

National Parks

ON THE AIR

2016



The ARRL
National Parks
on the Air
Activator's Guide



ARRL National Parks on the Air

— Activator's Guide —

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Introduction

2016 will mark 100 years of the National Park Service (NPS). With so much Amateur Radio activity taking place in the great outdoors, and with the pileups from the ARRL Centennial QSO Party still fresh in everyone's mind, creating the National Parks on the Air (NPOTA) event was simply the natural thing to do!

This Activator's Guide answers basic questions about the NPOTA program and successful operating from NPS Administrative Units.

We strongly encourage you to check out the official ARRL National Parks on the Air website at www.arrl.org/NPOTA. It contains links to all sorts of information, as well as links to social media venues where you can promote your activations, share photos, tell your story, and more!

ARRL will also maintain an online Frequently Asked Questions list throughout 2016 on the NPOTA website.

Cooperation between ARRL and the National Park Service

1. Is there a formal partnership between ARRL and NPS for this event?

ARRL has no formal partnership with NPS for this event, nor does a Memorandum of Understanding exist between ARRL and NPS. However, ARRL has been in communication with NPS, The NPS Centennial Office, and the National Parks Foundation concerning National Parks on the Air since early 2015. We have worked with these groups to ensure that as many NPS staff as possible are aware this event exists and that there will be increased activity from Amateur Radio operators in NPS units throughout 2016.

Radio amateurs have operated from NPS units for decades, and the vast majority of these operations were positive experiences from the perspective of both NPS and the amateurs.

2. Waiver of Liability

Activators of NPS units acknowledge the following legal requirements:

Participants in the National Parks on the Air event do so at their own risk. All participants are on notice that some risk is involved with any portable Amateur Radio operation. Participants activating any NPS Administrative Unit agree to take all safety precautions, including, but not limited to: avoiding power lines; following all rules and regulations of the NPS and instructions of NPS staff; choosing an operating site wisely; avoiding interactions with wildlife; not disturbing other guests of NPS Administrative Units; and by making an honest self-appraisal of their personal condition before undertaking portable Amateur Radio operation from an NPS Unit.

ARRL and the National Park Service assume no liability for any Amateur Radio operator or club participating in the National Parks on the Air event and participants agree to assume all risk and liability for damage to personal property and injury to persons that may result from such operation, and to hold NPS and ARRL harmless therefrom.

On the Cover

Pete Harris, KE6ZIW, set up on the South Rim of Grand Canyon National Park (NP22) in March 2013. It was an experience he won't forget anytime soon. "Radio reception and transmitting from this great location was amazing. I talked with hams from a bunch of different states — Illinois, Wisconsin, Texas, Nebraska, Colorado, South Dakota, Washington, Oregon, and several from my home location, the San Francisco Bay Area. "CQ from the Grand Canyon" resulted in a pileup of responses that I didn't expect and had never dealt with before. It was great fun! My wife had to drag me away!" [Pete Harris, KE6ZIW, photo]

NPS Administrative Unit Definition

1. How are the eligible NPS Administrative Units for NPOTA determined?

The official list of NPOTA operating locations, along with complete rules, is on the NPOTA website at www.arrl.org/NPOTA.

Rather than engage in debate over the validity of what units should be permitted as part of the NPOTA program, ARRL chose to use the list of official NPS Administrative Units and Affiliated Areas as provided by NPS itself at www.nps.gov/aboutus/faqs.htm. This list from NPS shows 408 Administrative Units and 25 NPS Affiliated Areas; it is this list on which the NPOTA event is based.

There are many places across the country that bear the NPS logo and are not part of the NPOTA program, such as National Heritage Areas, or sites on the National Register of Historic Places.

If a unit is not on the ARRL NPOTA list, it is not eligible for inclusion in NPOTA, even if it may have the NPS logo on its website or other signage associated with the unit.



Don Minkoff, NK6A, running a 20 meter pileup with his QRP gear at Rainbow Point, Bryce Canyon National Park (NP07) in Utah, 2014. Rainbow Point also qualifies for the Summits on the Air (SOTA) program as W7U/KA-005. [Don Minkoff, N6KA, photo]

2. Why aren't National Forests part of this event?

National Forests are administered by the United States Forest Service (USFS), which is a separate organization from the National Park Service. This event is focused on NPS and their Centennial; the USFS Centennial was in 2005.

3. Why Aren't National Heritage Areas on the list of NPS units?

From the National Park Service web page on National Heritage Areas (www.nps.gov/heritageareas/FAQ/):

“NHAs are not national park units. Rather, NPS partners with, provides technical assistance, and distributes matching federal funds from Congress to NHA entities. NPS does not assume ownership of land inside heritage areas or impose land use controls.”



4. Can the number of eligible NPS Administrative units change in 2016?

Yes, it is possible. There are several places that are being considered as new Administrative Units within NPS; if they are added to the official NPS Administrative Units List in 2016, they will immediately be eligible for inclusion in the NPOTA program from their date of official inclusion.

It is theoretically possible that a unit can be removed from the official list, but that is highly unlikely. Should that event occur, the unit would be removed from the NPOTA list effective on the date provided by NPS. All QSOs made from that unit before deactivation would count as valid QSOs for Activator and Chaser awards totals.

All decisions to add or remove a unit from the NPOTA list will be based solely on the official National Park Service Administrative Unit list.

Hope Lea, KM4IPF, did an SO50 satellite operation from the Wright Brothers National Memorial (NM29) in Kitty Hawk, North Carolina in the summer of 2015. [James Lea, WX4TV, photo]

Activating an NPS Unit for NPOTA

1. What bands and modes may I use?

- a) All amateur bands are permitted, except for 60 meters. Cross-band QSOs, QSOs made through repeaters, digipeaters, Echolink, IRLP, or any communications network that relays inter-station communication by non-amateur means do not count. A specific exemption is granted for QSOs made through the Amateur Radio satellites and the International Space Station.
- b) Any mode may be used.
- c) Remember that the NPOTA awards do not keep track of QSOs by band or mode. Only one verified QSO is needed on any band or mode to get credit for that NPS unit.
- d) The use of a remote station is permitted for Chasers. Activators and all their station equipment must be physically present in the unit they are activating.

2. What is required for my activation to be considered “official?”

For your activation to count toward your Activator Award, the following items must be met:

- a) You must make a minimum of 10 QSOs during your activation.
- b) All station equipment must be physically present in the NPS unit you activate.
- c) You must upload your log to Logbook of The World (LoTW) as soon as is practical.

3. How do I prove I was actually at the NPS Unit I activated?

While it is unlikely that ARRL will ask for documentation, ARRL reserves the right to ask for verification of any claimed operation from an NPS Administrative Unit. As an Activator, you should secure as much documentation as possible to verify that your operation was legitimate. Some ways to do this are:

- a) An official stamp from the NPS unit's “NPS Passport Program.” This is a free date/location stamp available at most NPS units, at the unit's main Visitors Center or Ranger Station. This is the preferred method of verification. More information on the NPS Passport Program is available at www.eparks.com.
- b) A photo of yourself in front of the NPS unit's main sign or distinguishing landmark.
- c) Image of GPS latitude/longitude coordinates.

4. What kind of station should I bring on my activation?

There's no one answer to that question. A lot will depend on which NPS unit you try to activate and how many people will be there when you try to set up. Some sample station configurations include:

- Operating from your car or RV with a mobile antenna affixed to the vehicle.
- Using a radio at a picnic area with a push-up mast and a simple wire antenna.
- “QRP portable,” with a small transceiver and a simple wire antenna.

Some sites will have restrictions on whether the ground can be modified. Others will be in highly urban areas and may offer no easy way to erect an antenna. Be flexible, prepare for multiple setup scenarios if possible, and always follow the rules as outlined by an NPS Administrative Unit's guidelines or staff.

5. Can I use trees at NPS units to hold up wire antennas?

This will vary from site to site. Some sites specifically prohibit tying any ropes to trees. We strongly suggest doing research before activating an NPS unit and bringing a portable mast for your antenna, in case using trees is prohibited.

6. Do I need a special use permit to operate my Amateur Radio station in an NPS unit?

This will vary from unit to unit. A lot will depend on your operating style. If you plan on operating strictly from your vehicle with a mobile antenna on the roof, or with a small station in a campground, you may not need a special use permit. If you are planning a large operation with big antennas, or want to operate from an NPS unit we have deemed as “sensitive,” the odds you will need a special use permit increase dramatically. Do not expect to roll in to an NPS unit with a tower trailer and a kilowatt HF station without prior approval. If you have any doubts, ask in advance.

7. If I go to the same NPS unit several times during the year, how much time must go by between activations?

A period of 24 hours must go by between operating sessions at the same NPS unit for it to be considered a new activation.

Best Practices as an NPOTA Activator

1) Cooperate with NPS staff at all times

As an Activator, it is absolutely critical that you communicate honestly and openly and cooperate with all NPS staff, rangers, and volunteers. We are visitors to their site, just like any other person or group, and we do not receive special consideration or priority because of our role as Amateur Radio operators. NPS reserves the right to enforce their rules as they deem appropriate.

Despite ARRL's best efforts, it is possible you will encounter an NPS staff member who is not familiar with the NPOTA event. We have provided a one-page handout you can download for free on the NPOTA web page to help explain to NPS staff what NPOTA is and where they can get some of their questions answered. Emphasize that this is a way the Amateur Radio community is helping NPS celebrate their Centennial, and that amateurs worldwide are eagerly trying to make a radio contact with all 433 NPOTA units.

Be friendly and engage with all NPS employees you encounter, not just the ones at the Ranger Station or visitor's office. Invite them to visit your site to show them what you are doing.

2) Do not disrupt the enjoyment of non-amateur visitors

Part of this event is to help showcase Amateur Radio to the general public. However, not everybody will be interested in what we are doing at NPS units. It is not in the best interest of Amateur Radio to disrupt other visitors to NPS units. Please avoid setting up in high-traffic areas (unless this has been arranged in advance) and be mindful of your noise. Consider other visitors when setting up your station.

3) Leave nothing but footprints

This is an old saying among people who enjoy the outdoors. We are all stewards of NPS units. Do not build, erect, or install anything that damages the land or property of the unit or would have a negative impact on wildlife or visitors in that unit. Pick up your trash. If you bring something in, bring it out. Leave your operating site in the same condition you found it, or better.



Dave Palmer, KB5WIA, operated during an ARRL VHF contest from Lassen Volcanic National Park (NP38) in 2011. [Dave Palmer, KB5WIA, photo]



Norm Fusaro, W3IZ, takes time to make a few quick contacts at 20-Minute Cliff, an overlook on the Blue Ridge Parkway (PK01) in Virginia. [Norm Fusaro, W3IZ, photo]

Sensitive Areas

Some of the units on the NPOTA list are deemed “sensitive;” they are identified with an asterisk, as found on the NPOTA Leader Board site. This means that extra caution should be used when trying to activate that unit. It may be for security reasons, such as the monuments in Washington DC, or for more aesthetic reasons, such as the Flight 93 Monument in Pennsylvania. Units with two asterisks on the NPOTA list are deemed “extremely sensitive” — work with the administration of the NPS unit in question to achieve an activation with minimal disruption.

If Your Activation is Denied

If you encounter an NPS staff member who does not permit you to set up an Amateur Radio station, ask to speak with their supervisor in a friendly way. Be courteous and polite at all times. Ask if there are alternatives that would permit the activation to continue. It's possible the ultimate answer will be “no.” Even then, be respectful. Let ARRL know that you had difficulty, and we will see if something can be worked out for future operations. Just keep in mind: the more respectful an amateur is if denied an activation, the easier our job will be to negotiate a positive outcome at a later date.

REMEMBER: All interactions you have with NPS staff will have a direct impact on how Amateur Radio is viewed as a whole and will affect our image, for better or for worse. It will also have a direct impact on how successful the next radio amateur is in getting permission to activate that same NPS unit. Operations that are friendly and cooperative with NPS staff will foster good relations and open doors for future activators. We are all “hambassadors” for this event.

Camping in the Wilderness

If you will be operating from a remote wilderness location in an NPS unit, such as in a National Park, it is expected that you are experienced in wilderness camping and accept the risks associated with this activity. There are real dangers, even for experienced outdoor enthusiasts. Be honest in your self-appraisal.

Be sure to check the website of the NPS unit you will activate prior to your trip; NPS frequently posts alerts about park conditions, road closures, maintenance, etc.

NPS Official Rules and Regulations

NPS offers a list of general rules and regulations at www.nps.gov/aboutus/lawsandpolicies.htm.

Each individual NPS unit will also have rules and regulations specific to the unit.

Promoting Your Activation

Promoting your activation at an NPS unit will help Chasers find you and work you more easily. The NPOTA Leader Board site has a page for reporting your upcoming activation and a calendar listing of all upcoming activations.

You can also report your activation using the ARRL NPOTA Facebook group and on Twitter with the hashtags **#ARRL_NPOTA** and **#HamRadioInParks**.

For more visible activations, posters are available from the ARRL NPOTA shop to promote your event to the general public.



Several operators put special event station W7C on the air from the rim at Crater Lake National Park (NP13) in Oregon. 2015 was the fourth year they've operated from the rim. [Everett Curry, W6ABM, photo]

Why PR (Public Relations) is Important

There were nearly 293 million visitors to NPS units in 2014. Operating in NPS units gives us a chance to showcase Amateur Radio to a very large number of people from all walks of life. Whether your activation is small or large, you have the opportunity to help raise the visibility of Amateur Radio. Public outreach is a key component of the NPOTA event.

Five Star Activator

To recognize Activators who engage in PR efforts to the general public, ARRL will provide a “Five Star Activator” designator on their certificate. Activators must perform five on the items of the Five Star Activator list to qualify.



Media Publicity

Send a press release about your activation to the local media. It is not necessary to send ARRL a copy of the press release, or a copy of the actual media publicity received (newspaper article, etc.); however, ARRL reserves the right to ask for proof of claimed activities.

Public Information Table

Promote Amateur Radio during your activation by making appropriate handouts and information available to the visiting public at the site. (Note: NPS regulations may require a special use permit to distribute flyers; check with the NPS unit first.)

Youth/Scouting Involvement

Activate an NPS unit with a youth group or Scouting program.

Radio E-message

Transmit at least one electronic message to a third party via Amateur Radio. Any digital format may be used to earn this bonus. The message must leave NPS property via RF on an Amateur Radio frequency.

Digital Modes

Demonstrate Amateur Radio using any of the digital modes available to radio amateurs to an audience of at least one person not familiar with digital modes.

Satellite Contact

Make a minimum of one QSO through an Amateur Radio satellite or the ISS. QSOs must be between two Earth stations.

Green Power

Make a successful activation using solar, wind, water, or non-fossil fuel power. This includes batteries charged using “green” power.

Battery Power

Make a successful activation using battery power. Batteries may be charged using commercial mains.

Social Media

Promote your activation, and post video or photographs of your activation on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or any other social media platform (not your own website).

Intrepid Traveler

Activate five or more different NPS units.

Stamp Collector

Participate in the NPS Passport program.

Share the Mike

Have a non-ham or new ham make a contact. (Similar to Field Day's GOTA operating.)

Moonbounce

Make at least one QSO via EME. Please use discretion when selecting your operating location.

NPS Resources

National Park Service Main Site: www.nps.gov

NPS Frequently Asked Questions (includes link to NPS regulations): www.nps.gov/faqs.htm

The official NPS Centennial Page: www.nps.gov/centennial

NPS Find Your Park: findyourpark.com/

NPS Passport Program: www.eparks.com

National Parks Foundation: www.nationalparks.org/

NPS Units on Twitter (unofficial list — not an NPS site):

jasoncochran.com/blog/all-the-national-park-service-twitter-accounts-in-one-place/

Logbook of The World (LoTW)

For an activation to count toward your total, and for the people you worked to get credit, you will need to upload your log to Logbook of The World (LoTW). No paper logs, paper QSLs, or electronic logs outside of LoTW will be accepted for award credit. Both Activators and Chasers must upload their logs to LoTW to be eligible for awards.

The 2016 release of TQSL 2.2.x will allow users to create station locations that include an NPS unit. Users will not have to request additional call sign certificates for the NPOTA event unless they operate from an NPS unit using a portable identifier, such as W3IZ/4, in which case they can simply use TQSL to request a signed call sign certificate for the appended call sign. For more information, see the section on multiple station locations and call signs at <https://lotw.arrl.org/lotw-help/multiple-callsigns-locations/>.

LoTW is free to use, and it will keep track of all credits earned for Chasers and Activators.

You will need a LoTW account to view the ARRL NPOTA Leader Board.

To get started with LoTW, visit <https://lotw.arrl.org/lotw-help/getting-started/>.

If you have questions about LoTW, you may e-mail LoTW-help@arrl.org or call 860-594-0200 Monday-Friday 8AM-5PM Eastern time.

