

DR. SETI'S STARSHIP

Searching For The Ultimate DX

Postcards from Beyond

If you are a regular reader of this column, perhaps by now I've convinced you to join the search for the ultimate DX. Then again, perhaps not. Quite a few of you have said to me, "It doesn't matter if I work Alpha Centauri or not. Those guys never QSL."

Some of my readers are new to ham radio and may be wondering, "What's a QSL?" Since early in the last century, amateur radio operators have observed a tradition of exchanging postal cards to commemorate their on-the-air contacts. So-called QSL cards (named for the International Morse Code signal for "confirmation") are used as proof of successful radio contact with stations, some of which are in rare and distant locations. Many operators who mount major DXpeditions or contest efforts employ the services of a QSL Manager to distribute their much sought-after cards. Now, as the world's radio hams prepare for the eventual reception of signals from civilizations far out in space, the question arises as to how those succeeding at the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence (SETI) will ever receive a QSL card.

To my knowledge, no ham has yet submitted to the DXCC administrators a card verifying contact with an alien world. Furthermore, we hams in The SETI League have decided that has to change, which is why we have just stepped up to the plate and volunteered our services as QSL Manager to ET (Extra-Terrestrial). To encourage amateur participation in the growing fields of radio astronomy and SETI, we are offering special cards to commemorate confirmed reception of a variety of extra-terrestrial signals—manmade, natural, and even alien.

Here's How It Works

Any SETI enthusiast documenting radio reception of an artificial satellite, manned or unmanned space probe, natural astrophysical phenomenon, or Earth transmission bounced off the moon or another planet is eligible to apply for a QSL card from The SETI League, Inc. The cards, bearing our club callsign, W2ETI, indicate the nature of the signal being confirmed. Reception must have been accomplished with equipment normally used for, or capable of being used for, radio astronomy. In addition, the signal must be received directly from a source in space, not via relay or retransmission (for example, simply watching satellite TV, placing a telephone call that is being routed through a satellite, or determining your location with a handheld GPS receiver will *not* count for a QSL card). Even so, many amateurs do indeed have the capability to directly receive qualifying signals. I expect we'll be sending out many such cards.

We have already issued cards to those who have demonstrated reception of manmade communications and navigation satellites, beacons on space probes, shuttle and space-station transmissions, ham radio moonbounce signals, pulsars, quasars,



As self-appointed QSL manager to ET, The SETI League will issue this card for confirmed reception of any electromagnetic emission emanating from beyond the Earth's atmosphere. Extra-Terrestrial QSL cards are available for the detection of signals in a variety of categories: natural, manmade, and some day, maybe even alien.

supernova remnants, broadband emissions from the Sun, the Moon's thermal signature, interstellar gas clouds, and the hydrogen hum of the Galactic Center. However, the holy grail of SETI is a verified transmission from our cosmic companions, and no, that hasn't happened yet (*X-files* claims notwithstanding). ET's QSL will be a rare one, but we stand ready to send it out when The Call is confirmed.

In my next column, I'll be telling you how you can use those collected Extra-Terrestrial QSL cards to qualify for even more lovely wallpaper.

Amateur radio astronomers seeking a QSL card should send reception reports (including date, time, frequency, coordinates, nature and origin of signal) to SETI League headquarters, along with a stamped, self-addressed business-size envelope. QSL requests from outside the U.S. should include two IRCs (International Reply Coupons). Please state whether the signal received was natural, manmade, or alien (and be prepared to justify any claims of the latter!).

Oh, and you need not be a licensed radio amateur to participate. In the U.S., and many other countries as well, no government-issued license is required for receiving, only for transmitting. Since radio astronomy and SETI are SWL (well, actually, ETL) activities, these cards are issued merely for confirmed reception.

On the other hand, if you do manage to achieve two-way contact with ET, and can prove it, I think you'll be receiving a suitable acknowledgment of that accomplishment. It's called the Nobel Prize. ■

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