

The Breakthrough Listen Search for Intelligent Life:  
Searching for Technosignatures in Observations of *TESS* Targets of Interest

RAFFY TRAAS,<sup>1,2</sup> STEVE CROFT,<sup>2,3</sup> VISHAL GAJJAR,<sup>2</sup> HOWARD ISAACSON,<sup>2,4</sup> MATT LEBOSKY,<sup>2</sup> DAVID H. E. MACMAHON,<sup>2</sup>  
KAREN PEREZ,<sup>5</sup> DANNY C. PRICE,<sup>2,6</sup> SOFIA SHEIKH,<sup>7,2</sup> ANDREW P. V. SIEMION,<sup>2,3,8,9</sup> SHANE SMITH,<sup>10</sup> JAMIE DREW,<sup>11</sup> AND  
S. PETE WORDEN<sup>11</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Department of Physics, University of Wisconsin - La Crosse, 1725 State Street, La Crosse, WI 54601, USA*

<sup>2</sup>*Department of Astronomy, University of California Berkeley, Berkeley CA 94720*

<sup>3</sup>*SETI Institute, Mountain View, California*

<sup>4</sup>*University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, QLD 4350, Australia*

<sup>5</sup>*Department of Astronomy, Columbia University, 550 West 120th Street, New York, NY 10027, USA*

<sup>6</sup>*Centre for Astrophysics & Supercomputing, Swinburne University of Technology, Hawthorn, VIC 3122, Australia*

<sup>7</sup>*Department of Astronomy and Astrophysics, Pennsylvania State University, University Park PA 16802*

<sup>8</sup>*Department of Astrophysics/IMAPP, Radboud University, Nijmegen, Netherlands*

<sup>9</sup>*University of Malta, Institute of Space Sciences and Astronomy*

<sup>10</sup>*Hillsdale College, 33 E College St, Hillsdale, MI 49242*

<sup>11</sup>*The Breakthrough Initiatives, NASA Research Park, Bld. 18, Moffett Field, CA, 94035, USA*

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## ABSTRACT

Exoplanetary systems are prime targets for the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI). With the recent uptick in the identification of candidate and confirmed exoplanets through the work of missions like the Transiting Exoplanet Survey Satellite (*TESS*), we are beginning to understand that Earth-like planets are common. In this work, we extend the Breakthrough Listen (BL) search for extraterrestrial intelligence to include targeted searches of stars identified by *TESS* as potential exoplanet hosts. We report on 113 30-min cadence observations collected for 28 targets selected from the *TESS* Input Catalog (TIC) from among those identified as containing signatures of transiting planets. The targets were searched for narrowband signals from 1 – 11 GHz using the turboSETI (Enriquez et al. 2017; Enriquez & Price 2019) pipeline architecture modified for compatibility with the Google Cloud environment. Data were searched for drift rates of  $\pm 4$  Hz/s above a minimum signal-to-noise threshold of 10, following the parameters of previous searches conducted by Price et al. (2020) and Enriquez et al. (2017). The observations presented in this work establish some of the deepest limits to date over such a wide band (1 – 11 GHz) for life beyond Earth. We determine that fewer than 12.72% of the observed targets possess transmitters operating at these frequencies with an Equivalent Isotropic Radiated Power greater than our derived threshold of  $4.9 \times 10^{14}$  W.

**Keywords:** exoplanets — technosignatures — search for extraterrestrial intelligence

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. SETI Methods

The Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI) is the endeavor to discover the existence of intelligent life elsewhere in the universe – one of the longest stand-

ing unanswered questions in science. There are three traditional techniques to detecting intelligent life. The first method is *in situ* sampling, where studies are conducted at the site of interest. While this approach would provide us with results containing the least amount of uncertainty, it is infeasible in practice when studying extrasolar objects due to the vast interstellar distances involved. This brings about the need for techniques that can indirectly study sites of interest, which motivates the remaining two strategies: remote *biosignature* and *technosignature* searches. Technosignature searches are

**Table 1.** Observation parameters

Receiver	Frequency (GHz)	$T_{\text{sys}}$ (K)	SEFD (Jy)	$10\sigma$ Minimum Flux Density (Jy)	$10\sigma$ Minimum EIRP ( $10^{12}W$ )
L-band	1.10–1.90	15.60	7.7251	5.304	491.6
S-band	1.80–2.80	14.80	7.32896	5.032	466.4
C-band	4.00–7.80	21.50	10.6468	7.310	677.5
X-band	7.80–11.20	30.80	15.2522	10.470	970.5

concerned with the detection of evidence of a technologically sophisticated civilization through their city lights, atmospheric pollution, satellites, powerful transmitters, etc. Traditionally, the majority of technosignature studies search for radio wave transmissions (Cocconi & Morrison 1959) typically in the 1 – 10 GHz frequency range. Biosignature searches use spectroscopy to detect planets with atmospheres or surfaces suitable for hosting life. This method is capable of detecting the presence of organic compounds in planetary atmospheres and surfaces, thus indicating the possibility of life; however, it is challenging to unequivocally determine if those compounds derive from the emissions of living organisms or byproducts of inorganic processes. More importantly, in the case that a biosignature search indisputably detects the presence of life, it remains uncertain as to whether these organisms are complex, or even technological. In this regard, technosignature searches can be seen as a more holistic approach than biosignatures because, in principle, the detection of a technosignature would imply the existence of life. Moreover, whereas even the next generation of telescopes will only be able to probe nearby stars for biosignatures, searching for technosignatures allows the search to extend out to a much larger number of stars.

### 1.2. Breakthrough Listen

Breakthrough Listen (Worden et al. 2017) is a ten-year initiative purposed towards the detection of technosignatures. Launched in 2015, it is equipped with the most capable tools and resources with which to conduct a SETI search, and constitutes the most comprehensive search to date (Enriquez et al. 2017; Price et al. 2020). BL conducts searches at optical wavelengths as well, by using facilities such as the Automated Planet Finder (APF) to search for laser emission lines present in stellar spectra (Lipman et al. 2019), and the VERITAS telescope to look for nanosecond optical pulses.

### 1.3. Exoplanets

Exoplanets are promising locations to search for technosignatures (e.g., Tingay et al. 2018; Tremblay & Tingay 2020). Earth harbors intelligent life and is itself an exoplanet from an extrasolar perspective, and this naturally leads us to presume the possibility of life having emerged in a similar environment. Besides an exoplanet

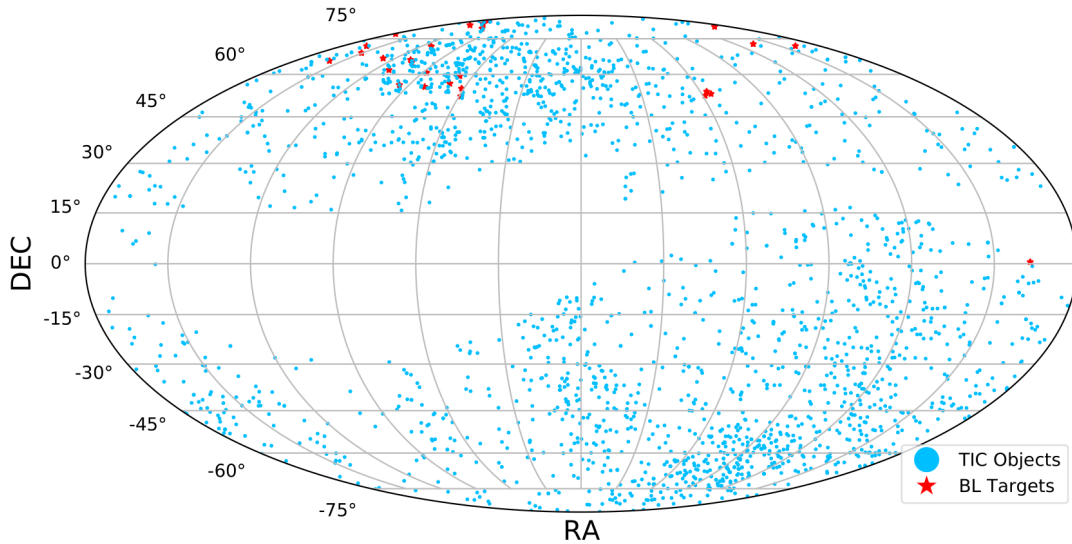
residing within the habitable zone of its host star, we are more likely to assume it might harbor intelligent life if its properties are similar to that of Earth’s. In the case that intelligent life eventually develops on these other worlds and become at least as technologically advanced as ourselves, they might possess some type of radio wave transmitting system, which forms the basis for many of our own telecommunications networks. Should such civilizations exist, we should be able to detect their presence as their signals inevitably spill out into space. While Breakthrough Listen has performed searches of specific exoplanet systems (e.g., Perez et al. 2020; Sheikh et al. 2020), observing a larger sample can provide a limit on the number of nearby exoplanets on which radio transmitters aim signals directly toward Earth or output a sufficient amount of isotropic power to be detectable.

With the current surge in exoplanet discovery work being made by the *NASA Transiting Exoplanet Survey Satellite* (*TESS*), the number of confirmed exoplanets has increased dramatically alongside the number of stars identified as having signatures of transiting planet candidates, making a technosignature search of these objects particularly timely. Objects in the *TESS* Input Catalog (TIC), assembled from several existing catalogs as detailed by Stassun et al. (2019), are observed by *TESS*, and those identified as having signatures of transiting planets are subsequently registered into the *TESS* Objects of Interest (TOI) catalog – a list of TIC targets marked for follow-up observation. The recent completion of the *TESS* primary mission has found 66 confirmed exoplanets and 2120 targets of interest<sup>1</sup>.

A collaboration between Breakthrough Listen and scientists working on the *TESS* mission has initiated the search for extraterrestrial intelligence in *TESS* target candidates. Removing those listed as false positives, Breakthrough Listen observes objects present in the TOI catalog using the Exoplanet Follow-up Observing Program for *TESS* (ExoFOP-*TESS*<sup>2</sup>). The Robert C. Byrd Green Bank Observatory (hereafter GBT), a BL facility, observes targets above a declination of  $-20^\circ$ , resulting in an observation queue of 964 objects. The 28 targets included in this work are those that, to date, have

<sup>1</sup> <https://tess.mit.edu/publications/>

<sup>2</sup> [https://exofop.ipac.caltech.edu/tess/view\\_toi.php](https://exofop.ipac.caltech.edu/tess/view_toi.php)



**Figure 1.** Distribution of BL targets analyzed in this paper, and a subset of existing TIC sources with associated TOI objects in equatorial coordinates. The subset was collected from resources provided by the Exoplanet Follow-up Observing Program for *TESS* (ExoFOP-*TESS*). The *TESS* project uses an all-sky survey approach to find transiting exoplanets.

been observed at all four of L-, S-, C-, and X-bands with the GBT. This work searches more targets across 1 – 11 GHz than any previous BL search (e.g., [Enriquez et al. 2018](#)). A summary of the targets is given in Table B, from which the information included is sourced from the ExoFOP-*TESS*.

## 2. OBSERVATIONS

Observations were conducted using the 100-m dish of the GBT and were recorded in an ABACAD cadence following the previous searches of [Enriquez et al. \(2017\)](#) and [Price et al. \(2020\)](#) in which each observation of a primary (‘ON’) target is alternated with observations of secondary (‘OFF’) targets. Each observation has a 5 min duration, amounting to 30 min for a full cadence of 6 observations, for a total of over 3390 min on the sky. Data are recorded in accordance with the standard Breakthrough Listen strategy detailed by [Lebofsky et al. \(2019\)](#). Details of the receivers are listed in Table 1.1.

## 3. ANALYSIS

### 3.1. De-Doppler Pipeline

The fine-frequency resolution data products, with a channelization of 2.7 Hz ([Lebofsky et al. 2019](#)), amounting to a total of 24 TB, were analyzed for the presence of narrowband drifting signals using the turboSETI<sup>3</sup> ([Enriquez et al. 2017](#); [Enriquez & Price 2019](#)) pipeline. The

datasets analyzed are available from the Breakthrough Listen Open Data Archive<sup>4</sup>.

TurboSETI is a Doppler drift search algorithm designed to search for narrowband drifting signals. Detecting narrowband signals in regions crowded with RFI, and over wide ranges of Doppler drift rates, is challenging (see, e.g., [Margot et al. 2021](#)), and detection efficiencies for certain kinds of signals may be lower than expected (including for signals that are more complex than the simple assumption of a narrowband tone). Work is ongoing to enhance the capabilities of turboSETI, including better handling of signals spread across multiple frequency channels, and quantifying detection efficiency using signal injection and recovery<sup>5</sup>. In addition, we are exploring approaches, including machine learning ([Brzycki et al. 2020](#)), that offer improved performance in regions crowded with RFI. Nevertheless, turboSETI successfully finds the Voyager 1 spacecraft (an “extraterrestrial” transmitter that is a good stand-in for a real technosignature) in a blind search<sup>6</sup>, and can be used to place useful limits on the prevalence of technosignatures in the dataset presented here.

Prior to this work, the Breakthrough Listen Doppler search pipeline was executed on the compute nodes at the UC Berkeley Data Center, where data to be processed was stored on disk. This work is the result of

<sup>3</sup> [https://github.com/UCBerkeleySETI/turbo\\_seti](https://github.com/UCBerkeleySETI/turbo_seti)

<sup>4</sup> <http://seti.berkeley.edu/opendata>

<sup>5</sup> <https://github.com/krishnabhattacharam/TurboSETIRetrieval>

<sup>6</sup> <https://github.com/elanlavie/VoyagerTutorialRepository>

an endeavor to migrate the turboSETI pipeline onto the Google Cloud Platform (GCP). Data were stored in a Google Cloud Storage (GCS) Bucket which was mounted to the file storage systems of each GCP Compute Engine to perform the analysis. Each of the 20 instances was installed with a containerized version of turboSETI as a *Docker* (Merkel 2014) image<sup>7</sup>. This process is shown in Figure 4. In this manner, turboSETI ran on a total of 113 full cadences, finding 249532 hits over a total of 696 individual observations. Only complete, six-target cadence sets were analyzed.

Narrowband drifting signals with  $S/N > 10$  detected by turboSETI are referred to as ‘hits’. A set of hits

present in all ‘ON’ observations falling within the range of frequencies subtended by a signal with constant drift are grouped into an ‘event’. That is, the  $n$ th event  $\varepsilon_n$  can be defined by Eq. 1, where  $t_{\text{obs}}$  is the duration of each observation (5 min),  $\nu_h$  is the frequency of a hit  $h$  present in the  $k$ th ‘ON’ observation, and  $\nu_0$  and  $\dot{\nu}_0$  are the frequency and drift rate, respectively, of a hit present in the first ‘ON’ observation  $A_0$  in the cadence ABACAD or ABABAB. Events which contain no hits present in all ‘OFF’ observations are defined as ‘potential candidates’. Thus, the  $n$ th potential candidate  $\rho_n$  can be defined by Eq. 2.

$$\varepsilon_n = \{h \in A_k : \nu_0 - \dot{\nu}_0 \cdot t_{\text{obs}} \leq \nu_h \leq \nu_0 + \dot{\nu}_0 \cdot t_{\text{obs}}\} \quad (1)$$

$$\rho_n = \{h \in A_k : h \notin B \wedge \nu_0 - \dot{\nu}_0 \cdot t_{\text{obs}} \leq \nu_h \leq \nu_0 + \dot{\nu}_0 \cdot t_{\text{obs}}\} \quad (2)$$

### 3.2. Signal Distribution

Events and candidates were found using the turboSETI `find_event` method for all full cadences, which found a total of 43275 events and 651 candidates across all four bands. A breakdown of the results is summarized in Table 2. The drift rate,  $S/N$ , and frequency distribution of hits and candidates detected at each band is shown in Figure 2. A sample of plots of candidate events is included in Appendix C.

L-band targets accounted for the largest share of hits (76%), while X-band amounts to the largest portion of hits among the remaining bands (15%), with S- and C-band accounting for 8% and 1% of total hits, respectively. We find that L-band accounts for 80% of total events, a slight increase compared to its hits proportion. Despite S-band comprising fewer hits than X-band, more events were recorded at S-band (13%) than X-band (6%), whereas the relative proportion of C-band events remained unchanged throughout (1%). Overall, 17% of the total hits were present in candidate events – the hit-event ‘conversion’ rate<sup>8</sup>. The L-band hit-event conversion rate was 18%, a low figure compared to those seen at S- (27%) and C-band (26%), which may indicate a stronger RFI presence. The proportion of candidates found at L-band was significantly higher than was previously for hits, accounting for 97% of total candidates. Table 2 gives an overview of these figures.

### 3.3. Event Groups

Following Price et al. (2020), events were grouped into ‘event groups’ of 125 kHz frequency bins, in which the

**Table 2.** Summary Statistics

	L-Band	S-Band	C-Band	X-Band	Overall
	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
Hits	76	8	1	15	100
Events	80	13	1	6	100
Candidates	97	2	1	0	100
Hit $\rightarrow$ Event	18	27	28	7	17
Event $\rightarrow$ Candidate	2	0.27	2	0	2
Hit $\rightarrow$ Candidate	0.33	0.07	0.57	0	0.26

spacing between the highest and lowest start frequencies  $\Delta\nu_{\text{event}}$  in each bin was computed. From this value, the central frequency  $\nu_{\text{event}}$  for each event group was computed. The larger the cluster size, the greater the RFI (or technosignature) presence.

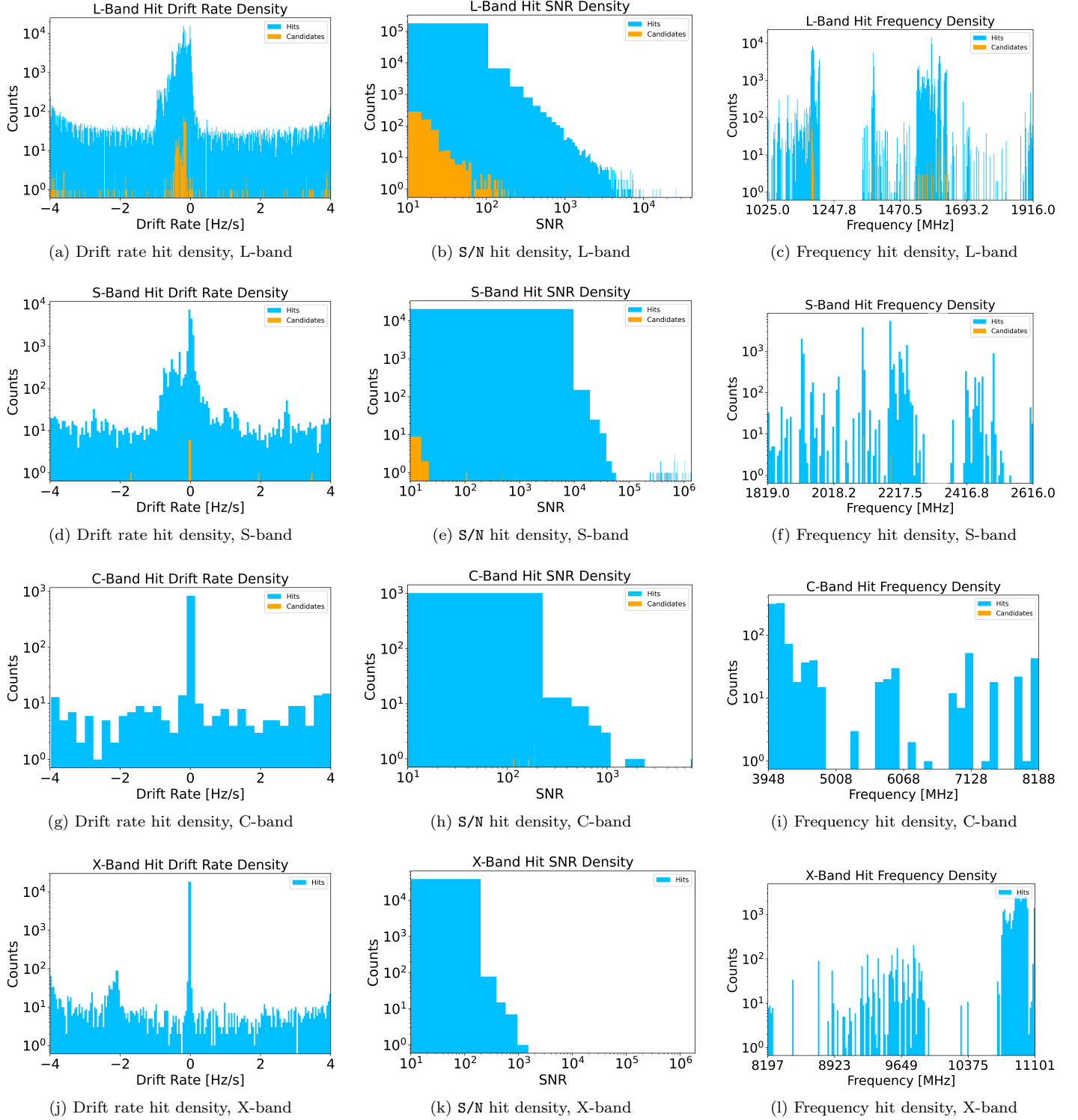
The candidate events at L-band were grouped into 135 frequency bins of 125 kHz, the lowest grouping at 1172 MHz, and the highest at 1626 MHz.

The statistical variance (and thus, standard deviation  $\sigma$ ) in frequency,  $S/N$ , and drift rate within an event group were found for each event group. A graphical depiction is shown in Figure 6. We define single sources of interference or technosignature as event groups whose events demonstrate uniformity in frequency,  $S/N$ , and drift rate, because signals which share similar characteristics are more likely to have a common origin. As such, we select event groups with  $\sigma_\nu < 1$ ,  $\sigma_{S/N} < 1$ , and  $\sigma_{\dot{\nu}} < 1$  as single sources. The results are shown in Table 4. Examples of single sources are Figure 7a and Figure 7b.

The *Breakthrough Listen* BLIMPY package (Breakthrough Listen Collaboration 2019) was used to produce diagnostic waterfall plots of the 20 single sources, in which upon visual inspection, interesting sources trace-

<sup>7</sup> The DOCKER image used in this work can be found here: <https://hub.docker.com/r/rtraas/turbo-cloud>

<sup>8</sup> In general, the A-B conversion rate is  $A \rightarrow B = \frac{\text{total A}}{\text{total B}}$ , and, in context, roughly describes how much of A is contained in B



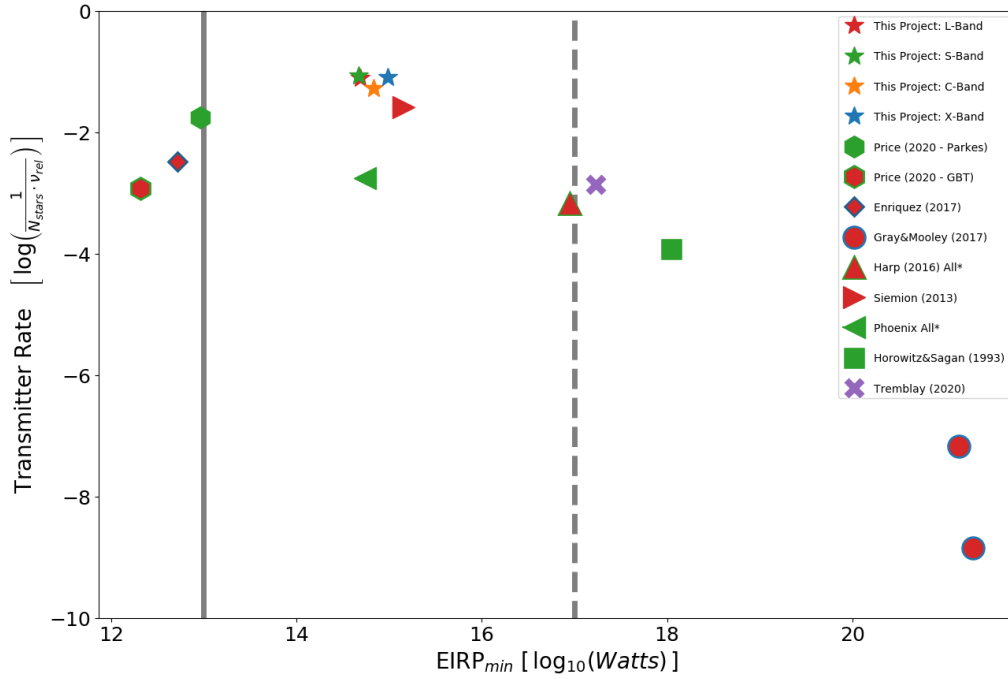
**Figure 2.** Histograms of the drift rate, S/N, and frequency density of hits (blue) and candidates (orange). Note Figure 2j, Figure 2k, and Figure 2l reflect no candidates being found at X-band.

**Table 3.** Candidates found across all bands.

Receiver	No. cadences	Hours	No. hits	No. events	No. candidates	TFM	Transmitter Limit <sup>a</sup>
L	28	14.5	189321	34727	630	1995	12.72%
S	28	14.5	20673	5485	15	2038	12.72%
C	28	14.5	1054	269	6	1878	12.72%
X	29 <sup>b</sup>	14.5	38484	2794	0	4675	12.72%
Total	113	58.0	249532	43275	651	1072	12.72%

<sup>a</sup>The limit on the existence of putative transmitters. Indicates the percentage of observed stars which possess transmitters above the  $\text{EIRP}_{\min}$  threshold. That is, of the stars observed at a particular band, the transmitter limit is the maximum proportion of those which possess narrowband transmitters. Values computed using a one-sided Poisson confidence interval, given a 50% probability of observing a signal if present.

<sup>b</sup>There were two cadences of observations performed for TIC232967666.



**Figure 3.** A comparison of the derived transmitter rate limits of this work with previous surveys, where red, green, orange, and blue correspond to searches conducted at L-, S-, C-, and X-band respectively. Respectively, the vertical solid and dashed lines represent the EIRP of the Arecibo planetary radar, and the total solar power incident on Earth. Note that the Tremblay & Tingay (2020) data point represents a survey conducted at 113 MHz with the Murchison Widefield Array (MWA). The values for Project Phoenix are from Price et al. (2020).



**Table 4.** Event Groups

Receiver	$N_{\text{event groups}}$	$N_{\text{single sources}}$	$N_{\text{non-RFI}}$
L-Band	135	20	0
S-Band	2	0	0
L-Band	1	0	0
X-Band	0	0	0

able to known RFI can be identified. A sample of these plots are included in Appendix D. All single-source event groups can be traced back to observations of 5 unique targets.

### 3.4. Transmitter Rate Limit

We can calculate the percentage of stars which could possess high duty cycle transmitters above the  $\text{EIRP}_{\text{min}}$  threshold, given our lack of detections. That is, of the stars observed at a particular band, the transmitter limit is the maximum proportion of those which possess narrowband transmitters. Values are computed using a one-sided Poisson confidence interval, assuming a conservative 50% probability of observing a signal if present.

The transmitter rate limit was calculated at L-, S-, C-, and X-band, the results of which are presented in Table 3. Our transmitter limit of 12.72% indicates that fewer than 12.72% of the observed stars have putative transmitters operating in the range of 1 – 11 GHz.

A comparison of the derived transmitter rate limits to those of previous surveys is shown in Figure 3, where red, green, orange, and blue correspond to searches conducted at L-, S-, C-, and X-band respectively. Our study provides similar constraints to previous studies, but over a much wider range of frequencies.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

We report on the Breakthrough Listen technosignature search of 28 stellar targets selected from the *TESS*

Input Catalog identified as potential exoplanet hosts. Our observations spanning 1 – 11 GHz were searched for narrowband signals exhibiting drift rates within  $\pm 4 \text{ Hz s}^{-1}$  above a minimum S/N threshold of 10, and no candidate signals unattributable to RFI were found. We derive an EIRP threshold of  $4.9 \times 10^{14} \text{ W}$  and establish some of the deepest limits to date over such a wide band.

### 4.1. Future Work

Breakthrough Listen is continuing to observe a larger sample of TOI targets. Furthermore, *TESS* has begun its extended mission and so will continue to refine its TOI catalog<sup>9</sup>, enabling future SETI searches to have a larger number of confirmed, nearby exoplanets for study.

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*Software:* turboSETI (Enriquez et al. 2017; Enriquez & Price 2019), BLIMPY (Breakthrough Listen Collaboration 2019), NUMPY (Harris et al. 2020), PANDAS (pandas development team 2020; Wes McKinney 2010), ASTROPY (Astropy Collaboration et al. 2013, 2018), DOCKER (Merkel 2014)

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<sup>9</sup> <https://tess.mit.edu/observations/>

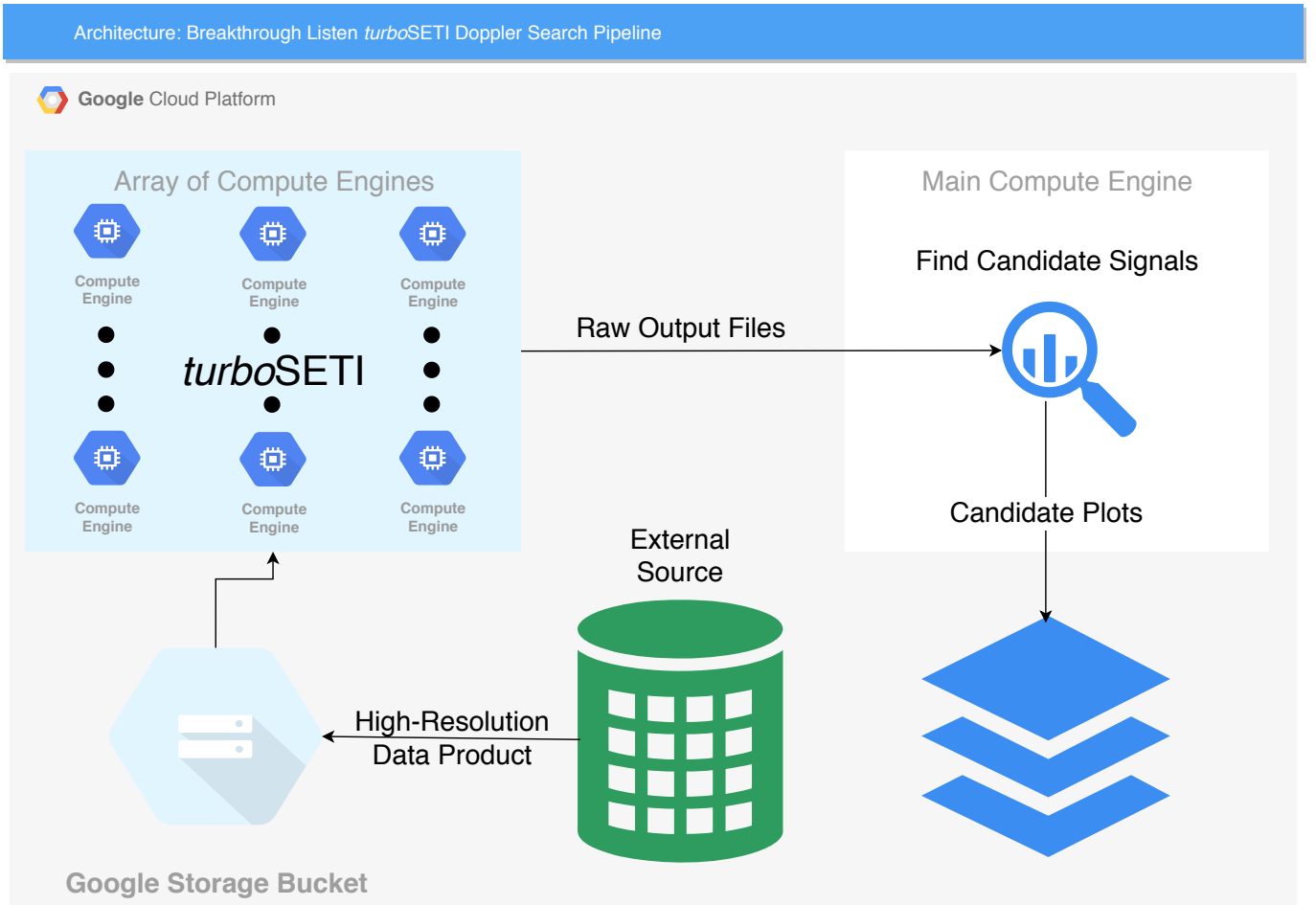
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## APPENDIX

## A. turboSETI IN GOOGLE CLOUD PLATFORM

This work is the result of an endeavor to migrate the turboSETI pipeline onto the GCP. GCP Compute Engine instances were used to conduct the analysis instead of the compute nodes at the UC Berkeley Data Center. Each of the 20 instances was mounted to a GCS Bucket to access the fine-frequency resolution data products and installed with a containerized version of turboSETI as a `DOCKER` image to search for narrowband drifting signals. Five Compute Engines were assigned to analyze the data at each of the bands (L, S, C, X). One of these instances acted as the “head node” and provided each Compute Engine a unique list of files to analyze. The head node then collected and searched the turboSETI raw output files for events. Events which passed turboSETI inspection were plotted.



**Figure 4.** The turboSETI pipeline adapted for compatibility with Google Cloud Platform

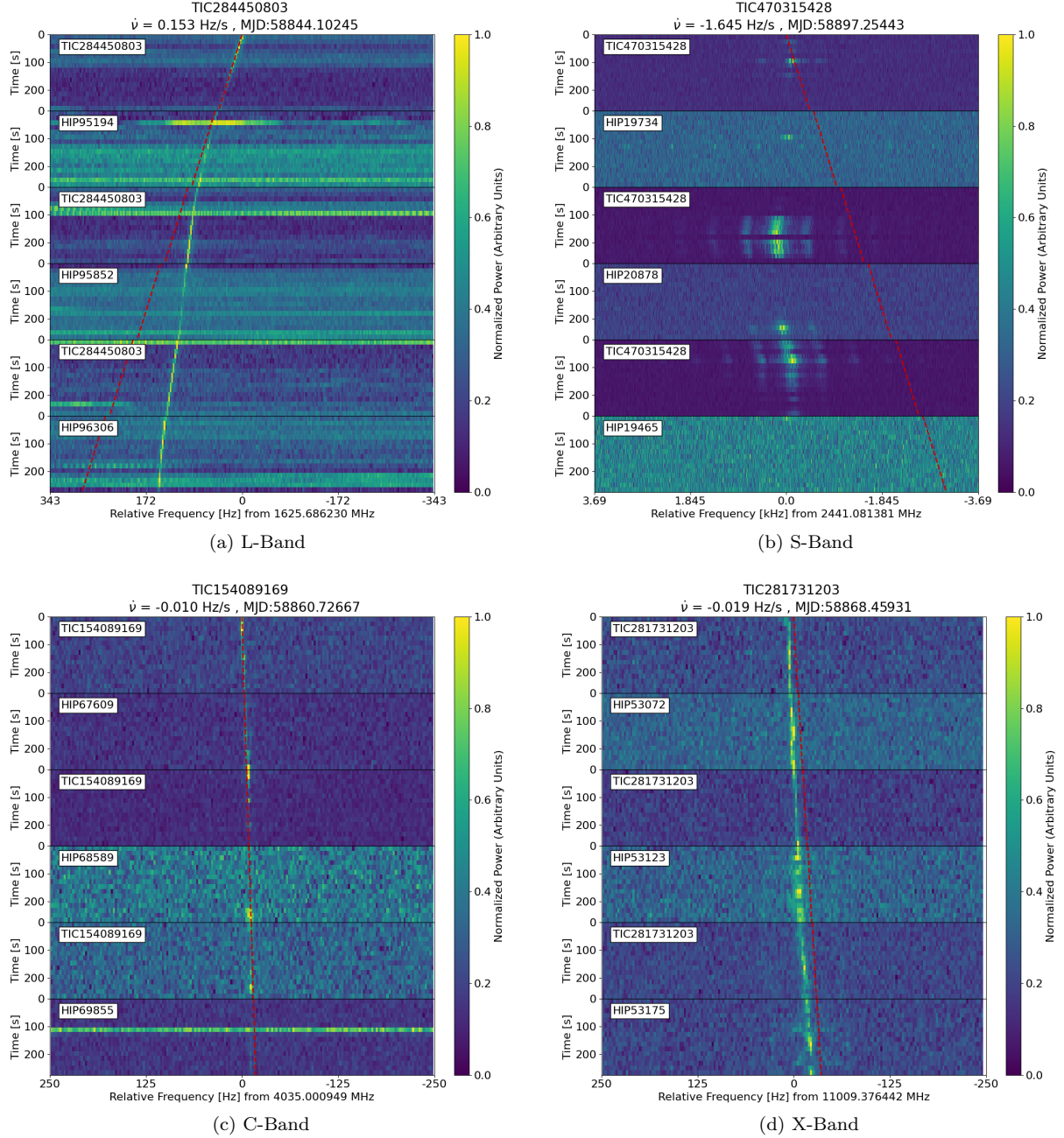
## B. TARGETS

**Table 5. Targets**

TIC ID	TOI ID	RA (J2000)	Dec (J2000)	Distance (pc)
154089169	1174.01	13:56:52.12	68:37:05.56	95
154840461	1153.01	12:10:45.97	85:42:18.28	147
154872375	1135.01	12:53:35.13	85:07:46.18	114
158002130	1180.01	14:18:13.39	82:11:37.55	72
159510109	1141.01	16:30:08.33	80:18:27.96	97
160268701	1143.01	12:10:09.28	77:21:08.15	192
198213332	1131.01	16:33:44.05	61:43:06.00	223
230088370	1176.01	16:29:25.60	71:30:21.14	296
232967666	1167.01	13:12:36.57	71:37:05.30	210
233087860	1184.01	18:08:49.08	60:40:43.62	59
266500992	1655.01	04:04:41.34	52:15:25.17	165
267489265	1132.01	19:55:07.51	54:46:53.20	287
267694283	1656.01	04:12:55.20	53:41:13.38	106
281731203	685.01	10:52:07.75	00:29:35.40	213
284450803	1142.01	19:22:50.15	56:36:55.39	299
287196418	1190.01	19:30:56.19	59:24:13.87	281
288185138	1200.01	14:51:21.94	82:57:08.13	224
289539327	1186.01	16:46:32.03	65:42:54.13	295
294176967	1170.01	20:03:13.23	52:02:27.03	880
302518439	1169.01	08:56:28.81	72:31:59.79	262
320525204	1140.01	17:39:50.77	56:04:44.30	123
341544930	1182.01	13:26:27.52	65:18:22.84	—
349827430	1148.01	10:47:38.17	71:39:20.62	97
359496368	1178.01	18:36:24.25	55:23:30.41	37
372757221	1187.01	10:51:34.36	81:19:19.83	221
458478250	1165.01	15:28:35.19	66:21:31.35	126
459970307	1154.01	16:59:41.77	64:41:57.17	94
470315428	1673.01	04:18:35.64	52:51:54.12	472

## C. EXAMPLES OF CANDIDATE EVENTS

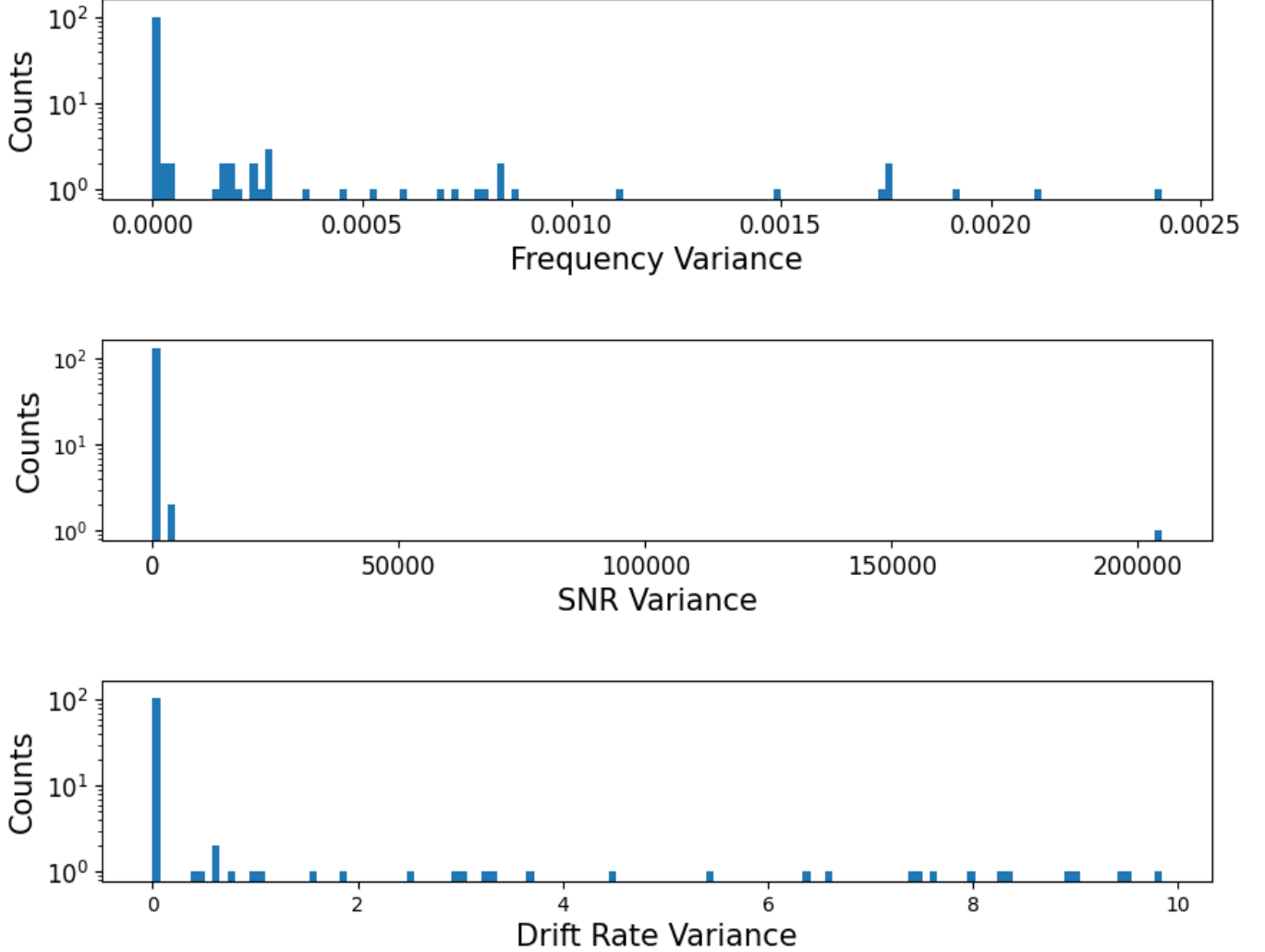
There were 651 candidate events detected by turboSETI across all four bands. Figure 5 shows a candidate event found at each band. These events passed turboSETI inspection as having signals with  $S/N > 10$  present in the ‘ON’ observations and none in the ‘OFF’ observations. By visual inspection, it is easily verifiable that there are emissions of  $S/N < 10$  present in ‘OFF’ observations—characteristic of RFI. In this way, each of the 651 candidate events were rejected.



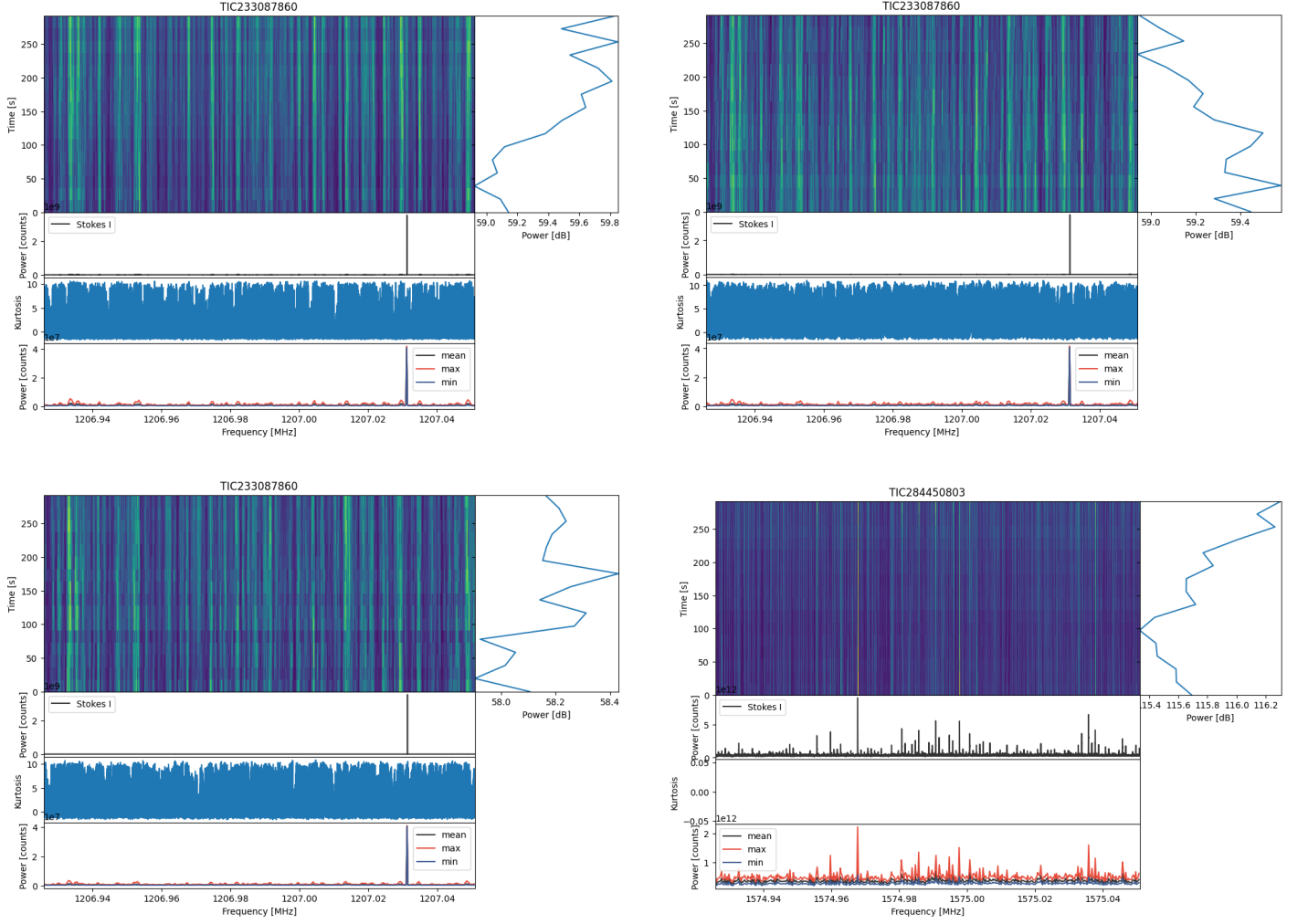
**Figure 5.** Spectra of events found by turboSETI found at each band. The panels are ordered sequentially following the ‘ON’–‘OFF’ observation cadence. The red dashed line indicates the drift rate computed by turboSETI for the first hit in the candidate event (although the underlying algorithm searches a range of drift for matches in the other five observations). Note that in cases such as Figure 5a and Figure 5b, the red line, assuming constant Doppler drift, is a poor match for the changing drift rate of the detected signal.

## D. EVENT GROUPS

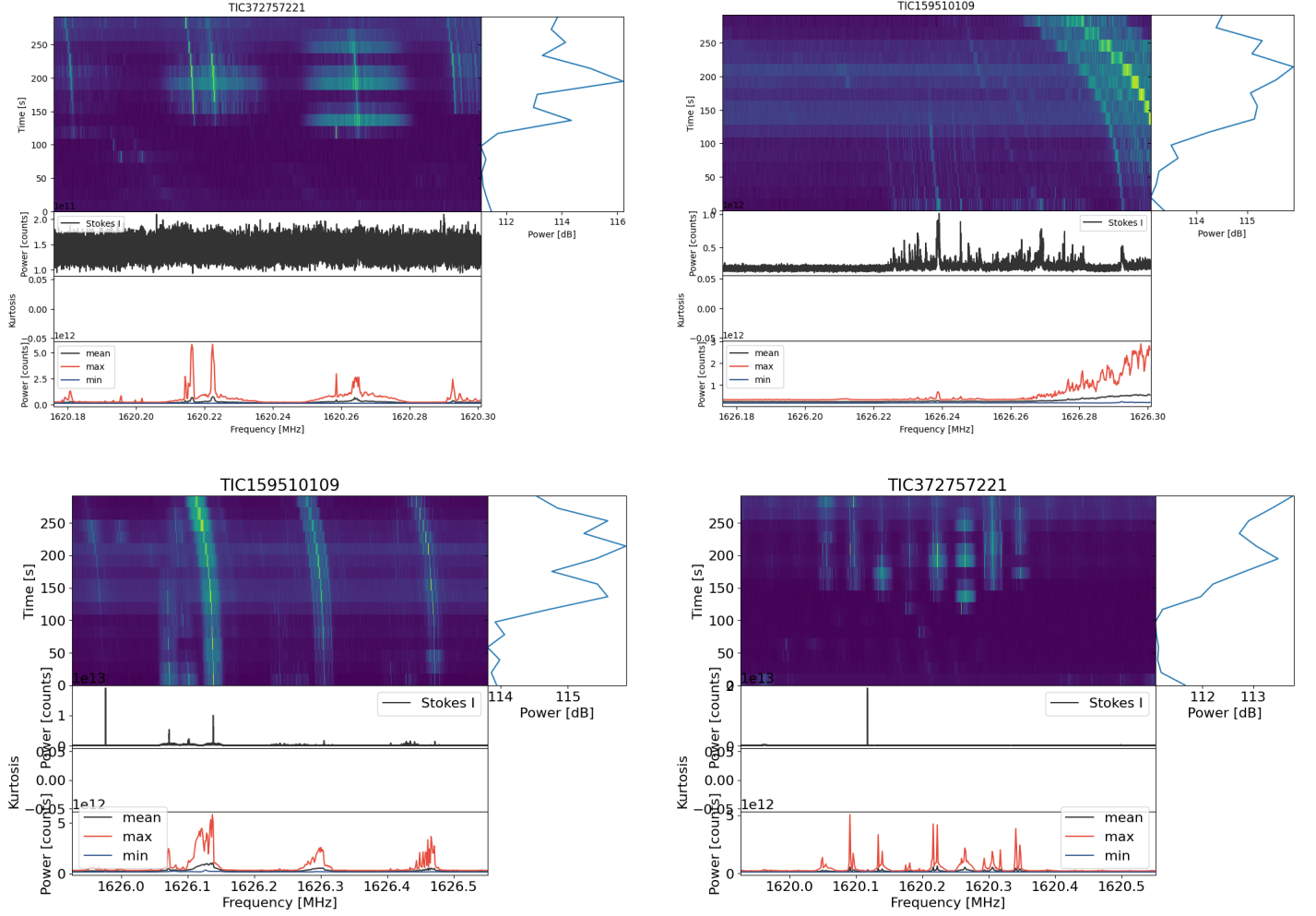
Event groups are 125 kHz-wide frequency ranges candidates which contain candidates identified by the turboSETI `find_event` method. Since signals emanating from a single source are likely to be clustered in frequency and exhibit near-identical  $S/N$  and drift rates, we consider event groups possessing a standard deviation less than 1 in frequency,  $S/N$ , and drift rate as single sources. The distribution of these variances is shown in Figure 6. In this way, technosignatures are those signals originating from single sources unattributable to RFI. There were no single-source signals which could not be attributed to RFI, but include sample plots of candidate technosignature sources shown in Figure 7 and Figure 8. All single-source event groups are traceable to 5 unique targets.



**Figure 6.** Histogram showing the variance of frequency,  $S/N$ , and drift rate of all event groups at L-band. All single source events (events with a standard distribution  $\sigma < 1$ ) for frequency,  $S/N$ , and drift rate, were found to exist only at L-band. We show the variance instead of the standard deviation since it is more effective in detecting outliers.



**Figure 7.** Examples of 125 kHz-wide, L-band, single-source event groups traceable to observations of TIC233087860 and TIC284450803. Note how clustered signals exhibit nearly identical drift rates, S/N, and frequency. Note the frequencies shown are both present in navigation satellite bands, and these observations appear to be badly affected by RFI.



**Figure 8.** Examples of 125 kHz-wide, L-band, single-source event groups traceable to observations of TIC372757221 and TIC159510109. Note all shown events have frequencies in the Iridium satellite band.