

AN INTRODUCTION TO COUNTY HUNTING - November 1991

This is a guide to the fundamentals of county hunting. After this introductory page, a number of topics are explained, and the last page lists sources for more information. It is designed for the person who may have heard of county hunting or run across a net on the ham bands, and wants more information on how the activity works, and how to get started.

WHAT

What in the world is county hunting? County hunting is a specialized interest within the hobby of amateur radio. People in the fifty states and a number of foreign countries, strive toward the goal of two way radio communication with all the 3076 counties in the entire United States of America, or hearing all counties in the case of SWLs. Doing so earns a large, beautiful, award certificate and plaque from the publishers of CQ Magazine - the coveted United States of America Counties Award (USA-CA). It would be hard to find a more attractive and impressive award to hang up in one's shack, or an award that would bring more satisfaction and new friends. Not to worry, though, one doesn't have to give up Monday Night Football to get started in county hunting. The basic USA-CA award is available for confirming 500 counties on any bands and with any mode. Many people would qualify simply by sorting through their present QSL cards, since any call at any time and in any location can be used for the award.

WHO

Who are county hunters? Young, old, women, men, paper chasers, rag chasers, mobbers, ssb, cw - in short, a cross section of amateur radio itself. Some people prefer to put counties on the air for others, especially if their time or work has them travelling the highways and byways. A majority work the mobiles for counties from their home stations. And some do both. County hunters have established some nets for the convenience of meeting with others so inclined, but it should be emphasized that county hunting can be done anywhere at any time, as either a group or individual activity. Some people like to strike out on their own, while others enjoy the fellowship of meeting friends regularly on the nets dedicated to a common cause.

WHERE

Where does one find this strange breed of hams? The ssb and cw nets are active in varying degrees every day of the year. The ssb net on 14.336 Mhz. is the mainstay of daily activity, but operation moves to 40 meters for closer in contacts and better conditions. 75 meters is used on winter evenings, particularly in the low part of the sun spot cycle. The nets are directed to a control station to assist the mobile stations giving out the counties, and to give everyone, both mobile and fixed stations, assistance at working each county. A verified exchange of signal reports, and written confirmation of the contacts, are required for the award. But don't be dismayed, as county hunters have an easy way of confirming contacts.

WHAT IS MARAC

What is MARAC? The Mobile Amateur Radio Awards Club, Inc. is the primary support group for county hunters, and is not affiliated with CQ Magazine or any of the county hunting nets. More detail will be provided later in this guide.

THE USA-CA COUNTIES AWARD

THE USA-CA AWARD - The basic certificate is available for working 500 counties in any of the 50 states, with ssb, cw, or any combination of these modes. Award upgrades in the form of seals are available in increments of 500 counties with certain numbers of states required, until the goal of all counties is reached. That earns a special honors plaque upon completing the whole program. All contacts for the award must be two-way (one-way for SWLs, of course) and confirmed, usually on special county hunter confirmation cards printed especially for that purpose. A Mobile QSL Bureau is operated to help county hunters confirm mobile contacts. To organize the record keeping task, CQ Magazine and other vendors listed, offer the United States of America Counties Award Record Book which lists all the counties, has room for entering contact information for each county, and must be used for the initial application for the USA-CA award. The award can be endorsed for all contacts ssb, cw, or other options as long as the applicant has QSL cards to support the endorsement. Contacts via repeaters, satellites, moon-bounce, and phone patches are not allowed, but all other contacts using any calls, locations, or dates are valid. The award is also available on a SWL basis, and several other sources offer similar awards for working all counties more than once, and even on five bands for the truly intrepid. The complete rules governing the program are included in the USA-CA Record Book and should be read carefully. Cards confirming contacts must be verified by two hams, and any confirmations can be requested for further verification by the CQ Awards Custodian. Earning the award for working all counties is a major accomplishment, but it should be that the basic award is fairly easily reached, and there are no time limits. While a few hams have worked all counties in as little as a year of intensive activity, a more typical time frame might be 2 - 5 years.

COUNTIES ARE:

2. **The U.S. Counties** - Although we know counties as political - geographical entities larger than cities but smaller than states, there have been some changes and irregularities in county designation over the years. A few counties have been absorbed by others, added, or changed to the status of Independent Cities. Currently there are 3076 counties, but that could change in the future. Both the four Federal Judicial Districts of Alaska, and the five major islands of Hawaii, are considered to be counties. Independent Cities may be used for any one of the counties bordering on it. The list of Independent Cities (primarily in the state of Virginia) may be used for any one of the counties bordering on it. In addition to a list of the regular counties in each state, a list of the 40 or so Independent Cities, and the counties for which they apply, is also in the USA-CA Record Book. Sometimes a mobile station will park on a county line and run two counties at the same time. In that case, a single contact will count for both counties, provided that both are confirmed with a QSL. All questions concerning county designation are answered by Post Office publication #65, the National Five-Digit ZIP code and Post Office Directory.

COUNTY HUNTER NETS

3. **The Nets** - The easiest way to find people who are also interested in county hunting is the county hunting nets. (* = Primary regular nets).

	<u>SSB</u>	<u>CW</u>
75 Meters	3,865	3,670
40 Meters	7,238	7,035
20 Meters	14,336 *	14,056.5 *
15 Meters	21,338	21,066
10 Meters	28,336	28,066

The 20 meter nets operate from early morning until the band goes out late in the afternoon or evening. The 20 meter CW net is more active on weekends, so if activity isn't heard on weekdays, try the weekend. If net isn't immediately heard when tuning to 14.336, don't assume that the net is not in session. The net control station or a mobile running his county, may be too close for you to hear - particularly on 20 meters. Don't jump in without listening first. These nets exist primarily to provide mobile stations a "protected" frequency to run their counties, and a place for fixed stations to meet and work the mobiles. The net is also run by a Net Control Station (NCS), and an assistant. The assistant NCS is usually located in a different geographical part of the country than the NCS to facilitate radio coverage of the whole U.S. Actual contacts are done "contest style" - that is, a rapid exchange and verification of signal reports, and then on to the next station that wants to work the mobile station in that county. Fixed stations do not usually run their county on the nets unless there is no mobile activity.

NET OPERATIONS

4. **Net Operation** - The operation of the net usually follows a regular cycle of events and is similar to a DX net operation:

- A. The NCS asks for mobile station check-ins, assembles a list of mobiles, what county they are in, and whether they are ready to run.
- B. The mobile to be run and his county is announced by both the NCS and the NCS assistant.
- C. The mobile runs his county, making as many contacts unassisted as he can in the allotted time.
- D. Both NCS's check for any stations that need help in working the mobile, (called relaying).
- E. The NCS announces the station and county that has just been run, and returns to step B with the next mobile on the list.

The NCS runs the net, and he or she is the one that decides the order in which the mobiles are run. The NCS will announce the mobile's call and the county he is running. The mobile will then say, "QRZ for Fenderbender County, Arizona." Fixed stations wishing to work the mobile give their call sign much like calling a DX station, and listen to see to whom the mobile station returns. The mobile exchanges signal reports with that station, and calls QRZ for the next contact. Different mobiles have somewhat differing operating styles, but most are a variation of this pattern.

THE SIGNAL EXCHANGE

5. **Signal Exchange** - Each signal report must be received and verified in the following manner: the mobile gives a signal report, and the fixed station repeats the mobile's report so others can hear, or verify, it. Then he gives the mobile a report back, which the mobile also repeats.

Mobile: "KA3FIX from W9MBL, you're 5-5"
 Fixed: "W9MBL from KA3FIX, QSL your 5-5, you're 5-7"
 Mobile: "QSL your 5-7, QRZ Fenderbender County"

RELAYS

6. **Relays** - Sometimes the mobile signal is so weak or the QRM so bad that the county hunter can hear the mobile but can't work it unassisted. The NCS and assistant NCS will ask for relays after the mobile has worked all the stations he can hear. The fixed station gives his call and gets put on the relay list. Then the NCS will "feed" the relays to the mobile one by one, as long as time permits. It is important to note that the NCS cannot help with the signal report, but simply acts as a coordinator getting the fixed and mobile stations together.

NCS: "W9MBL, listen for KA3FIX, go with a report"

The signal report procedure is the same as above, with the verification repeated by each party. Usually the fixed station is given two tries to get the signal report through before going on to the next station, and a 2-2 report is the minimum acceptable for the award. The fixed station can request the mobile go to 40 meters for shorter distance contacts, as many mobiles carry 40 meter antenna resonators. The fixed station is expected to go immediately to 40 and meet the mobile at the standard frequency. Occasionally the list of mobiles waiting to run may get so long that an alternate frequency is started so two mobiles can run simultaneously. Announcements of runs are made on both frequencies.

CONFIRMATIONS

7. **Confirmations** - Since all contacts must be confirmed, county hunters have devised ways to simplify and expedite written contact confirmations. Instead of sending your personal QSL card to confirm every contact, most county hunters only send their personal QSL card the first time they contact a mobile, and use special printed reply cards to confirm all other contacts. These cards are called either Mobile Reply Cards (MRCs) - or County Hunter Reply Cards (CHRCs) - the names are interchangeable - and have room for listing several contacts on a single card. A common mistake in filling out the cards by beginners is to put your call incorrectly at the top of the card. The confirmation is FROM the mobile TO you, so put his call as the FROM station, and your call as the TO station. Also, be sure to put the signal report the mobile gave to you, rather than the other way around. See the example on the next page. After the card is filled out with the data about each contact, it is sent to the mobile station who put the counties out. He will verify the contact data and signal report in his log, sign the card at the bottom for all the contacts if correct, and return it to you.

You are expected to furnish the postage to return the signed confirmation back to you. The mobile gets many requests for contact confirmations, and if you don't include return postage, or don't send your personal QSL for the first contact, he will probably file your cards in the circular file.

Mobile Reply Cards / County Hunter Reply Cards

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. Call of the Mobile station. | 2. Your call here. The card is from the mobile to you. |
| 3. Date of the contact in Month/Day/Year format. | 4. Time of actual contact in UTC (only). |
| 5. Band. | 6. The signal report you received from the mobile. |
| 7. State the mobile is in. | 8. The mobile's county. |
| 9. Leave blank. This is where the mobile will sign. | |

Confirming QSO
 FROM ARS 1 TO ARS 2
 Mode: CW SSB FM AM Mobile Portable Fixed
 MARAC # _____ USA-CA # _____ 2nd Time # _____

DATE	UTC	MHZ	RST	ST	COUNTY
{3}	{4}	{5}	{6}	{7}	{8}

 {9}
 Signature

THE MOBILE QSL BUREAU

8. The Mobile QSL Bureau - An alternative to sending mobile reply cards (MRCs) or county hunter reply cards (CHRCs) directly to the mobile station is the Mobile QSL Bureau. You bundle up your sorted outgoing cards and send them to the bureau with the processing fee. The bureau processes your cards along with everyone else's, and sends batches of unsigned cards to the mobiles regularly. The mobile signs everyone's cards after verifying the data and sends them back to the bureau, where they are then returned to you. This takes longer than sending the cards directly to the mobile, but is usually more economical, especially with large numbers of cards. Check with the bureau for info and prices.

STARTING UP

9. Getting Started - What is needed in the area of supplies to actually get started hunting counties. A record book is needed for a list of the counties in each state, and to keep track of counties worked and confirmed. Very helpful is a book displaying a map of each state, with the counties outlined and labeled within that state. Sometimes called a "coloring book", these map books allow the county hunter to color in the counties completed, and give quick reference to which counties have been worked, and which are still needed in a given state. In addition to a supply of personal QSL cards for sending the first time to mobiles, a supply of mobile reply cards or county hunter reply cards is needed. These are usually sold in multiples of 500 cards, and can be obtained in different color stock, if desired, for tracking bands, modes, or endorsements. These supplies are sold through the vendors listed.

M.A.R.A.C., INC.

10. MARAC - The Mobile Amateur Radio Awards Club, Inc. (MARAC) was organized in 1970 as a non-profit corporation to support and promote county hunting and mobile activity. 800 members strong, staffed entirely by volunteers, and headquartered in the twin cities of Minneapolis - St. Paul, Minnesota, the organization has three main programs: (1) MARAC has an extensive awards program for mobile and fixed stations featuring both certificates and plaques. One of the plaques is solid walnut in the shape of a car, and has a mobile antenna and suitably engraved plate. The ultimate operating challenge is the Five Band Counties Award. Although it is initially issued for 1500 confirmed counties on any one band, no one yet has worked all counties on 5 bands. However, MARAC also has many other operating awards of widely varying difficulty for almost any taste. (2) MARAC publishes a monthly newsletter, called the Roadrunner, for all members with county hunting news, address info, advance notice of mobile trips, upcoming conventions, awards earned, and member's correspondence. The newsletter serves as a vehicle for member communication on a variety of topics. (3) MARAC holds an annual national convention, usually in July, in a different location each year, providing all county hunters and their families a chance to get together for 5-9 eyeball socializing. At the convention, individuals who have been chosen by the membership are honored as Mobile, Net Control, and County Hunter of the Year. 250 - 300 people attend these conventions, providing a chance to see old friends, make new ones, and swap yarns about the counties that got away. During the rest of the year, a number of areas in the country have mini-conventions, providing informal get-togethers for people residing in those areas. Information about all conventions are carried in the monthly newsletter. For many in the organization, the friendship is as important as the awards, and it would be hard to find a friendlier group of people than county hunters and their families. For MARAC membership information, see the enclosed application blank.

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MARAC (Mobile Amateur Radio Awards Club, Inc.)
MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

To: MARAC Secretary
Shel Mann, NØDRX
1618 Pine St.
Stillwater, MN 55082

Date:

Dear Shel:

Yes I would like to Join / Rejoin MARAC. Enclosed are my dues for:

One Year Two Years Three Years (Please check one)

I have enclosed a check or money order payable to MARAC for \$ _____

Membership dues are:

\$16. / year for dues and monthly newsletter subscription sent via First Class Mail (U.S. and Canada only).

\$13. / year for dues and monthly newsletter subscription sent via Third Class Mail (U.S. only).

\$25. / year for dues and monthly newsletter subscription sent via First Class Mail to all Non-North American DX.

Name _____ Call _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ ZIP _____

RAC Number (If a previous member.) _____ Home County _____

Optional Information

It would be appreciated by the membership to have the following information for publication, like handle, home county, tel. no., etc.

Nick-name / Handle (if different than first name) _____

OM / XYL First Name (Handle) _____

Tel. No. (Home) (_____) - _____ - _____ (Work) (_____) - _____ - _____

Other Calls Held _____

OTHER INFORMATION

11. For More Information:

A. United States of America Counties Award (USA-CA)

For the United States of America Counties Award Record Book with Rules and application blank (price \$1.25):

CQ Magazine
75 North Broadway
Hicksville, NY 11801

B. Mobile Amateur Radio Awards Club

For award program info, send a self addressed, stamped, business sized envelope, (SASE) to:

Bill Nash, WØOWY
MARAC Awards Custodian
P.O. Box 83403
Phoenix, Arizona 85071

For additional copies of this information packet, send a self addressed, stamped business size envelope (SASE) to:

MARAC, Inc.
P.O. Box 64
Newport, Minnesota 55055

C. Mobile QSL Bureau

For QSL procedures and prices, Record Books, MRCs, and Bingo information, send a self addressed, stamped business size envelope (SASE) to:

The Mobile QSL Bureau
P.O. Box 6436
Florence, South Carolina 29502

D. The B&B Shop

For Record Books, Directories, MRCs, Map Books, Log Books, Handbooks and printed and computerized info, send your request to: (SASE not needed)

The B&B Shop
P.O. Box 83403
Phoenix, Arizona 85071

In a Hurry!! Call: (602) 938 - 4691.

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