

Hiking with Ham

BY DENNIS BLANCHARD

Technology and hiking is often a bitter-sweet relationship. Many hikers shun technology on the Trail, feeling it invades their primitive outdoor experience; others embrace it. I was determined to both hike the A.T. and carry an amateur radio, commonly known as a “ham radio.” At 60 years old I had been a ham operator for 45 years so I chose as my Trail name my ham radio call letters, “K1YPP;” eventually my fellow thru-hikers shortened it to just “K1.”

The radio fits in an Altoids mint tin. It is a kit, dubbed the ATS-3 by its creator, Steve Weber, (Trail name “Slo-go’en”) and uses Morse code with a telegraph key. Additionally, I carried a 50-foot wire for an antenna and a homemade battery pack that not only powered the radio but also charged my cell phone. The radio transmitter runs on less power than most headlamps; consequently the batteries last forever, a bonus to those packing light.

The system is extremely stealthy. I didn’t want to be intrusive on the other hikers’ experience, and with this set-up I could merely toss the wire up in a tree and operate the radio in my hammock. Wearing headphones and using my fingers to talk, the other hikers were unaware that I was communicating with hams around the country.

In all, I talked to 57 different stations in 25 states. My preferred short-wave band,

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40 meters, is capable of worldwide communications. Although I did hear many European stations and one Australian, I didn’t happen to talk to any of them, but I did achieve my personal goal of using the radio in all 14 A.T. states.

At Pearisburg, Virginia I was having chest pains, so I left the Trail and returned to Sarasota, Florida to get checked. I was immediately admitted to surgery for a six-artery heart bypass operation. I had to wait 300 “zero” days until the surgeon couldn’t find any more excuses to keep me off the Trail. I returned to Pearisburg in May 2008. I still had to make contacts in 10 more states; I couldn’t let heart surgery upset my plans.

At the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) headquarters in Harpers Ferry many thru-hikers meet John Fletcher. He’s the staff member that greets everyone and photographs them for the record book. When I found out he was also “a ham,” I showed him my mint-tin radio. He urged me to stop at the ATC regional office at Boiling Springs, Pennsylvania to show the radio to John Luthy, another

enthusiastic ham at that office. At the Boiling Springs office I met John; he suggested that we make a contact that night. Later, at the Darlington Shelter in Pennsylvania I tossed up a wire in a tree and tuned to the appropriate frequency at the appointed time and there was John, loud and clear.

Occasionally other hikers expressed curiosity about the radio. My most memorable demonstration was at Katahdin Springs Campground, the night before climbing Mt. Katahdin. I was camped with thru-hiker, “New York Minute” and communicated with a station in Manitowoc, Wisconsin. “New York Minute” was awed that such a simple station could communicate so well.

I was confident that from anywhere on the Trail I had the ability to summon help with my little mint-tin radio and that was comforting. Common courtesy and discrete usage made the entire experience a pleasure for both the other hikers and myself. For me, technology and the Trail were a happy marriage.

