

# Ham enthusiasts explore the world over the radio

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Last summer, Al Penney, president of the West Carleton Amateur Radio Club, drove through a rural Ontario town with other club members searching for a good spot to set up their equipment.

They stumbled upon the perfect hill, and pulled into a nearby farm to ask permission to set up shop.

"The farmer came out, all grizzled and weather-beaten," said Penney. "I'm about to launch into an explanation and he looks at us and says, 'Wanna use the hill for the contest, do ya?' My jaw dropped, and then I noticed he was wearing an amateur radio hat."

Ham radio is still a popular method of communication around the world, said Penney.

"I regularly talk to the South Pole," said Carp resident Ken Asmus who is the club treasurer. "Australia is fairly simple to contact. Europe is a daily event. There is really no limit; you can talk to someone any place on the planet, or even out in space."

Amateur radio technology is not obsolete and is in fact progressing all the time. One member of the WCARC, Bert Zauhar, has mastered the art of moon-bouncing - ricocheting radio signals off of the moon to speak to someone on Earth. Signals can also be bounced off the northern lights, airplanes, or meteors.

Any astronaut who ascends into space is required to get a ham radio license, because when all other methods of communication fail, the radio won't.

The International Space Station has a permanent ham radio that is used quite often, Asmus said.

"From our radios from home, we're able to talk to an astronaut in space," he said.

Not only can hams communicate with humans in space, they can also listen to transmissions from planets.

Radio astronomy is the study of the radio frequencies emitted by celestial objects.

Jupiter, for example, transmits radio waves that sound like waves crashing against the shore.

Penney said that the most interesting part about being a ham is not knowing who you will reach at the other end of the

radio.

"If you talk to someone on amateur radio, you don't know if it's a 12-year-old kid or a Nobel Prize winner," Penney said.

Graham Ide is a member of the club who has been doing amateur radio for 50 years.

"One problem these days is that it (amateur radio) doesn't seem to be attracting as many people as it used to because of cell phones and the internet," Ide said.

To deal with this issue, Penney has been trying to recruit young blood into the hobby. He volunteers with the Smiths Falls Air Cadets and teaches them why ham radio is still useful today.

"People will say, 'You just spoke to someone in China, big deal, I can do that on my cell phone,'" Penney said. "And I look at them and say, 'Alright, dial me a number and talk to someone in China right now.'"

And of course they can't.

"But they're missing the bigger point which is that cell phones use billions of dollars of communications infrastructure so you can talk to someone in China. I just did it with something that's using less power than a 100 watt light bulb, using my own radio, my own antenna that I built, talking to a guy in China who is using the same equipment as I am."

This year, Penney was successful in helping a young man to get his amateur radio license, which consists of a 100-question multiple choice test.

Along with the license comes a call sign. Hams aren't known by their full names, but rather their first name and their call sign, a combination of letters and numbers they use to identify themselves.

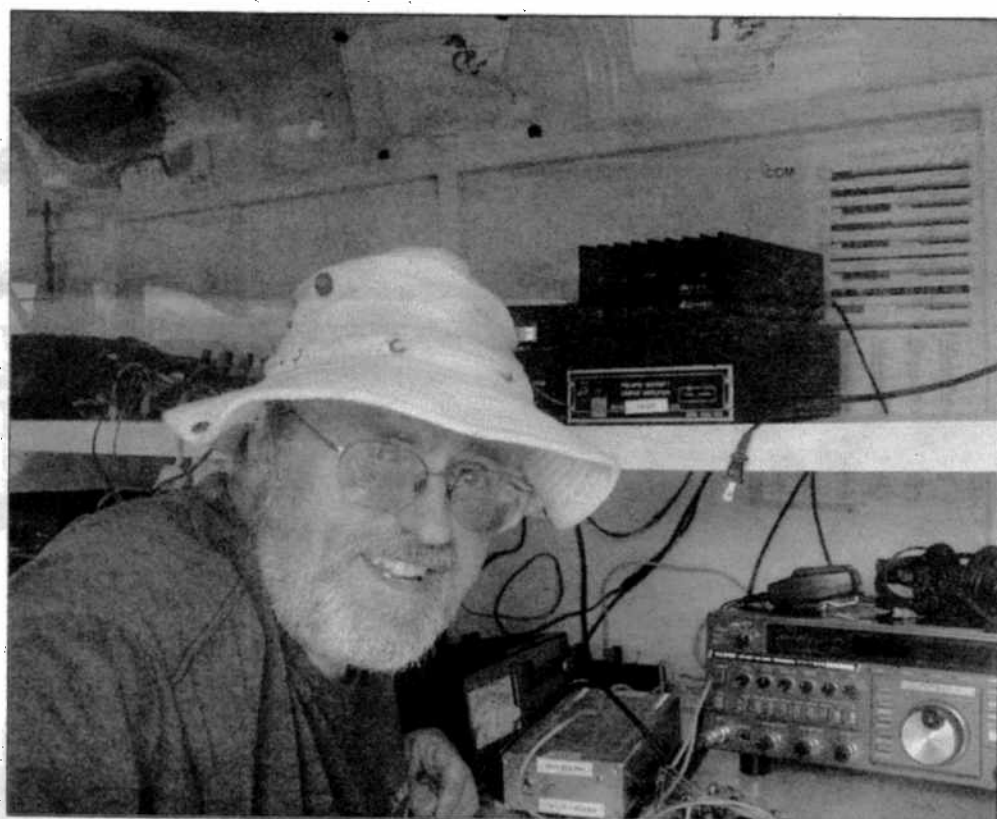
"I'm Al VO1NO," Penney said proudly.

Asmus, who goes by VA3KA, has his call sign on the license plate of his car.

The WCARC has been ranked as the number one amateur radio club in Canada for three out of the past four years, and number one in the central region, which is an area designated by the American Radio Relay League that includes some U.S. states as well.

These outstanding rankings are because of WCARC's contest results, another interesting aspect of amateur radio.

For these contests, the earth is broken up into various grids using longitude and latitude. The goal is to contact as many



Courtney Symons photo

Carp's Ken Asmus smiles amongst the radio equipment he has set up in a trailer to participate in an amateur radio contest in June. Asmus is a member of the West Carleton Amateur Radio Club and goes by the call sign VA3KA.

different grids from as many different frequencies as possible using a ham radio.

Some grids are more desirable than others because of the low number of active ham radios in the area. If you're one of the only ones in a certain grid, more people will choose to talk to you to be able to log communication with that spot for the contest.

Another ham radio contest is called a fox hunt or a bunny hunt, depending on where you are in North America.

A tiny transmitter is hidden somewhere, and a team of participants have to locate the transmitter using various amateur radio techniques.

Over the years, some very creative hiding spots have been used.

Penney encountered a decoy duck amongst a pond full of real ducks in which the transmitter was hidden; As-

mus recounted one hidden in a Volkswagen vehicle that was parked at a Volkswagen dealership amongst rows and rows of other cars.

"It's a lot of fun, but it can be extremely frustrating," Penney said. "My wife went with me one time and said she'd never come again because I cursed so much."

Members of the WCARC swear by amateur radio, and think it is still a relevant method of communication.

Asmus recalled seeing an episode of Jay Leno recently, where two youngsters were challenged to a "text-off" against two men who used Morse Code over the radio to see who could communicate the fastest.

"The Morse Code won," Asmus said. "They beat the kids quite easily."

To find out more about the WCARC or to become a member, visit their website at [www.wcarc.on.ca](http://www.wcarc.on.ca).

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