

Take it to the Field Special



Photo A. Tim Augustine, KG6WFV, and Richard Johnson, KI6EZA, relax with Richard's military HF rig at "Pancake Rock" in eastern San Diego County. (Photo by Marilou Howard, KJ6ONN)

Off-road adventure can pave a pathway to ham radio, something that's encouraged by a growing number of 4WD clubs

4-Wheel it to the Field

BY TOM SMERK,* AA6TS

We all are aware that many people have migrated to amateur radio after using CB radio. I would like to discuss a particular form of this transition as it relates to the use of two-way radio for off-road 4-wheel-drive (4WD) activities.

When two or more Jeeps or other 4WD vehicles venture off-road (it is never advisable to go off-road alone!), it is necessary to maintain contact between the two vehicles in case they become separated. It also would be nice to be able to call for help in an emergency. Cell-phone service often is not available in the remote areas that attract off-roaders. While

CB (and sometimes Family Radio Service, or FRS, radios) has worked well for car-to-car contact, it cannot be relied upon to reach "back to civilization."

Often, all it takes is for one ham radio operator to show up at an event with a mobile rig in his/her vehicle, and before long everyone else who is there has discovered the clear, reliable communications that FM VHF/UHF ham radio offers. Because of this, many vehicles that are showing up for off-road activities are now equipped with a mobile FM amateur radio, along with a licensed driver or passenger.

In addition to having the ability to call for help through an accessible repeater, other reasons for having ham radios include using APRS (Automatic Packet Reporting System; see <www.aprs.org>) for location tracking and the ability for the trip leader to communicate interesting information about

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Photo B. Testing session in the desert northeast of the Salton Sea in southern California. (Photo by Tim Augustine, KG6WV)

the history of an area, or about local plants, trees, geology, or interesting facts about what is being observed during the trip. Mobile HF gear is growing in popularity as well.

Many areas have four-wheel-drive clubs that sponsor weekly or monthly trips and other events. Also, many of these clubs are now making arrangements for amateur radio classes and testing for their members and are encouraging as many members as possible to obtain their ham radio licenses and equip their vehicles with mobile or handheld transceivers. Three of them are profiled here.

4x4 Ham Group

The 4x4 Ham group (<http://www.4x4ham.com>) in Arizona is one of the many established and emerging clubs that have combined the two great pastimes of amateur radio and 4-wheeling. Founded in early 2008, it has grown to over 130 members worldwide. 4x4 Ham members have promoted both 4-wheeling and ham radio in various ways, and have joined forces with other groups to support responsible land use and public-service events. There is a net on local Arizona repeaters each Wednesday evening, and when possible, streaming audio is broadcast live on the internet for out-of-area participants to listen and reply via the chat forum. The group also conducts training exercises and participates in Field Day activities.

Tierra Del Sol

Tim Augustine, KG6WV, is president of the Tierra Del Sol Four-Wheel-Drive Club (TDS) of San Diego. TDS hosts

monthly 4WD runs in a variety of remote mountain and desert locations throughout California. The group uses 2-meter ham radio for nearly all trail communications on these runs. Tim shared the following information:

Approximately 85% of our club's members are licensed ham radio operators. Most traffic is short-range simplex communications, just chatter. We also use them to keep the group together when spread out, sometimes over miles apart on the trail. At a minimum, the "trail-boss" and the tail-end "charlie" will have radios to make sure both ends stay in contact and no one gets lost or misses a turn. Trail etiquette dictates that you keep the vehicle behind you in sight so that they can see you make any turns. This doesn't always work out, so the trail leader calling out turns as they are made also helps to ensure that no one gets lost. We also can communicate breakdowns, needs for the group to stop, points of interest, etc. If the group needs to split up, then the groups can stay in contact with each other easily over longer distances. When I lead a historical run, I am often telling historical stories and describing points of interest of the area as we go along. While I have done my research, there are those attending that know additional stories or info that adds to the group's knowledge, so the run becomes a moving classroom.

Many of the larger events involve the use of a net control station that tracks the progress of the vehicles and can dispatch help during an emergency. In those rare events, the net control might declare an emergency, which would mean that radio traffic is restricted to important communications for getting the situation resolved.

Sometimes the 4-wheelers meet up with hikers or dirt bikers who are also equipped with ham radio, and they communicate useful information to each other. Ham radio-



Photo C. HF ham radio is growing in popularity among off-roaders, along with VHF/UHF FM. (Photo by Dave Kupfer, K6DTK)

equipped vehicles are also useful for reporting emergencies that might be encountered along the road en route to or from an excursion.

Tim got into ham radio as a direct result of his first run with the TDS club. Since he didn't have a ham license at the time, he monitored the communications on his scanner and was impressed, but what really convinced Tim was when after camping on the beach overnight the group split up with some members staying at the camp while the main group continued south along the coast. When one person realized he had lost his glasses, he called the group back at the camps to see if they could search around his campsite. This was a clear simplex contact of over 60 miles! Shortly thereafter, Tim began studying for his license!

Now studying for his Extra Class ticket, Tim has been taking his mobile HF rig with him on longer trips (photo A), such as to the Grand Canyon, and uses it to keep in touch with his friends back home as well as to make DX contacts. Once known mainly as a "4-wheeler," Tim is now a respected ham radio operator who is giving back by promoting ham radio and encouraging other "wheelers" to get their ham licenses (photo B). Tim is also active with RACES, SKYWARN, and other amateur radio organizations.

Outdoor Adventure USA

Outdoor Adventure USA (OAUSA) is another 4WD club that has embraced amateur radio. I spoke with founder Dave

Kupfer, K6DTK, and he explained that when OAUSA was formed, it had two goals: first, to showcase the incredible beauty that exists in our country by using 4WD vehicles; and second, to promote the use of ham radio as an indispensable piece of equipment when traveling into remote locations.

It was decided that a great way to promote ham radio was to offer testing opportunities in the remote and unique locations to which the group travels. OAUSA has about 10 Volunteer Examiners among its members and offers testing in these locations several times a year. Imagine testing for your ham license or upgrade in the desert, on the rim of a canyon, or on the beach within 15 yards of the ocean! OAUSA also participates in the ARRL Field Day activities every year.

In photo C you will see that OAUSA also travels with HF equipment. Dave, K6DTK, explains: "I use this setup for both HF voice and Airmail. Airmail is an HF e-mail program that allows me to send and receive regular e-mails (including pictures) from virtually any location. It works in every location I have ever been in, including deep canyons where even the sat phones wouldn't work. I use Airmail whenever we travel beyond cell-phone range (which is most of the time) to keep in touch with family and friends."

Making DX contacts on HF encourages more hams to upgrade to at least General Class to gain access to more bands to enjoy this popular ham radio activity. "All the HF contacts showed increased interest when they learned where we were," said Dave. "The group has also used APRS to guide a late arriving member ... to our campsite."

It seems to me that we have discovered yet another excellent source for recruiting many more good hams!

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