

How to Cheat on DXCC

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These techniques are all well proven. Despite the fact that DXCC is probably the world's premier DX award and has maintained a relatively clean record of policing and integrity, people still cheat. Below you will find a variety of ways to cheat. The object isn't really to help you to cheat. It is actually to help you think through some of the techniques you yourself may be using. As an aside, it may also place the "achievements" of some of these cheaters in perspective. I'm hoping that, once you've seen how people cheat, you may re-evaluate the importance of obtaining DXCC accolades at all cost.

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1. What is the Incentive?

DXCC has a range of awards. They all share a basic entry level of 100 countries. These days they are called "entities" to include some of the counters that are patently not countries, such as a building in downtown Geneva and an uninhabited pile of rocks in the South China Sea. However, most people still think of DXCC as a country-chasing award.

The awards include Mixed (any band or mode may be used), Phone (including SSB, FM, AM etc.), CW and Digital (including RTTY and a plethora of different modes with names starting with PSK or JT and ending in a random number), as well as single-band awards for most bands. Such awards have been claimed on all bands from 1,8 to 440 MHz, except for the new 5 MHz band. There is also a Satellite award, the only one which recognises contacts through a repeater device.

For most of these DXCC awards, reaching the entry level is not hard. For others, just reaching the entry level is very tough. Achieving DXCC on 1,8 MHz or one of the VHF/UHF bands requires serious dedication. However, for all the awards, reaching the top echelons of endorsement levels is a real achievement.

The DXCC Honour Roll (HR) recognises the top achievers in the Mixed, CW, Phone and Digital awards. The list shows participants who need less than 10 entities. Interestingly, reaching the HR represents the half-way mark en route to the top. Going from 9 needed (entry level) to none needed (the Top of the HR) represents as much work as getting onto the HR in the first place.¹

Against this background, it is clear that there is little incentive to cheat to reach the entry level for most awards. However, towards the end of their quest, some may find the temptation overwhelming. Cheating on "only" ten contacts can effectively eliminate half the effort.

Of course, we can speculate about the reasons for wanting to cheat in the first place. In my book, the willingness to compromise one's integrity for perceived glory in a hobby is pathetic. Anyone who will sell his soul for a listing in fine print on some Web site clearly doesn't have much of a life.

However, given that people are cheating, it clearly appears worth while to some. Some of the choice techniques are discussed below.

Unfortunately, we'll never reach consensus on these issues. Some regard some of these techniques as perfectly legitimate. Just like drugs, pornography and philandering are perfectly acceptable in some circles and not in others, we'll always have a mixture of ethical frameworks in amateur radio.

¹ An article referenced at the end of this one describes the mathematical basis of this claim. It is really true. When you reach the Honour Roll, you are half-way to the top.

You be the judge. Decide which ones you can associate with and which you can't, and act accordingly.

2. Six Practical Ways to Cheat

2.1 Running high power

Running illegal power levels constitutes a common form of cheating. DXCC rules require the applicant to adhere to the legal restrictions on amateur radio in his or her country. Running illegal power clearly breaks this taboo.

The common perception of the effect of excessive power is overrated. Only when one properly understands the effect of logarithmic hearing response, can one accurately assess the effects of power.

The legal output power limit in most countries is around 1 kW. Few amateurs can afford the equipment and the electricity to run much more than 5 kW output. As a result, the maximum advantage that can be gained is around 7 dB, or a single S unit on most receivers' signal strength meters. Given the expense involved, it hardly sounds worth it.

Power also has the effect of turning you into a crocodile: All mouth and no ears. It will soon become evident on the air that you're cheating when you can be heard all round but you often cannot hear stations ostensibly-similar to your own.

The fact of the matter is that you can achieve far greater gains with better antennas. It is not hard to be 7 dB louder than your neighbour by just having better antennas. Even better, with antennas you gain both ways. You are louder at the other end, and the guy you're working is louder at your end.

There is another way of looking at excessive power that puts it into even clearer perspective. The difference between a superstation and an average station is in the vicinity of 30 dB. The variability in propagation could exceed 50 dB fairly comfortably. In other words: When conditions are good, even a modest station is loud. When conditions are poor, even a superstation isn't going to make the grade. If you have a bit of time, you can wait it out. Many QRPers, running less than 5 W output, have worked and confirmed well over 300 countries with suitable skill and cunning and a bit of patience, even while leading a full and varied life.

2.2 Vicarious contacts

Vicarious contacts take place when one individual makes a contact on someone else's behalf, using the beneficiary's callsign. Depending on the situation, this practice may or may not be legal. In some countries, an individual can make a contact using someone else's callsign, especially from that individual's station. However, DXCC Rule 10 states specifically that all contacts must be made by the applicant. There is some room for contacts made from a station "owned and normally operated by" the applicant. In other words: If your buddy comes to your house and uses your station and your callsign to make a contact to contribute to your DXCC, it's permissible under DXCC rules.

However, there are legal restrictions too. South African radio regulations make no provision for such operations, except under personal supervision of the licensee. In other words: Vicarious contacts are illegal in South Africa.

There are a few precautions to take if you want to get away with it. If you are on SSB, practice changing your voice so that it isn't too obvious that you're working the DXpedition under five callsigns in quick succession. On CW, at least ensure that your keying is clean. If you are clicking or have an otherwise distinctive tone, you'll give yourself away. You have to be subtle about these things.

2.3 DX nets

DX nets operate on pre-advertised frequencies. An individual with an above-average station, known as “Net Control” by those checked into the DX Net and “Pimp” to those that are not, makes a list of DX stations and would-be DXers. He (for they are mostly male) then allows the would-be DXers to call the DX stations one by one, without having to face any competition. He mostly also facilitates the contact by relaying those pesky details that the two stations can’t hear. Remarks like “Over-Over”, “Good Contact” and “Give him the second digit of the report again—it’s a little higher” are commonplace. The callers also quickly rise to the challenge, and learn inane habits like saying “Please Copy” and other meaningless phrases before everything they say.

In many cases, it’s patently obvious to all listeners on frequency that the DX station and the would-be DXer are not hearing one another. As the call signs are often relayed by the Pimp, there has to at least be some pretence of an information exchange between the DXer and the DX station. For this reason, Pimps are strong on ensuring that the signal reports are passed in both directions. It is in situations like this, where the two stations clearly cannot hear one another, that helpful comments like the ones mentioned above come into their own.

The ultimate insult comes when the Pimp pronounces: “Good Contact”. As if the Pimp has anything to say about the legitimacy of someone else’s communication...

This system works well for people who don’t have any real antennas. It allows them to use their basement dipoles to make contacts that are well below the threshold of ESP.

The obvious ethical question is: Whose achievement is it? Did the would-be DXer actually achieve anything? Or is the achievement all with the Pimp, who at least has a sufficient signal to be able to control the frequency? Did the DX station achieve anything?

My opinion is that DX stations would do better to control the pileups themselves. Learning how to do so is not superhuman; thousands of operators have learned how to control a frequency admirably. Using split-frequency operation provides the opportunity to work many stations quickly, even with a modest signal.

The would-be DXer would be better off learning how to break a pileup. A wily DX station operator can easily pick up well-timed signals in a pileup, even if they are not the loudest. Placing your signal on exactly the right frequency at exactly the right time works more often than not, even if you are weak.

All of which leaves only the Pimp. Where will the Pimp otherwise get the ego trip that he currently gets from running a DX net? Maybe he should graduate to Cheating on DXpeditions. The following section outlines everything he needs to know.

2.4 Cheating from DXpeditions

DXpeditioners are few and far between. The reason is not hard to find. DXpeditions require above-average initiative and above-average resources. To be successful, they also require above-average operating skill. Unfortunately, these three attributes seldom vest in one single individual.

As a result, some DXpeditions are not a pleasure to behold.

Several informal groups have come into existence that can indeed lay on a good show, combining the skills and resources of many team members to ensure that all bases are covered. Examples include the Cordell Expeditions, the Dateline DX Association, the Five Star DXers Association, the Intrepid DX Group and the Microlight Penguins. There are individuals who can pull off a spectacular show too:

DJ6SI, DK7PE, G3SXW, G3TXF and others spring to mind. When they hit the road, we all know that a good show is in store.

As a result, some individuals have become DXpedition celebrities.

The fame of a DXpeditioner is considerably more meaningful than that of a DXer. For starters, there is the issue of rarity. Over 1000 individuals are perched at the top of the DXCC Honour Roll. Another few thousand are found at lower levels on the HR. Clearly, being on the HR is no longer the Big Deal it once was. However, competent DXpeditioners are counted in dozens.

Of course, there is also the issue of common good.

DXpeditioning serves some sort of useful purpose. A good DXpedition is hunted by thousands. It provides entertainment, and potentially also a measure of education about far-flung places and about radio propagation. It may even help to open parochial countries to the outside world. One could therefore argue that DXpeditioners make some sort of contribution to the greater good.

DXing, on the other hand, is a very selfish pursuit. Someone sits in a dark room and spends hours briefly exchanging greetings with strangers halfway around the world, ticking off the counters as they accumulate. It is strictly a matter of personal challenge. It won't develop any new technology, except maybe the handful of die-hard engineers who pursue DX simply as a vehicle for testing new technologies. It won't feed any starving children. In fact, it won't even feed your own family. It is completely selfish.

All in all, DXpeditioners can be proud of their reputations. They have become famous because they have contributed to numerous others' enjoyment of the hobby.

It therefore strikes me as odd that individuals who have a DXpedition track record are prepared to tarnish their hard-earned reputations in an effort to gain fame as a DXer. It's kind-of like a pop idol risking his showbiz reputation to cheat his way into becoming the local tennis club champion. Or even a US president who risks his reputation to get into the panties of a cigar-chomping intern.

Now that I've adequately expressed my amazement that anyone would do it, it's time to disclose how to do it, and how to tell when it has been done.

The process starts years before the actual public acclaim starts rolling in. It starts with devoting your life to Mammon, cheating on tax and doing whatever is required to accumulate an obscene amount of money. This phase can be conducted in an honest way too, but doing so is a lot harder and completely unnecessary given the nefarious end goal.

Once the resources are in hand, it's time to start the actual cheating. The idea is to go to countries that you haven't worked and to conduct a DXpedition from there. Of course it's nice if you can conduct a real DXpedition that covers the entire globe and makes tens of thousands of contacts, but it isn't necessary. You can even do a suitcase expedition that makes only a few hundred contacts, all within your immediate vicinity. As long as you have the paperwork to satisfy the DXCC Desk that the operation was legal, you'll be fine.

Once you're there, you place your own home callsign in the log, purporting to have contacted your home station. If you understand propagation, you can thumb-suck a suitable time and frequency that will stand up to the scrutiny of experts. However, even if you don't, you can still make a plan. One way is to appoint a buddy back home as a "pilot" for your DXpedition and ask him to propose a sked time. This sked time (if you have chosen your "pilot" judiciously) should be a time at which actual

propagation to your home QTH exists. However, if you want to be 100% sure, you can wait until you make an actual contact with your buddy and then log your own callsign a minute later. This way, you can state with a clear conscience that there certainly was propagation.

If you have a conscience (strictly optional and in fact somewhat counterproductive in this exercise) you can even ask your buddy before the DXpedition to make an actual contact using your home callsign, which you can then log. Of course, there is the question whether it is legal for your buddy to make such a contact. In many countries, including South Africa, it is not. Of course, I needn't mention the famous Rule 10, which also brings some of its own niggles. However, as you have already indicated your willingness to cheat by setting up the fake contact in the first place, don't fret over technicalities. Don't let ethics stand in the way of fame.

Now you're all set. When you get home, just issue yourself a QSL and submit it to DXCC. If the card checker is inattentive, it is likely to be approved without further scrutiny. Just a word of warning, though: Don't use your local DXCC card checker, as he is much more likely to notice that you "worked" yourself.

With LotW, it's even easier. Simply insert the fake QSO into the DXpedition log and your home log, submit to LotW, get a QSL match and press the "Apply" button. In the absence of human scrutiny, you're almost certain of getting away with it.

Given that you only need to cheat on 10 countries to save yourself 50% of the effort towards Top of the HR, and 20 to save yourself 75% of the effort, it goes without saying that this technique is very popular with DXCC cheats of means. After all, it's much more fun to go on a package holiday than to spend hundreds of hours watching the screen of your spotting computer!

When you discuss the issue with the cheat, the defence is always the same. The story goes that "everyone does it". Were it not for this "unwritten DXCC rule" (of which the DXCC Desk knows nothing), no-one would go on DXpeditions to truly rare locations. Or so they say.

Again, I do not follow the logic. Does "everybody" doing it make it acceptable? And does everybody really do it?

Why would someone refrain from going to North Korea merely to get to the Top of the HR? There are more than 1000 people on that list already. If it's fame you crave, just put North Korea on the air. If you do a good job, you'll be as famous as you can handle. If you do a bad job, you'll be even more famous. You just can't lose.

Now that you know in detail how to cheat, it's time to choose some role models to teach you the finer points. I'm afraid I'm simply not experienced enough to fulfil that role. Fortunately, log checkers and particularly Clublog have made this choice so much easier. What you need to do is to punch all the operators' callsigns into the log checker during a major DXpedition to see whose callsign comes up. You may see some legitimate contacts (such as the owner of a large Multi-Op contest station whose operators work the DXpedition from the contest station), but you may also see some of these self-made contacts. The giveaway is normally that the fake contacts are made with the cheat as operator. So if you see the operator's home callsign in the log and the QSO was made by that same operator, and especially if the time of day is suspect, you know that you have found a master cheat. You can safely revere this individual as a role model on your way to the top.

As for the claim that “everyone does it”: Personal discussions with the kingpins in several high-profile DXpedition groups confirmed that they frown upon this form of cheating, and universally remove the operators’ call signs from their DXpedition logs. Clearly, not “everybody” is doing it.

I also offer two counter-examples from my personal experience. When we went to the potential new country of Penguin Island in 1990, two of the operators (ZS6EZ and OH2BH) had missed the first small-scale expedition. Our operation became the one that gave most people a crack at this new country. When Penguin was later added to the DXCC list, Martti slipped from the top slot on the HR, needing only Penguin. Given that he’d been the QSL manager, it would have been the easiest thing in the world to issue himself a card. Clearly, he did not. The following year, I went again. The resulting ZS0Z card put Martti back at the top of the HR.

As for me, I entered the DXCC HR in 1993, needing Penguin as one of my last ten counters. I managed to work a subsequent DXpedition on a few bands, but I missed RTTY and 21 MHz. It cost me dearly, as Penguin is the only deleted country I ever missed on the 21 MHz band. It’s a deficit I can never make up... unless of course I slip a few fresh QSOs into my LotW portfolio...

2.5 Remote stations

Remote stations don’t necessarily constitute cheating. They are probably the way of the future, as more and more of us are crammed into high-density residential areas with antenna restrictions. However, they do open up exciting possibilities for the hard-core cheat.

DXCC rules state that you can freely use a remote station to make contacts, as long as the remote station and the operator are in the same DXCC country. Now there are some serious countries out there. Canada, Brazil, the continental USA and Asiatic Russia all span huge distances. Perhaps the most well-known example is the US. Someone in New England has a completely different set of challenges from someone in California. The one has a good shot into Europe; the other into the Pacific. The Midwest has a somewhat worse shot into each of these areas, but gains from not having a complete dearth of coverage in the other direction.

These days, you can buy access to a pool of remote stations for a monthly subscription fee. Technically, you can use this group of stations as your own, and work the world from your smart phone. Want to work Swain’s Island? Use your Left Coast station. Want to work the Middle East? Use your New England station. Africa? Use your Florida station. You just can’t lose.

Most of us have a feeling of unease about this *modus operandi*. It is within the rules, that much is clear. However, we would all feel that the playing field isn’t entirely level if our neighbour has antennas on both coasts.

But of course, if you want to cheat, you must do it with all your heart. So don’t let something as arbitrary as national borders stand in your way.

There are a few well-known case studies, but the most famous one is an east European who somehow puts a loud VHF signal into the Caribbean, even when no other Europeans are being heard. His neighbours seldom hear him on the air, yet he has accumulated a spectacular 50 MHz score in less than two solar cycles. Impressive.

So here are a few of the signs you’re looking for when trying to find a mentor for this particular ruse. Look for someone who has a mediocre signal in his own area, yet manages to work those distant DXpeditions every time. If you can gather enough evidence, maybe you can even blackmail him into

giving you the IP addresses and login details for those remote stations, so you can make the big time too.

The advantage of this particular trick is that you are no longer dependent on the realities of propagation. Whether the band is open or not is of no consequence, as long as you have a remote station that is within one hop of the target DX station, Bob's your uncle.

2.6 Blank QSL cards

I've written on the topic before, and the article is still available on the Internet², so I'll give you only the short version.

We all have some blank cards. They come through the mail to express gratitude (especially if you happen to be a QSL manager). They get handed out at conventions as print samples. They get left behind on exhibit boards after conventions, and end up in the trash. In principle, once you fill them in, you can submit them for DXCC credit and no-one will be any the wiser.

I have even asked famous DXpeditioners point-blank for blank cards. Most of them have giggled nervously, but most of them have given me the requested blanks nevertheless.

I have such blank cards from more than half the DXCC countries—over 170 of them.

At one time, I needed only a handful of cards to get onto the HR. I had enough blanks to cover the deficit. Gee, had I filled them in, I could have been on the HR much sooner!

To cheat in this way, just keep your eyes open the next time you visit a convention. Pay particular attention to the printer's exhibits. Feign interest in their products, and pocket a card or two from suitably rare DX stations. In time, you'll be able to make great progress with your DXCC totals.

In fact, this technique has the great advantage that you can bolster your specialty DXCC scores. All the other cheats above can only work on bands and modes where the station was actually active. Blank cards work not only where there is no propagation, but also where the station has not even been on the air. On VHF, low bands and Satellite, where the operator concerned might never have taken an interest in those difficult bands and modes, this advantage is considerable.

3. Coming Clean

Let me start this section by coming clean. I'm a DXCC cheat. I've used four of the six cheats to a greater or lesser extent at various times in my three-odd decades of hamming.

I have run illegal power in the past. These days, for various reasons, I can't cheat as easily as I used to. I can't afford big amplifiers and big electricity bills. I also hold a Government Ticket which allows me to maintain high-power broadcast stations, so I'm entitled to own powerful equipment. Our legal power limit has become more realistic. Believe it or not, when I was licenced, running a barefoot transceiver to full output on CW was illegal. I'm therefore unfortunately no longer in a position to transgress in this way. I may not even want to. I'm voluntarily driving an economy car because of environmental concerns, and running high power strikes me as unjustifiable. However, there are definitely some QSOs in my log which were not legal.

When I was a sixteen-year-old schoolboy in the Eighties, I worked an HB0 on CW one afternoon using a friend's callsign. I thought I was doing him a favour. When I told him about his new country, he was not impressed. I learned something from that, and never did it again.

² The article is referenced at the end of this document.

As a youngster, I also checked into DX nets a few times, specifically on 7 MHz. It never felt quite right, but I had to shape my sense of ethics before I could take a strong stand against DX nets. I did so around age 20, and have never used a DX net again. Some of my peers maintained that I would never get to the HR without DX nets. My attitude then was, and still is, that I'd rather not be on the HR than sell my soul on a DX net. In the event, I did get to the top without DX nets. I had to do some serious antenna work, but it was worth it.

I haven't tried the DXpedition cheat, except maybe when I worked a teammate mobile across the border of a neighbouring country on 50 MHz. There was a real contact between real stations using real callsigns, so it was legal and according to rules, but these days I wouldn't have claimed that as a new country on Six. Fortunately, I've subsequently re-worked the country from my home station under more conventional circumstances. Nevertheless, let's consider me guilty.

As for the remote stations and blank QSL cards, I've never made a remote contact and I still have my complete blank collection. At least I'm not a cheat in these respects, even after decades of having the option available. What a relief.

So, in the interests of full recovery, and in the traditions of Cheats Anonymous, there it is: I'm Chris. I'm a DXCC Cheat. I'm sorry. I'm recovering.

Now: What about other cheats, other than myself?

I recently read a mock-admission by a known DXCC cheat. Like Bill Clinton and Hansie Cronjé before him, he admitted to the stuff he knew he'd been caught out on, but not to the stuff that he figured wasn't in the public eye. He also hasn't handed back the dozens of nefariously-earned DXCC credits, so he still features highly in the HR lists. Is it true repentance, or just window-dressing? I think you know the answer already.

It struck me as very, very sad. The individual concerned has considerable resources. He has the opportunity to make a name for himself as a DXpeditioner, especially if he can take other operators along to make lots of contacts. Instead, he's jeopardising his fledgling reputation by cheating on DXCC. Gee, he can cheat himself into being one of 5000 guys on the HR, in fine print. Wow.

Is it worth it? To me, the answer appears to be a resounding "No".

However, on every major DXpedition the operators continue to appear in the log. In some cases, those bogus QSOs disappear late in the expedition, as the persons responsible for the log remove them. Of course, we don't know whether they are also removed from the version that is used to print QSL labels and the version that goes onto LotW.

I hope they are, but what if they are not?

Actually, it makes no difference to me. We all DX for our own reasons. In my case, I'm not prepared to sacrifice my own integrity for the limelight. Clearly, there are others who feel differently. But I figure that the vast majority play by the rules, and the few cheats will always remain a small group of outcasts. I certainly hope so.

Reading Matter

About effort vs. achievement in DXCC scores:

<http://zs6ez.org.za/articles/dx-score.htm>

About Blank QSL cards:

<http://zs6ez.org.za/articles/blank.htm>