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## Radio Takes a Holiday



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# Hamming it up on the Appalachian Trail

By Joe Cuhaj

I have been a hiker and SWL since the early 70s. Since that time my interest in hiking has expanded to help organizations build and maintain hiking and backpacking trails. So, there I was one afternoon working on a trail with my friend Johnny Miller. Johnny is a hiker as well and a ham operator.

As we worked, we talked about our past hiking adventures, particularly on the Appalachian Trail. In 1921, a US Forest Service employee by the name of Benton MacKaye envisioned a wilderness footpath that would travel the spine of the Appalachian Mountains from Georgia to Maine. This dream was to become the 2,100-mile long Appalachian Trail that stretches from Springer Mountain in Georgia to Mount Katahdin in Maine.

Thousands have hiked or have attempted to hike this trail from end-to-end and those numbers increase each year. Those who try the hike do so for as many different reasons as there are hikers who climb to the top of Springer Mountain to begin the journey. But no matter who you are, if you can make the 6-month journey, it is a life changing experience.

As Johnny and I talked about the trail he casually mentioned that amateur radio operators are now bringing their gear along as they attempt to thru-hike from Georgia to Maine. Immediately an image of a guy hiking to the top of the trail's (and East Coast's) highest mountain, the 6,288-foot tall Mount Washington came to mind. I could see him with a 12-volt car battery strapped to his back, a 3-element Yagi antenna clutched in one hand, a Yaesu FT DX 5000 gingerly balanced in his arm, and his one free hand clutching the microphone in an attempt to QSO someone in Maryland.

Johnny quickly set me straight. Yes, there are many ham operators who drive to a spot near

the trail or hike a short distance to a ledge or trail shelter along the A.T. to set up a voice station, but he was talking about bone fide "hiker hams" — ham operators who are actually hiking the trail and working all the 14 states the long path travels through, by using what is known as QRP (low power communications, usually below 5 watts).

The idea is to use very low power but obtain the maximum amount of coverage. What makes QRP ideal for hiking is that the rigs are very small in size. If you scan the Internet you'll most likely see images of circuit boards tucked neatly into Altoids or tuna fish tins, both of which are perfect housings for a QRP kit.

The units themselves weigh only a few ounces, making them fit perfectly into the mantra of long distance backpackers — keep your load as light as possible. You have to remember that these "thru-hikers" are hiking over 2,000 miles with just about everything they need to survive hanging on their back. Bringing along a radio of any type is normally taboo, but as you can see, QRP rigs break that mold.

To further keep the weight down, these hams normally work the trail with CW, not voice. CW gear is not only lighter, but quick and easy to get on the air, while voice-operated rigs tends to be bulkier and heavier.

Most QRP hikers like to build their own transmitters using readily available plans found online. Some of the more popular plans include the Tuna Tin 2 and the Chickadee. Or, they opt to have a kit sent right to them with all of the parts they will need to build it, such as the Hendricks DC40B. Of course, speakers are not used; just a simple set of ear buds gets the job done.

Antennas are simple affairs as well. Lightweight antennas such as the PAC-12 aren't bad to pack along. When disassembled they are only 12-inches long. Still, antennas such as these can be rather bulky. For true portability and lightweight, many QRPers use a simple long wire made of zip cord. This is quite convenient in that it acts as both the antenna and lead-in.

With its small size, power requirements are small as well. Usually just a AA, AAA, or 9-volt battery will do the trick. Some hikers have gone the extra mile to go a little bit greener by using rechargeable batteries and powering them with portable solar chargers such as the Solio.

To get the most from working the trail, many hikers rely on a series of 2 meter repeaters. While most were not built specially for use on the trail, their location makes them ideal to work from all 14 states using small 2 meter handi-talkies. These

are particularly useful for safety, as many areas have spotty cell phone coverage at best.

The exact number of amateur radio operators hiking and working the Appalachian Trail is not known, but the number is definitely growing as evidenced by the number of web pages that are springing up and the popularity of special A.T. awards and contests. Some of these contests include the Eastern PA QRP Club's "Appalachian Trail Award."

This contest is designed to promote hiking the trail from end-to-end and has several awards available, including the Trail Award which is presented when the ham works any station from all 14 states the trail travels through while they are actually on the A.T., and the Trail-to-Trail Award in which the ham must be on the A.T. and have 2-way communication with another station also on the trail.

I couldn't think of a more perfect adventure — hiking the tall peaks of the Appalachians such as Springer, Blood, Washington, or Katahdin, making camp for the night on a rock outcropping with a brilliant red sunset on the horizon, and taking out a QRP rig for a few quick QSOs with hams up and down the trail rooting you on toward the end of your adventure.

## About the author:

Joe Cuhaj was born and raised in New Jersey just a stone's throw from the Appalachian Trail. Joe has been an SWL since the early 1970s. He is currently a software programmer, author, and freelance writer living on Alabama's Gulf Coast.

## References:

Tuna Tin 2: [www.amqrp.org/kits/tt2/index.html](http://www.amqrp.org/kits/tt2/index.html)  
Appalachian Trail 2 Meter Repeater Guide: <http://www.fred.net/kathy/at/ham-guide.html>

## Organizations:

American QRP Club: [www.amqrp.org](http://www.amqrp.org)  
Appalachian Trail Conservancy: [www.appalachiantrail.org](http://www.appalachiantrail.org)  
QRP Homebuilder: [www.qrp.pops.net](http://www.qrp.pops.net)  
Eastern PA QRP Club: [www.n3epa.org](http://www.n3epa.org)

## Charger:

Solio: [www.solio.com](http://www.solio.com)

## Adventures:

Jim Cluett (W1PID): [www.mv.com/ipusers/w1pid](http://www.mv.com/ipusers/w1pid)



Hendricks DC40B QRP Kit (Courtesy: Hendricks QRP Kits)