

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	5
Band Offset	5
Calibration	5
Dongle	5
Dwell	5
FFT Size	6
Gain	6
Local Oscillator (LO)	6
Scan	6
Server	6
Sweep	6
Window Function	6
Graphical User Interface	7
Main Window	7
Menu Bar	7
File	7
Edit	8
Scan	8
Tools	8
Help	8
Graph	8
Standard Controls	8
Plot	9
Additional Controls	9
Spectrogram	9
Additional Controls	9
3D Spectrogram	9
Additional Controls	9
Tool Bar	9
Properties Window	10
Preferences Window	11
General	11
Continuous Scans	11
Plot View	12
Spectrogram View	12
Devices	12
Window Function Window	13

RTLSDR Scanner

Compare Window	13
Auto Calibration Window	13
Advanced Device Settings Window	14
Command Line Interface	15
Format	15
Switches	15
File	15
Start	15
End	15
Gain	15
Dwell	15
FFT	15
LO	15
Index	16
Remote	16
Help	16
Examples	16
Illustration Index	17
Alphabetical Index	18

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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.

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.

Scan

One or more sweeps of the frequency range.

Server

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

Sweep

A single pass of the frequency range.

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

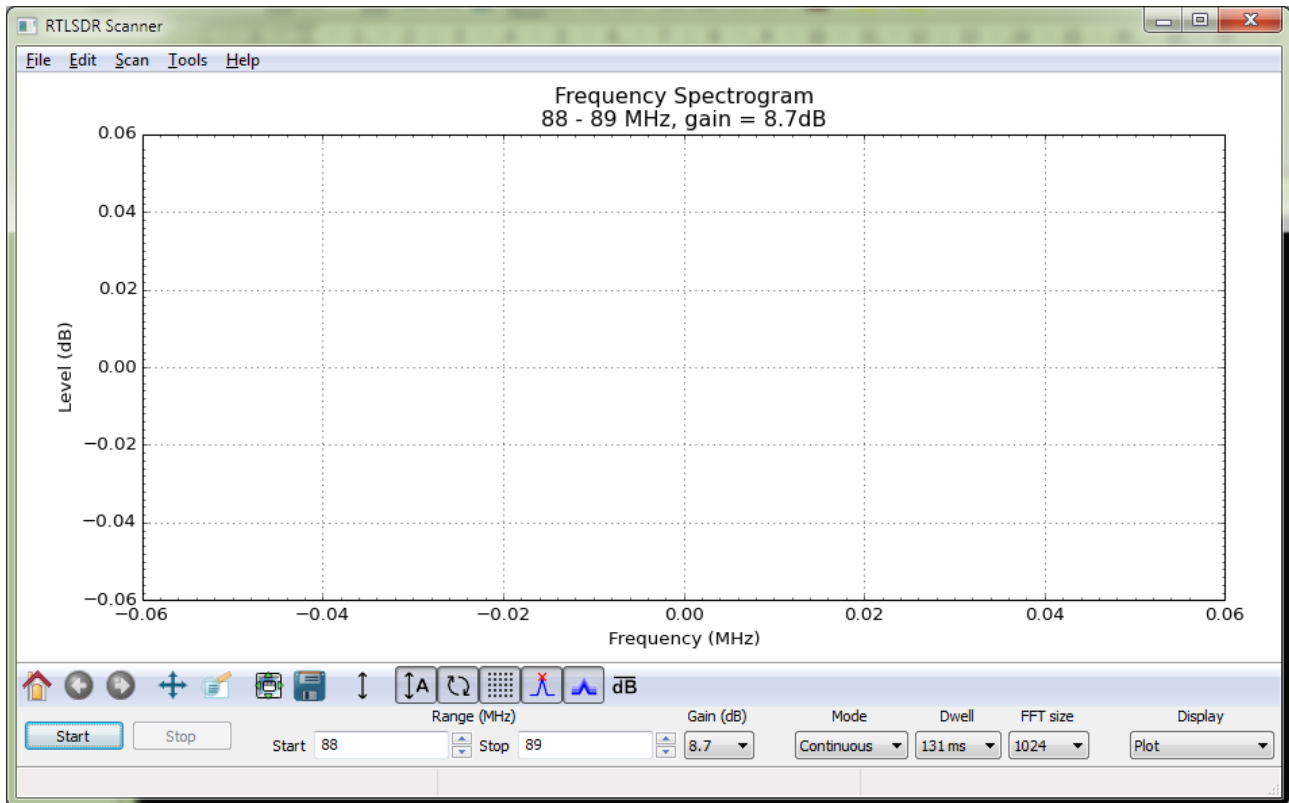


Image 1: Main Window

The main window is split into 3 main areas; the Menu Bar, the Graph 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.
- Window Function... Change the window function used while scanning.

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.

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.
-  Subplots Change the margins of the plot.
-  Save Save the current plot as an image.
-  Range Set the limits of the Level axis.



RTLSDR Scanner

-  Auto range Adjust the axes to display all data.
-  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 peak of the last sweep.

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

- Colour map The mapping of levels to colour.

3D Spectrogram

A three dimensional plot of frequency versus time versus level.

Additional Controls

- Colour map The mapping of levels to colour.
-  Wireframe Plot the spectrum as a wireframe instead of colouring the faces.

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.

RTLSDR Scanner

- 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

Displays the know properties of the known scan, latitude and longitude information may be added here.

Preferences Window

Preferences

General

☒ Save warning ☐ Level alert (dB) -20

Continuous Scans

☐ Average Scans
☒ Retain previous scans

Max scans 20

Plot View

☒ Fade previous scans

Spectrogram View

Colour map jet

Devices

Select	Device	Tuner	Serial Number	Index	Gain (dB)	Calibration (ppm)	LO (MHz)	Advanced
	Generic RTL2832U OEM	Rafael Micro R820T	00000013	0	8.7	0.000	0.000	...
	localhost: 1234	Rafael Micro R820T			0.0	0.000	0.000	...

Add Delete

OK Cancel

Allows 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

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.

Spectrogram View

Options related to the spectrogram and 3D spectrogram view

- Colour map The mapping to convert a level to colour in the view.

Devices

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.
- Advanced Click to open the advanced device settings window.
- Add Add a server
- Delete Delete the currently select server

Window Function Window

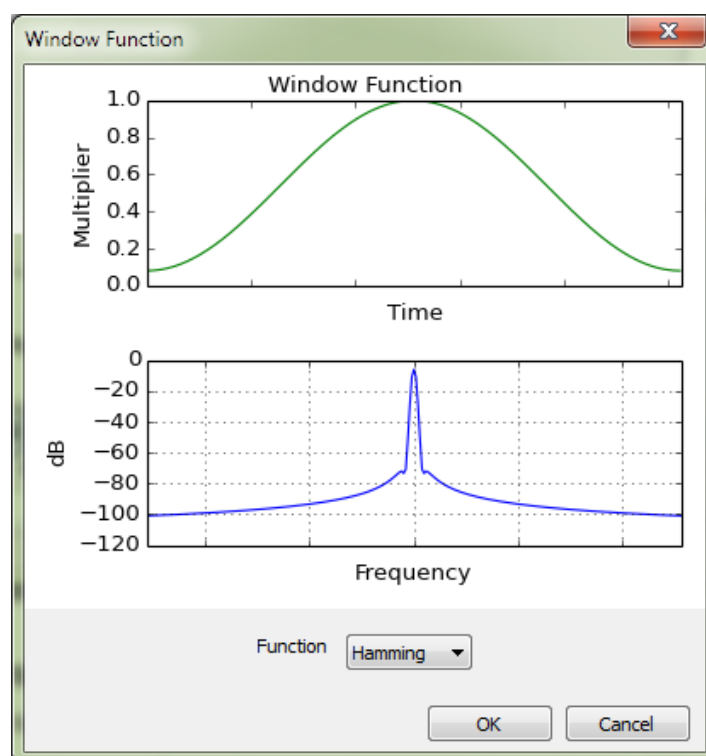


Image 2: Window Function

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.

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.

Advanced Device Settings Window

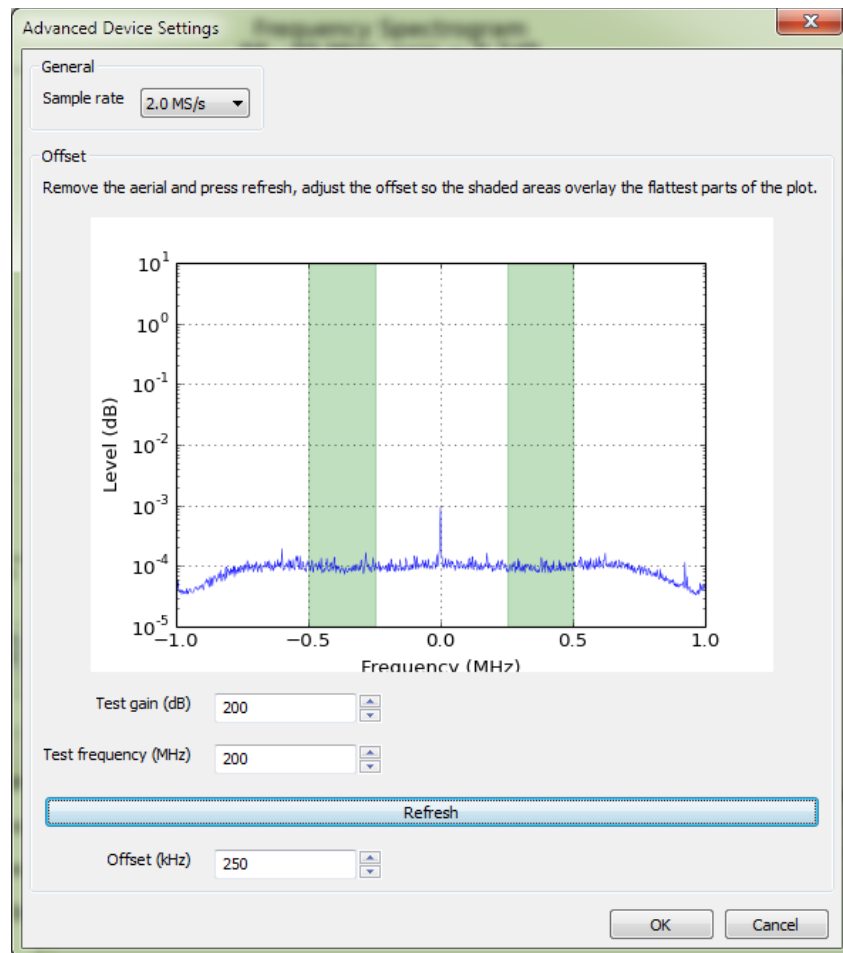


Image 3: Advanced Device Settings

This window allows you to select the sample rate and pick the flattest part of the spectrum returned by the dongle.

- Pick the desired sample rate.
- 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.....	7
Image 2: Window Function.....	13
Image 3: Advanced Device Settings.....	14

Alphabetical Index

About	8
Add	12
Advanced Device Settings	14
Auto Calibration	8, 13
Auto range	9
Average	9, 11
Back	8
Band Offset	5
Calibration	5, 12
Colour map	9, 12
Compare	8, 13
Continuous	10p.
Delete	12
Device	12
Devices	12
Display	10
Dongle	5
Dwell	5, 10, 15
End	15
Exit	7
Export	7
Fade plots	9
Fade previous scans	12
FFT	15
FFT Size	6, 10
File	15
Forward	8
Gain	6, 9, 12, 15
General	11
Grid	9
Help	8, 16
Home	8
Index	12, 16
Label peak	9
Level alert	11
Live update	9
Local Oscillator	6, 12, 15
Main Window	7
Max scans	11
Menu Bar	7
Mode	9
Open	7
Pan	8
Plot	9
Plot View	12

RTLSDR Scanner

Preferences	8, 11
Properties	7, 10
Range	8p.
Recent Files	7
Remote	16
Retain previous scans	11
Sample rate	14
Save	8
Save As	7
Save warning	11
Scan	6
Serial Number	12
Server	6
Single	10
Spectrogram View	12
Start	8p., 15
Stop	8p.
Stop at end	8
Subplots	8
Sweep	6
Tuner	12
Waterfall	9
Window Function	6, 8, 13
Wireframe	9
Zoom	8