

RTLSDR Scanner

Wideband RF Spectrum Scanning

<http://eartoearoak.com/software/rtlsdr-scanner>

Contents

Copyright	4
License	4
Contributors	4
Further Information	4
Introduction	5
What is RTLSDR Scanner?	5
Required Hardware	5
Installation	5
Common Terms	6
Band Offset	6
Calibration	6
Dongle	6
Dwell	6
FFT Size	6
Gain	6
Geometric Mean	6
Local Oscillator (LO)	6
Mean	6
Resolution Bandwidth (RBW)	7
Scan	7
Server	7
Spectral Flatness	7
Sweep	7
Power Spectral Density	7
Window Function	7
Graphical User Interface	8
Main Window	8
Menu Bar	8
File	8
Edit	9
Scan	9
Tools	9
Help	9
Graph	9
Standard Controls	9
Plot	10
Additional Controls	10
Spectrogram	10
Additional Controls	10
3D Spectrogram	10
Additional Controls	10
Measurement Table	10
Tool Bar	11
Properties Window	12
Preferences Window	13

RTLSDR Scanner

General	13
Continuous Scans	14
Plot View	14
Advanced Preferences Window	14
Devices Window	15
Window Function Window	16
Compare Window	16
Auto Calibration Window	16
Band Offset Window	17
Command Line Interface	18
Format	18
Switches	18
File	18
Start	18
End	18
Gain	18
Dwell	18
FFT	18
LO	18
Index	19
Remote	19
Help	19
Examples	19
Illustration Index	20
Alphabetical Index	21

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Contributors

Contributors to this document and the RTLSDR Scanner can be found at the GitHub page:
<https://github.com/EarToEarOak/RTLSDR-Scanner/graphs/contributors>

Further Information

General information: <http://eartoearoak.com/software/rtlsdr-scanner>

Installation instructions: <http://eartoearoak.com/software/rtlsdr-scanner/rtlsdr-scanner-installation>

Code repository: <https://github.com/EarToEarOak/RTLSDR-Scanner>

Introduction

What is RTLSDR Scanner?

RTLSDR Scanner is a wideband spectrum analyser for RTLSDR dongles which allows the visualisation of radio frequency signals.

The software is cross-platform and runs under Linux, Windows and OS X.

RTLSDR Scanner provides both GUI and command line interfaces.

Required Hardware

- A PC, Mac or an embedded Linux platform such as the Raspberry Pi.
- A compatible RTLSDR dongle, see the OsmoSDR page for more details at <http://sdr.osmocom.org/trac/wiki/rtl-sdr>

Installation

Installation of the RTLSDR driver and library dependencies are beyond the scope of this document, further details can be found at: <http://eartoearoak.com/software/rtlsdr-scanner/rtlsdr-scanner-installation>

Common Terms

Band Offset

The frequency offset where data is taken from to give a smooth scan and overcome the non-linear frequency response of the dongle.

Calibration

The frequency compensation to apply to scanning to overcome errors in the dongle, specified in parts per million (ppm).

Dongle

The RTLSDR USB device to use to sample the radio data.

Dwell

The time spent sampling at each frequency step, longer dwell times will slow the scanning speed but potentially reduce noise. For short-lived signals a fast dwell time should be used otherwise it's amplitude may be significantly reduced.

FFT Size

The number of bins used for Fast Fourier Transform analysis, larger values give an increased frequency resolution but require more computational power and higher memory usage.

Gain

The gain (amplification) specified in Decibels (dB) to set the dongle to during a scan.

Geometric Mean

A type of mean (average) which indicates the typical value rather than the average value.

Local Oscillator (LO)

The frequency offset to apply to scans if an external frequency converter (mixer) is used. Up and down converters are used to extend the tuning range to the dongle. For up-converters the offset is positive and negative for down-converters.

Mean

The average.

Resolution Bandwidth (RBW)

The minimum frequency between two separate peaks.

Scan

One or more sweeps of the frequency range.

Server

A dongle connected to a network which provides data via the *rtl_tcp* utility.

Spectral Flatness

A measure of how flat the spectrum is. Pure white noise has a flatness of 1, this will decrease towards zero as more distinct signals appear above the noise floor

Sweep

A single pass of the frequency range.

Power Spectral Density

The method for converting the radio data into a frequency spectrum.

Window Function

A mathematical function used to reduce the effects of spectral leakage and noise when analysing data. Most users will probably want to leave this at it's default (Hamming window).

Graphical User Interface

Main Window

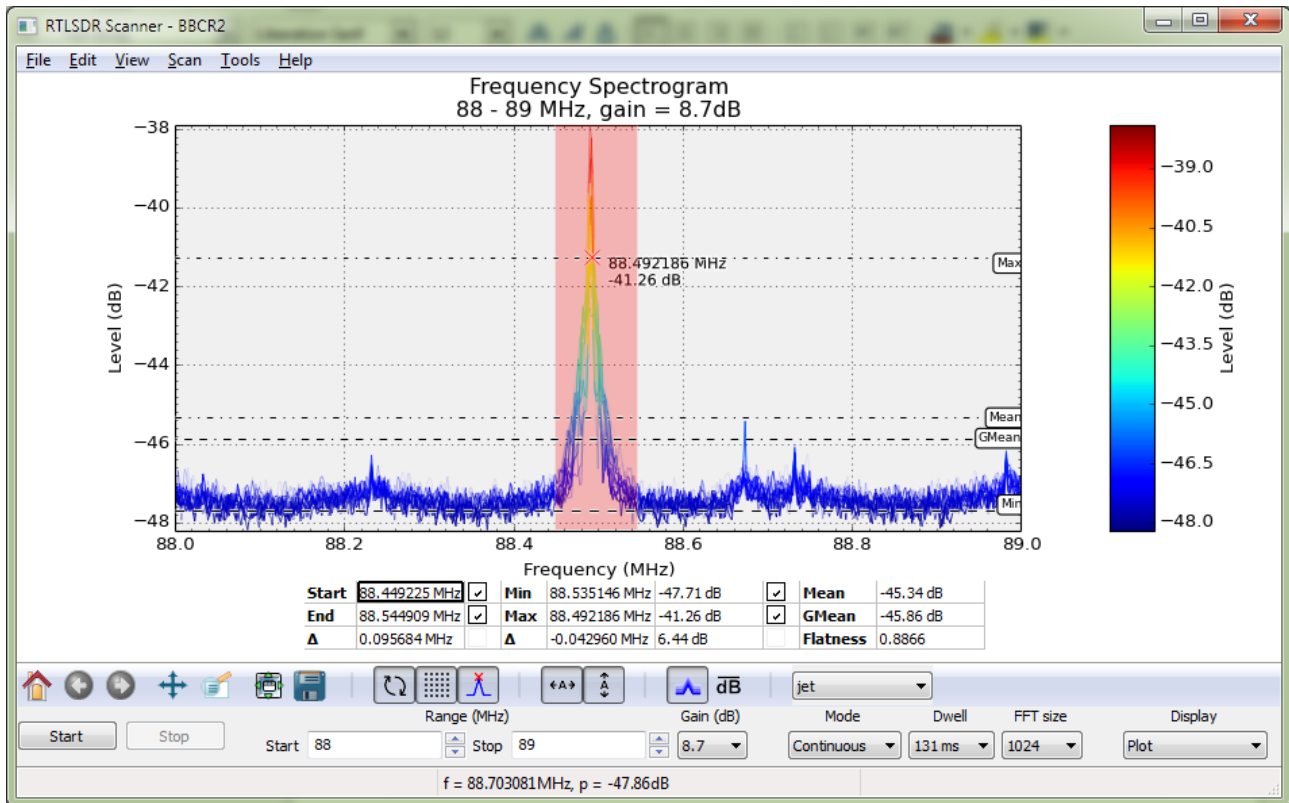


Image 1: Main Window

The main window is split into 4 main areas; the Menu Bar, the Graph, the Measurement Table and Tool Bar.

Menu Bar

File

- Open... Open a scan.
- Recent Files... A list of recently used files.
- Save As... Save a scan.
- Export... Export a scan
- Properties... Properties of the current scan.
- Exit Exit the program.

RTLSDR Scanner

Edit

- Preferences... Show the preferences page.
- Advanced prefs... Advanced software settings
- Devices... Device settings

Scan

- Start Start a scan.
- Stop Immediately stop the scan.
- Stop at end Stop scanning at the end of the current sweep.

Tools

- Compare... Compare two scans.
- Auto Calibration... Attempt to calibrate the dongle with a known frequency.

Help

- Help... Open up further information from the RTLSDR Scanner page.
- About... Basic information about the program

Graph






A plot of the scanned spectrum, three modes are currently available; Plot, Spectrogram and 3D Spectrogram.

A toolbar is available under the graph which allows panning and zooming in addition to plot specific commands.








The mouse wheel can be used to zoom 2 dimensional plots by first clicking the graph.

Further options are available by right-clicking the graph.

Standard Controls

-  Home Zoom to the default limits of the plot.
-  Back Zoom to the previous view of the plot.
-  Forward Zoom to the next plot view.
-  Pan Pan the plot.
-  Zoom Zoom to an area of the plot.



RTLSDR Scanner

-  Subplots Change the margins of the plot.
-  Save Save the current plot as an image.
-  Live update Update the plot as new data is processed (can be slow).
-  Grid Display a grid on the plot.
-  Label peak Display a marker and label at the most recent peak.
-  Auto frequency Auto range the frequency axis to display all data.
-  Auto level Auto range the level axis to display all data.
- Colour map The mapping of levels to colour.

Plot

A plot of the level versus frequency.

Additional Controls

-  Fade plots Fade previous sweeps
-  Average plots Average all the sweeps.

Spectrogram

A plot of time versus frequency, level is displayed as colour. Often called a waterfall plot.



Additional Controls

-  Auto time Auto range the time axis to display all data.

3D Spectrogram

A three dimensional plot of frequency versus time versus level.

Additional Controls

-  Auto time Auto range the time axis to display all data.
-  Wireframe Plot the spectrum as a wireframe instead of colouring the faces.

Measurement Table

To perform measurements of the spectrum use the middle mouse button to drag a selection box over the area of interest (in Plot or Spectrogram displays). Measurements are taken from the last sweep.

Tool Bar

The tool bar is used to control the main functions of the scanner.

- Start Start a scan.
- Stop Immediately stop the scan.
- Range The frequency range.
 - Start The start frequency in megahertz.
 - Stop The end frequency in megahertz.
- Gain The dongle gain in Decibels.
- Mode Perform a single or multiple sweeps.
 - Single Only run a single sweep
 - Continuous Run multiple sweeps until the scan is stopped,
- Dwell The dwell time for each scanning step.
- FFT Size The number of FFT bins to calculate.
- Display The type of plot to display.

Properties Window

Scan Properties

Scan

Description: BBC Radio 2
Transmitter: Idle, Bradford, UK

Start: 88 MHz

Stop: 89 MHz

Dwell: 0.131 seconds

FFT Size: 1024

RBW: 1.953 kHz

First scan: 12/29/13 22:06:14

Last scan: 12/29/13 22:07:07

Latitude: Unknown

Longitude: Unknown

Device

Name: ezcap USB 2.0 DVB-T DAB

Tuner: Elonics E4000

Gain: -1.0 dB

LO: 0.0 MHz

Calibration: -198.623 ppm

OK Cancel

Image 2: Properties Window

Displays the known properties of the scan. Latitude and longitude information may be edited here.

Preferences Window

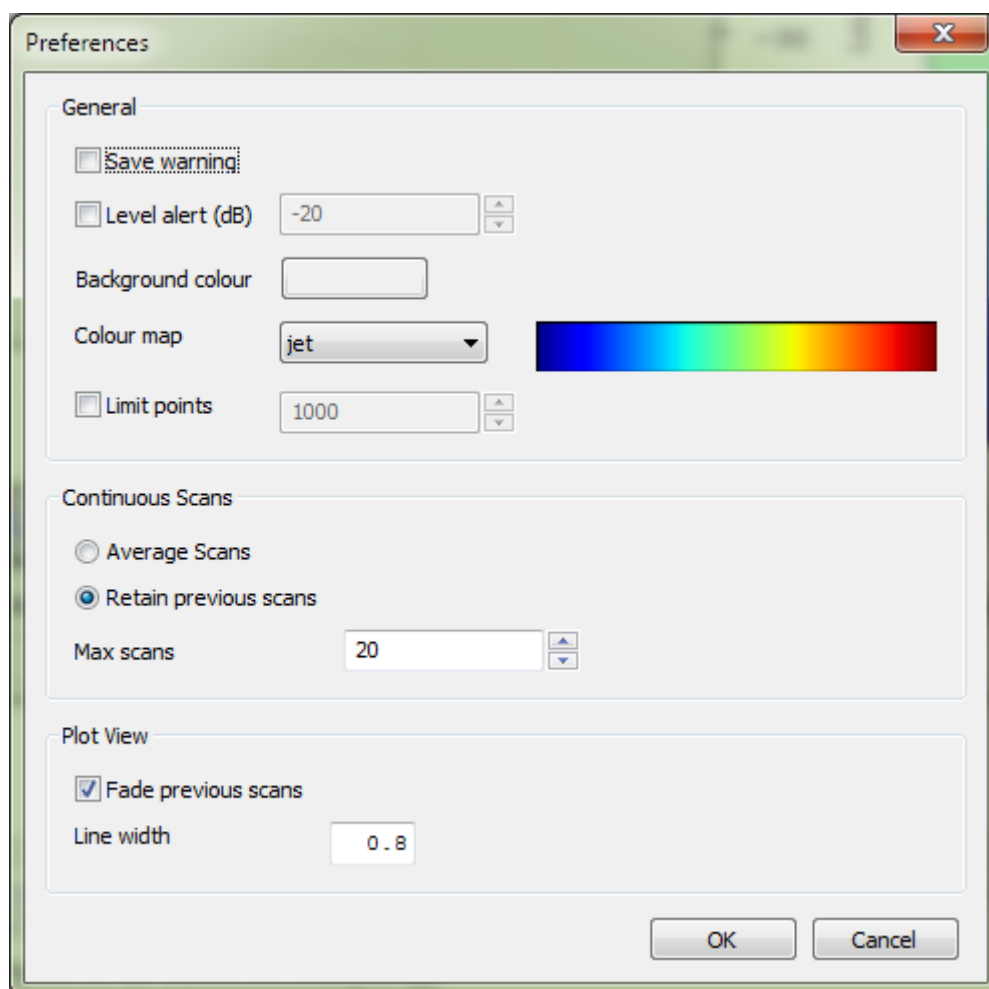


Image 3: Preferences Window

Allows generalised customisation of the software.

General

- Save warning Warn if a scan has not been saved before overwriting or exiting.
- Level alert Beep if the scan level is equal or greater than this level.
- Background colour The background colour of graph planes.
- Colour map The mapping to convert a level to colour in the view.
- Limit points The maximum number of points to plot.

Continuous Scans

Options pertaining to the continuous scan mode.

- Average scans Average the current sweep with the previous one.
- Retain previous scans Keep previous sweeps.
- Max scans Maximum number of sweeps to keep

Plot View

Settings related to the plot display

- Fade previous scans Fade out older scans in the view.
- Line width Line width to use when plotting

Advanced Preferences Window

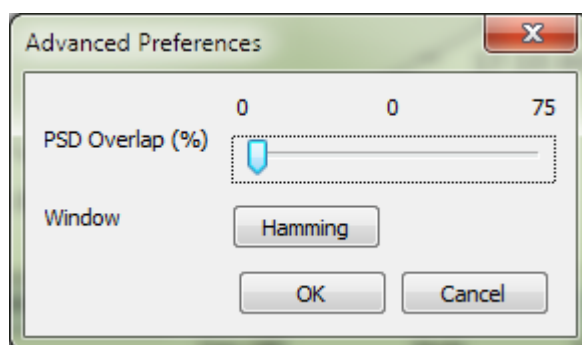


Image 4: Advanced Preferences Window

Advanced settings.

- PSD overlap Overlap percentage for power spectral density calculations.
- Window Change the window function used while scanning.

Devices Window

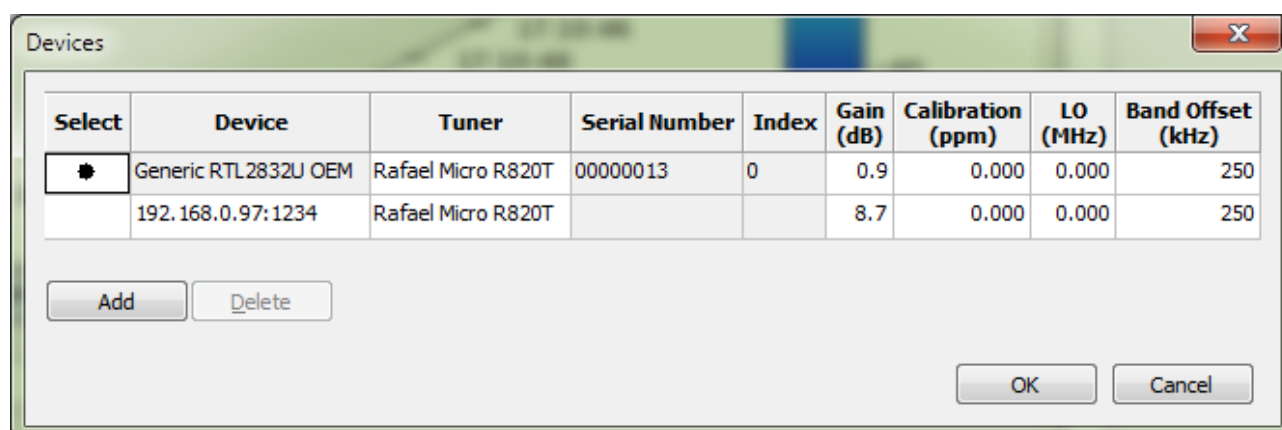


Image 5: Devices Window

A list of currently detected dongles and server settings.

- **Select** Use this column to select a device to scan with.
- **Device** Displays the name of the dongle or the host and port of a server.
- **Tuner** The tuner type in the dongle.
- **Serial Number** The serial number of the dongle (not supported for servers)
- **Index** The USB index of the dongle.
- **Gain** The gain to set the dongle to in Decibels.
- **Calibration** The frequency calibration to apply to the dongle in parts per million.
- **LO** Local oscillator offset – used with frequency converters.
- **Band offset...** Click to open the band offset window.
- **Add** Add a server
- **Delete** Delete the currently select server

Window Function Window

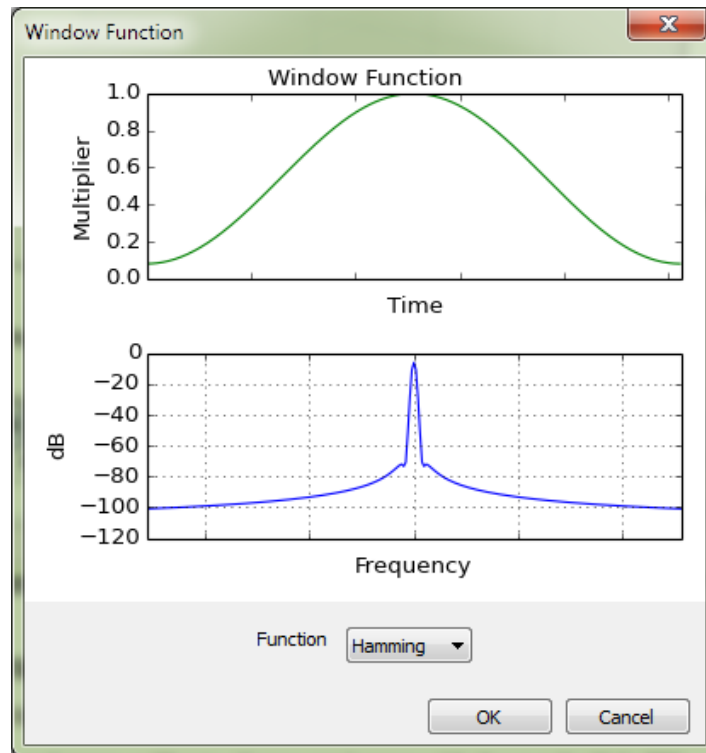


Image 6: Window Function

Allows the setting of the window function that the scanner applies to incoming samples. This window is meant primarily for educational purposes as the default Hamming window gives the best results.

The first graph (green) displays how the window function tapers off data at the beginning and end of the sample to reduce leakage and noise when the sample is converted into frequency data.

The bottom graph (blue) displays the frequency response of the window function. The software takes data from the flattest sections of the graph ignoring the large peak which corresponds to 0Hz.

Compare Window

Allows you to load two different scans and display the difference between them if their frequency bins coincide.

The first plot is shown in blue, the second in green and the difference in red.

Auto Calibration Window

Basic calibration to a **known** signal.

Set the frequency and press calibrate, if you are happy with the result click OK.

RTLSDR Scanner

Suitable signals are constant, unwavering signals such as that from a signal generator.

Real world sources such as FM radio transmissions can be used although the precision is reduced. In these cases it is recommended to set the dwell time to 1000ms to reduce errors.

Band Offset Window

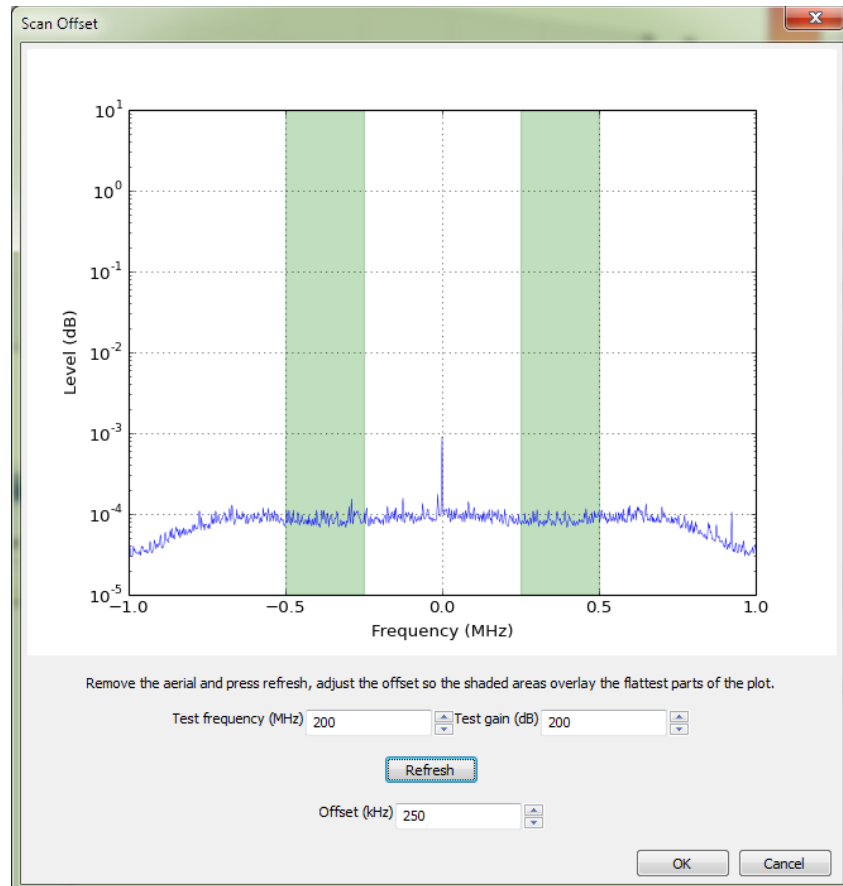


Image 7: Band Offset Window

This window allows you to select the flattest part of the spectrum returned by the dongle, to improve the quality of the scan.

- Disconnect the antenna from the dongle and ideally replace it with a 50 ohm load.
- Press refresh and wait for the spectrum to be displayed.
- Adjust the offset so the green bars cover the flattest section.

Command Line Interface

Scanning can be initiated from the command line.

Format

```
rtlsdr_scan.py    [-h]
                  [-s START] [-e END]
                  [-g GAIN] [-d DWELL] [-f FFT] [-l LO]
                  [-i INDEX | -r REMOTE]
                  [file]
```

Switches

File

The file name to save the scan to, either ending in '.rfs' for native file or '.csv' to export to a comma separated values file.

Start

-s, --start Start of the frequency range in megahertz.

End

-e, --end End of the frequency range in megahertz.

Gain

-g, --gain Scan gain in Decibels (optional, default – 0dB).

Dwell

-d, --dwell Dwell time in seconds (optional, default – 131ms).

FFT

-f, --fft The number of FFT bins (optional, default – 1024).

LO

-l, --lo The local oscillator offset in megahertz (optional, default – 0MHz).

RTLSDR Scanner

Index

`-i, --index` The zero-based index of the dongle (optional, cannot be used with `-r`).

Remote

`-r, --remote` The server host and port (optional, cannot be used with `-i`).

Help

`-h, --help` Display help information (optional).

Examples

Scan from 88 to 108 MHz, saving to 'scan.rfs'

```
rtlsdr_scan.py -s 88 -e 108 scan.rfs
```

Scan from 430 to 436MHz, with a gain of 8.7dB and a dwell of 16ms, saving to 'test.rfs':

```
rtlsdr_scan.py -s 430 -e 436 -g 8.7 -d 16 test.rfs
```

Scanning using a second dongle:

```
rtlsdr_scan.py -s 88 -e 108 -d 1 scan.rfs
```

Scan using a server by name:

```
rtlsdr_scan.py -s 88 -e 108 -r rtlserver:1234 scan.rfs
```

Scan using a server by address:

```
rtlsdr_scan.py -s 88 -e 108 -r 192.168.0.22:1234 scan.rfs
```

Illustration Index

Image 1: Main Window.....	8
Image 2: Properties Window.....	12
Image 3: Preferences Window.....	13
Image 4: Advanced Preferences Window.....	14
Image 5: Devices Window.....	15
Image 6: Window Function.....	16
Image 7: Band Offset Window.....	17

Alphabetical Index

About	9
Add	15
Advanced Preferences	9, 14
Auto Calibration	9, 16
Auto range	
Frequency	10
Level	10
Time	10
Average	10, 14
Back	9
Background colour	13
Band Offset	6, 15, 17
Calibration	6, 15
Colour map	10, 13
Compare	9, 16
Continuous	11, 14
Delete	15
Device	15
Devices	9, 15
Display	11
Dongle	6
Dwell	6, 11, 18
End	18
Exit	8
Export	8
Fade plots	10
Fade previous scans	14
FFT	18
FFT Size	6, 11
File	18
Forward	9
Gain	6, 11, 15, 18
General	13
Grid	10
Help	9, 19
Home	9
Index	15, 19
Label peak	10
Level alert	13
Limit points	13
Line width	14
Live update	10
Local Oscillator	6, 15, 18
Main Window	8
Max scans	14

RTLSDR Scanner

Mean	6
Geometric	6
Measurement Table	10
Menu Bar	8
Mode	11
Mouse wheel	9
Open	8
Pan	9
Plot	10
Plot View	14
Power Spectral Density	7
Preferences	9, 13
Properties	8, 12
PSD overlap	14
Range	11
Recent Files	8
Remote	19
Resolution Bandwidth	7
Retain previous scans	14
Save	10
Save As	8
Save warning	13
Scan	7
Serial Number	15
Server	7
Single	11
Spectral Flatness	7
Start	9, 11, 18
Stop	9, 11
Stop at end	9
Subplots	10
Sweep	7
Tuner	15
Waterfall	10
Window Function	7, 14, 16
Wireframe	10
Zoom	9