Pacific Northwest SOTA Newsletter

May-June 2019

Photo by Matt-KF7HIZ Mount St. Helens-W7W/LC-001

Upcoming Events – Spring is here and summer is coming soon…and here are some events "to get our SOTA on!"

May 31-June 2 – SeaPac Convention, Seaside, Ore. This includes the annual PNW SOTA gathering – see details below.
June 8-9 – June VHF Contest. A great chance to try SSB (or FM!) on VHF/UHF bands, especially from a favorite summit.
June 22-23 – ARRL Field Day. Another chance for radio from summits, or participate – mountain-top portable!
May 31 – Annual Pacific Northwest SOTA Gathering. 6pm, Pizza Harbor, Seaside. We'll visit with our fellow SOTAteers, perhaps have a couple short presentations, and have a gear weigh-in. For the weigh-in, bring your favorite complete SOTA station (rig, mic, key, antenna, battery) and we'll weigh 'em up. No prizes, no razzing for lightest or heaviest – they all do different things, this is just to see a range of what is possible and how much some people are willing to carry!

W7W Summit-to-Summit Party – Coming Up on May 18! – The fun isn't just for Oregon, W7W is looking to get a bunch of folks on the air for a S2S event on Saturday, May 18. The focus will be on Puget Sound – so consider working from either side of the water. Post an alert on www.sotawatch.org for your favorite peak with a starting time of noon local (1900z) on 146.58-FM.

SOTA Success using 2m FM – There are new folks and Techs that want to give SOTA a try – it's a challenge sometimes to work four contacts on 2m FM. Here are a few points for success using 2m FM for simplex contacts from a SOTA summit.

- BE SURE to post Alerts and Spots on www.sotawatch.org – local SOTA folks will chase for you.
  (ALERTS indicate your INTENTIONS and SPOTS are for when you are actually ON THE AIR.)
- Post an alternative frequency (146.48 or 146.58 perhaps) in case the calling frequency (146.52) is busy.
- Consider a major brand radio – we've noticed that some inexpensive radios don't hear very well – a serious problem for making simplex contacts.
- Open your squelch after making a call – there may be someone in the weeds calling you.
- Use an aftermarket antenna – we like the MFJ "Long Ranger" telescopic…cheap, lightweight and easy to use.
- It helps to have Line of Sight to a population center where a few folks (hopefully at least four!) can work you.
- We recommend a simple, short CQ ending with "mountain-top potable" to generate interest (some think SOTA is a contest and won't answer you). Try two or three CQs and then give it a rest for five minutes for the next mobile station to come into range.
- Sometimes asking on a local repeater for folks to move to simplex will work for that fourth contact.
- Tell your friends to look out for you – they'll have fun seeing if they can work you simplex.
- Some summits with RF sites may block receive on your HT – use the HT attenuator feature or a poorer antenna.

Tag Alongs Welcome! Have you wanted to try Summits on the Air but would like to first see how it's done? You have a General ticket and would like to try HF from a summit, but only have a HT? Watch out for **"Tag Alongs Welcome!"** in the comment field for www.sotawatch.org Alerts – that's an invitation to join the activation.

We had some "Tag Alongs" at Cooper Mountain (W7O/WV-099) on a sunny day in February when Robert-KI7PLB and Ken-KI7VEM came out to for their first SOTA Activations. (With K7ATN holding the SOTA flag.)

If you would be glad to have another activator or two along, please consider putting **"Tag Alongs Welcome!"** in your alert comment with "meet at trailhead" or "rsvp by email" or whatever might work for you and the summit you have in mind. With a bit of cooperation three or even four activators can co-exist on a summit and each make four contacts for points.

To the left is another **"Tag Along"** with Steve-W7SRH, Etienne-K7ATN, Joe-WB7VTY, Mark-KE7MSU, Ken-KI7VEM and Benton-NX7O on Mt. Sylvania-W7O/WV-096.

Willamette Valley Summit-to-Summit Party! Everyone loves a party, and we celebrated a rain-free Saturday, March 23 when there were 24 summits activated all over W7O (to my count). For the Willamette Valley S2S Party, we had 21 Activators involved on nine summits. And to continue the fun, we gathered afterwards at a local pub.

Note that W7W will be having a S2S event of their own on May 18 (see events above) and if you want to feature your own regional Summit-to-Summit event here, let me know.

From left to right: Mark-KE7MSU, Dan-N7CQR, Etienne-K7ATN, Nick-KI7PTT, Bill-WJ7WJ, Andrew-K7AHR, Matt-KF7HIZ, Steve-KI7HYF, Travis-K7PLC, Ken-KI7VEM, JP-K7JPF, Brian-AF7MD, Ryan-W7RMR, Jim-AF7JT, Rick-K7RJB, James-WA7JNJ, and Greg-K7RSB.

Videos – There are many SOTA videos online…here are a few of those that I have enjoyed. If you know of any videos that are worthy of being featured here (especially with activations in our own Pacific Northwest) let me know!
[Click the thumbnail to get YouTube started for each video.]

Mike-ACØPR activates in Utah:

Mot-JP1QEC works NA (our own NS7P!) and VK:

Stuart-KB1HQS does summits in NC with his pup:

Matt-KF7HIZ on a climb of St. Helens:

Matt-KF7PXT and Lily working 'em from Silver Peak:

Todd-W7TAO has a crew carrying their gear:

You can't have enough of videos from Steve-WGØAT:

Roger-F5LKW has great taste in music:

George-KX0R makes some good points about antennas for SOTA. When QRP, he first wanted to have the best signals possible, so he carried lots of complex things to make that possible. But he's found that an end-fed half wave can be the best portable antenna, and here are his reasons:

- A single end-fed wire is more practical and effective to use for SOTA activations than anything else we know.
- You can use your limited time on a summit any way you choose, but many of us prefer being on the air and making lots of contacts over struggling with complex antennas, feedlines, and heavy poles.
- An end-fed system is safer than a traditional dipole, because it can be erected and taken down much faster. In windy, cold, or stormy weather, the advantages become incredibly clear!
- Reducing weight and complexity buys you time and energy, especially at high altitudes, when you don't have enough of either.

You can read the entire thread and his full comments here.

SOTA with Snow(mobile) — Part I - Darryl-WW7D introduces us to the world of snowmobiles for SOTA…

During the Washington winters, most of our six-point summits are buried under many feet of snow. Even the roads leading to trailheads are impassible by cars and trucks. Many roads in state and national forests are converted into "Sno-Parks" for winter recreation. Sno-Parks collect user fees and use them to plow access roads and parking areas. Furthermore, the forest service roads are groomed into trails for specific uses like cross-country skiing or snowmobiling. There are some 120 Sno-Parks in Washington, with 80 of them designated "motorized" Sno-Parks.

Last fall, Josh-WU7H and I were discussing how many of the motorized Sno-Park "trails" lead to trailheads for many six-point SOTA summits, and how easy it would be to get to the trailheads on a snowmobile. We were half joking about buying a pair of old snowmobiles, but the complications of procuring, transporting, maintaining, and storing snowmobiles left the discussion in the realm of the theoretical. Neither of us had any real experience with snowmobiles.

Joking or not, I did check Craigslist on occasion, just to see what the market was like. And then, late in 2018, something turned up that was hard to ignore: a couple of mid-1990 snowmobiles with a trailer for $1,000. Neither machine had run for a couple of years, but the trailer was in "great shape." Josh and I decided to take a look.

Josh-WU7H and Darryl-WW7D with snowmobile #1

The snowmobiles were surprisingly clean based on our "YouTube knowledge" of buying a used snowmobile. They each had under 5,000 miles on the odometer. The trailer was pretty rusty underneath, but tilted nicely and seemed functional. I valued the trailer at $600 and $200 apiece for the non-functioning snowmobiles. So we bought them and towed them over to Josh's QTH.

New Year's Eve was two days later, and Josh and I undertook our planned activation of Nason Ridge, W7W/CW-204. The trip involved snowshoeing four miles up a forest service road followed by a one-mile cross-country scramble up a steep ridge. As we hiked the road, a couple of snowmobiles were repeatedly hauling snowboarders to the top of a large switchback. By the end of that trip, we had

spent hours hiking up the road in daylight and back down by headlamp. “If only we had found our snowmobiles earlier,” we discussed during the long return trip.

For the next month, whenever we could manage the time, I'd head over to Josh's house to work on the snowmobiles and the trailer. We started with snowmobile #1, a 1995 Polaris Indy Trail 500cc, two-cylinder two-stroke air-cooled machine with electric start and reverse. We were told it was fine for groomed trials, but not very capable off-trail or in deep snow. Besides doing ordinary maintenance items, we drained the old fuel, replaced fuel lines, disassembled carbs and ultrasonically cleaned the parts, and replaced the battery. A few weeks into the adventure, we were ready to start the machine up. It did so with ease, and purred like a kitten. It took another work session to fix the drive clutch and, in theory, we had one working machine.

In the middle of all this, the Puget Sound region was hit with a series of debilitating snowstorms and cold that slowed down the project for most of February. The weather was leaving lots of snow in the mountains, so we didn't complain too much.

Snowmobile #2 is a 1997 XLT RMK 600cc water cooled three-cylinder two-stroke with a pull-start and no reverse. This machine, we were told, is far more capable off-trail. It is not as capable as a modern machine, but in its day, it was considered quite capable for even off-trail riding. We followed almost identical maintenance and repair steps to bring this machine back to life, and soon it too, was purring like a kitten. The trailer also required some work, including replacing both hubs. Now we were ready to find some snow.

Two snowmobiles at the saddle below Pechugh Peak

We planned our first outing to the Greenwater Sno-Park just north of Mt. Rainier, off of WA-410. A handful of summits are accessible from roads that are groomed or “periodically groomed.” One Sunday morning in early March, we hooked up Josh’s Suburban to the trailer and were underway. The trip to Greenwater was uneventful. We stopped a few times to check if the hubs were getting hot. They weren't. The snowmobiles require ethanol-free gasoline, and we found it at a gas station along the way.

When we arrived at the Sno-Park around 9am and there was already a mile of pickup trucks and trailers parked along the plowed road. (Apparently, snowmobiling is “a thing” in Washington. Who knew?!) We quickly unloaded the snowmobiles. Number 1 started right up, but the key was not turning the lock in #2. After a few minutes of playing with it, we took the lock out, and warmed it with heat from the Suburban. That did the trick. We donned our riding gear, synced our helmet intercoms, and we were off! As we drove past a mile of parked vehicles, I thought about whether anyone had any inkling that we had no idea what we were doing!

Soon we were on the groomed trail, experimenting with speed, cornering, and braking. It actually seemed straightforward! After about three miles we turned north on a “periodically groomed” road. It hadn’t been groomed recently, but the snow was compacted from ample earlier snowmobile traffic. After another five miles, we arrived at “Big Intersection.” From here we could turn right to head toward Pechugh Peak, W7W/KG-051, or turn left and head to Sawmill Ridge, W7W/KG-074. We went right, if only because there were tracks heading that way. After a mile or so we turned onto a small spur road that switchback uphill for another mile to a landing about 300 feet below the summit. The snow was less compacted as the road had seen few snowmobiles since the last snowfall. With the moderate grade, the snowmobiles easily carried us up toward the trailhead.

One of the issues I noticed with machine #2 was that it didn't steer very well off the groomed trails. This is a symptom of worn carbide runners on the bottom of the skis. As a result, I had to use plenty of “body English” to take corners on my machine. That worked pretty well until the last hairpin turn, where I went wide and ended up stopped in deep snow. It took Josh and me about 20 minutes of digging and dragging the machine around to get it unstuck. From there, we reached the landing in no time.

We strapped on snowshoes and headed to the summit in deep powder. Because we were walking several feet above ground cover and the smaller blowdowns, we both found this part of the trip easier in snowshoes than our experiences from past summers activating the same summit.

It was a cloudless, clear day, and from the summit, Mt. Rainier was a stunning view. We worked plenty of stations on 2m, including Tom, KE7SW, who worked us again on 1296.2 MHz. We opted out of doing HF, because a quick VHF-only activation left us enough time for a second summit.

Both snowmobiles started right up, and motored back to Big Intersection to take another road to Sawmill Ridge. That road had deeper snow and no recent traffic on it. We decided to “go for it,” at least a little way up the road.

I laid a track with the more capable machine, and Josh followed behind being careful to stay in my track. It was smooth sailing until the last 500 feet. The road dropped down sharply and the snow looked deep. We decided to leave Josh’s machine up top and go 2-up on my machine to the trail head. When we got there, Josh jumped off, and I looped around to park in my own track, hopefully making for an easy exit.

The snowshoe trip up Sawmill Ridge is about a half mile hike with 400 feet of gain. The summit is nearly treeless, and offers spectacular views of snow-covered mountains in all directions. To the south, Mt. Rainier was in full splendor, and to the North was the endless expanse of snow-covered Cascades. We could see numerous nearby SOTA summits all around us, including Pyramid Peak (W7W/CW-050), Kelly Butte (W7W/KG-060), Colquhoun Peak (W7W/KG-147), and Blowout Mountain (W7W/CW-045). We, again, opted for a VHF-only activation to ensure we had plenty of daylight remaining to get back to the truck.

Darryl Snowshoeing up Sawmill Ridge (W7W/KG-074)

We rode 2-up back to Josh's machine without any difficulties. Then we proceeded single file for the ten-mile trip back to the truck. About a mile into it, as we hit a squirrelly uphill section. I had to shift my weight multiple times to keep the snowmobile going in the desired direction. At some point I lost my balance, and the snowmobile headed to the shoulder and into some brush and deep powder.

Now, an experienced snowmobiler would have known exactly what to do—keep moving, add throttle, and ride it out. But then, an experienced snowmobiler probably wouldn't have had much difficulty with the shifting camber of the track. In any case, I came to a complete stop, forcing Josh to stop about 30 feet back. My snowmobile was good and stuck about 40 feet from the crest of the hill. We lifted and dug and piled snow under the snowmobile, and then tried to motor forward. That got me five feet before sinking in again. We tried a few more times, only moving a few feet with each try.

After an hour of this, we had moved the snowmobile about 15 feet toward the crest of the hill, and we had less than an hour of daylight left. We resorted to plan-B, which was to turn the machine around to face downhill. The plan was that I would ride down the hill, turn around, and take a second pass, and continue riding until I was sure the snowmobile would make it back to the truck. Josh would make use of the reverse gear on his machine to turn around and do the same.

The plan half worked. I rode down to the bottom of the hill, spun my machine around, and blasted up the hill, this time without any difficulties at all. Momentum is everything! I stopped about a third of a mile later on a wide flat spot, where I could easily turn the around and go back if needed. Josh, meanwhile, was left to fend for himself. The reverse didn't really help in the deep powder, and the snowmobile embedded itself well into the snow.

With about 30 minutes of daylight left, we discussed our options on 146.52 MHz. Option 1 was for me to ride back to Josh and help muscle his machine around. Option 2 was for Josh to snowshoe the one-third mile to where I was, and we would ride 2-up back to the truck. We would come back later in the week and retrieve the other snowmobile with plenty of daylight. Option 1 probably would have worked fine, but if anything had gone wrong, we would either have to spend an uncomfortable night in the forest, or snowshoe in the dark nine miles back to the truck. We figured there was little chance of anyone even coming across the stuck snowmobile, given that there were no fresh tracks besides our own. So we did the surest thing. I waited down the road and, a few minutes later, Josh joined me.

The rest of the trip was uneventful, if a little uncomfortable, with two people crammed on the snowmobile. Back at the truck, I drove the snowmobile up onto the trailer, we secured it, put some fresh socks and shoes on, and headed to Enumclaw for dinner and a beer.

Aside from the fact that we returned without one of the snowmobiles, it was a pretty good day—we had a hard time wiping the smiles off of our faces over dinner. As a proof-of-concept, the adventure was a success with two six-point summits (plus bonus points) in the bag. The up-side of leaving a machine behind was that we would be returning in the near future with the possibility of doing more summits.

Stay tuned for the exciting conclusion to *SOTA with Snow(mobiles)* in the next newsletter!