ, KE8NHH, K7CAN, N3CDF, KK7MXL, and KO4TFE.

A screenshot of the Active Spots web page on the POTA website (<https://pota.app/#/>). This is how hunters can locate activators.

contacts that have been submitted by activators at <https://pota.app/#/user/logbook>.

Though it is not required, each hunter should keep a personal log of his or her POTA contacts because questions can arise about specific contact information. Extra confirmation is sometimes needed for non-POTA operating awards like Worked all States, CQ WPX, or the County Hunter awards. For the same reasons, both hunters and activators typically submit their logs to their preferred online QSL services, such as Logbook of The World or QRZ.

Awards for Hunters

POTA offers a variety of awards for many types of on-air activity. The top hunters have worked and confirmed more than 8,000 parks and 25,000 contacts, but hunters can earn an award after confirming only 10 parks, or for confirming five unique DX stations. Hunters can qualify for these awards using any combination of modes or bands.


There are additional awards for hunters and activators who make park contacts at specific times. Early Shift and Late Shift awards are given to those who make early-morning or late-evening contacts. Because the sun rises and sets at different times depending on a station's location, the exact times during which you can earn these awards vary. Said times for each park are listed on the POTA website's Shifts Map (click the links in the Early Shift/Late Shift Awards section at www.parksontheair.com/pota-awards/#advanced-awards) and on the POTA park map (<http://pota.app/#/map>).

There is no need to apply for a POTA operating award. Once you are registered on the website, awards are automatically tracked and granted. If a hunter achieves an award, the website displays a professionally designed, personalized PDF certificate that they can download and print. The website has extensive award tracking information, so hunters can easily monitor their progress.

POTA also sponsors operating events throughout the year, such as New Year's Week and the annual Plaque Events. One of my favorites is Support Your Parks, which occurs during the third full weekend of each January, April, July, and October. Such events are designed to get more activators in the parks and encourage more hunters to work them.

There are many online materials about the POTA program for those who are interested in learning more.



 In the digital edition of *QST* (www.arrl.org/qst), the author, Harold Kramer, WJ1B, takes you inside the mind of a successful POTA hunter. Hear his tips and see them in action as he works a POTA activation from the ARRL Radio Laboratory, W1HQ.

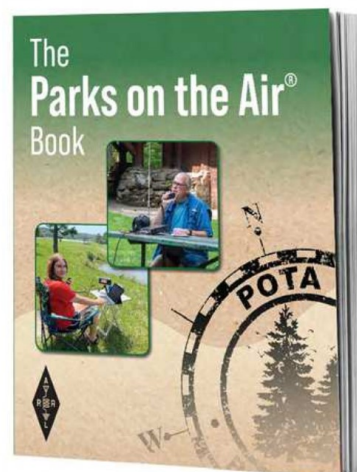
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For updates to this article, see the *QST* Feedback page at www.arll.org/feedback.



For more information on how to become an effective POTA hunter, check out *The Parks on the Air® Book*, published by ARRL. It shares the experiences of various operators who activate park units, and it provides advice on how to work a POTA activator from the comfort of your home station.



The Parks on the Air® Book is available from the ARRL online store (www.arll.org/shop) and ARRL dealers.