



POTA Activity My experience

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In this article, I would like to share my experience as a Parks On The Air (POTA) activator, hoping it will inspire some new vocations. A POTA activity consists of going to an area officially designated as a « Nature Park» and conducting radio activity there. The POTA programme is available on the website pota.app.



How I came to radio and POTA activations

I came into the world of radio through family and military experience. My grandfather, Julien, was a radio amateur with the callsign ON4JX. And military, because I was a radio operator during my military service in 1985 in the Belgian Forces in Germany, within the 4th Signal Battalion (4 TTR). It was during this military service that I really discovered radio, while on manoeuvres in the German countryside. I drove a Mercedes Unimog which carried the R.I.T.A. relay communication system, and I loved it! From then on, everything followed: I passed my exams, both technical and CW, and I became ON8ON.

I started operating portable entirely on my own in 2014 as a challenge following my cerebral haemorrhage and the resulting hemiplegia. Going out was a kind of accomplishment for me, all while enjoying myself — that is, by doing radio.

Evolution of my POTA setup

At the beginning, I had a HONDA EU2000i generator, a YAESU FT-450D and a “FAN” 40/20m dual-band dipole. It worked quite well, but I gave up the generator, finding it inappropriate in nature and its wildlife. I replaced it with a battery, eventually arriving at today’s setup: a 20Ah LiFePo battery that lasts more than 5 hours at 100W SSB.

I have tested various antennas since my dipole. I tried a ZS6BKW which works very well but requires a Balun and an external Tuner, which is not practical if you want to activate with light equipment. I then worked with an I-Pro Traveller multi-band vertical dipole which gave excellent results despite its 3m length and capacitive top hats. It allowed me to make SSB QSOs with the whole world!

I now still work with a home-made dipole using 1.5 mm² copper wire without Balun, in inverted-V, forming a multi-band antenna from 40m to 10m. This antenna is of the “Linked”

type, meaning that band changes are made via series connectors. For my antenna, I also use a 10m fibreglass mast (no carbon, which is conductive and would disturb the radiation). This mast is used with an aluminium tripod or an aluminium support held under the car tyre. A piece of advice: prefer an antenna resonant at the 50 Ohms of your TRX — simpler and with better efficiency.



My antenna installation
activation of park BE-0184, Het Beiaardbos – Fonteinbos Park near Ronse
245 QSOs made

For transceivers, I currently use several models depending on the circumstances. For light setups — that is, when moving around the park only on foot — I use an IC-703 QRP or a YAESU FT-891. If, on the other hand, I can transmit in the park from a location accessible by car, or accessible with my fishing trolley, I use an IC-7300.

The main advice is to have fun by testing and experimenting with different setups.

Informing the curious

Obviously, during my activations, you are not alone. Many people also use the park, some for walks on foot, some for cycling (when regulations allow). Seeing someone with a fishing pole, a transmitter and radio headphones does not go unnoticed and arouses curiosity.

To inform visitors, I have made information signs with my callsign, my first name and the ONFF logo. This helps to start the conversation and reassure walkers, and sometimes the authorities and DNF officers (Département de la Nature et des Forêts in Wallonia, or its equivalent in Flanders or in the countries I visit).

POTA Activity

Regarding POTA activity, let's talk about the practical aspects. Many OMs and YLs reply to /P stations. Indeed, there is not just POTA — there are also plenty of other activities such as

Flora Fauna WWFF, the Castles WCA, the Bunkers B.O.T.A, Summits On The Air (SOTA), Islands On The Air (IOTA, an activity already carried out by ON4RSX), etc. Generally, many radio amateurs naturally make contact with /P stations.

A small detail before continuing: one must comply with the rules of the various programmes, whether POTA, WWFF or another. It is important to know the reference of the park where the activation takes place, and one must of course be exactly within the area, otherwise the activation will be rejected by the programme manager.



My equipment, battery and transceiver during the activation of park BE-0184

Obviously, making contact also requires the activator, whatever the activation programme, to log the contacts made. When I started, a paper log was the norm and it was necessary to transcribe all the traffic using the FLE software. Since then, things have evolved a great deal. Many programmes exist (N1MM, Swisslog, ...), but the platforms have also evolved with the advent of smartphones and tablets, which also reduces the equipment bulk during activations.

Currently, for log management, I use the excellent HAM2K software. It allows many things: checking callsigns, doing the logging, self-announcing on the pota.app website or on the clusters, entering Park to Park contacts, and sending the log to the WWFF programme manager and to CQGMA, the site dedicated to the various programmes. For POTA, it is also very simple, since you just have to upload the log yourself to pota.app.

As for the actual traffic, it is useless, as it was 10 years ago, to call CQ for a long time without reply. It is enough to announce your presence in real time via smartphone or iPad with HAM2K or cluster apps for POTA, WWFF, GMA spots, and the OMs come. The "hunters" scrutinise the clusters and a self-spot is tolerated to feed the pile-ups.

Regarding the bands, with a little experience, you notice that 20m will be very productive early in the morning for DX, and our POTA/WWFF hunter friends from Oceania are regularly present via the Long Path on their side. Then 40m works very well across the whole of Europe, even in broad daylight. I generally test all bands 40/20/17/15/12/10, and sometimes surprises are on the menu. An airline pilot answering my CQ, a ZL answering when I have only 10W, etc.

Have fun es 73 44

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