

“The Sunspot Cycle is Dead! Long Live the Sunspot Cycle!”

Waiting for the new sunspot cycle to begin has been a little like living in an old-time kingdom, knowing that the sovereign was on his deathbed and just waiting for word from roving couriers that his long decline was over and that a new ruler had been installed. “The king is dead! Long live the king!” they’d cry. And we would all know that a new era had begun, even though we knew little to nothing about the new king.

So it is today as the news filters in from far-off sources (such as the orbiting SOHO solar observatory) that the long-ailing sunspot cycle that has ruled our radio lives for lo, nearly twelve years now, the 23rd in the current line, was declared dead by the royal physicians on the fourth day of January; and that the reign of its successor, Cycle 24, has officially begun. “The Sunspot Cycle is Dead! Long Live the Sunspot Cycle!”

It is much too early to know whether Cycle 24 will be a benevolent ruler, or whether its reign will be short or long-lived. There hasn’t even been time to plan the coronation. Yet, there are already signs of life in the castle. After a long period of dormancy, lights in some far-off windows are beginning to be visible. And some wings of the castle—seemingly dead themselves in recent months—are showing signs of renewed activity.

In mid-January, for example, I tuned in 10 meters late one evening, hoping to find a couple of strong local stations to help me with some audio tests. It was about 10:30 at night. I never found the strong locals, but I did hear two fairly weak stations via groundwave from Brooklyn, New York (about 15–20 miles from my QTH in northern New Jersey), talking first with a station in St. Louis, Missouri (about 950 miles away) and then with another in South Carolina (about 750 miles away). I was able to hear all four stations. The strongest signal came from South Carolina. He was still talking with the guys in Brooklyn when I turned off the rig at about 11:00 PM.

The following night, according to reports on PropNet.org, there were openings of similar distances between stations in the southwest, also in the late evening local time (0600–0800 UTC). Now, there’s nothing unusual about those distances—they’re at the short end of sporadic-*E* range. But the *E* layer of the ionosphere depends on sunlight to get those electrons bouncing around. All of these paths were long into nighttime at all points. So it wasn’t your typical sporadic-*E*. Ten meters, late at night at the bottom of the sunspot cycle, is supposed to be dead, closed, good for local groundwave contacts only. Yet here were stations coming in from nearly 1000 miles away, with respectable signals. There are a few possibilities: (1) the “common wisdom” that says such paths are impossible is wrong (highly unlikely, say the possessors of the common wisdom); (2) Ten meters is on its way back! (too early, says the common wisdom), or (3) Ten meters was never really as dead as the common wisdom said it should be. And if you look at the results of last May’s CQ WPX CW Contest (p. 24), you’ll see that the top single-band entry on 10 meters made nearly 1300 contacts, and his prime competition wasn’t far behind. And remember that in 2006, six meters opened from the U.S. east coast to Europe and from the west coast to Japan. Impossible, said “the possessors.” Can’t happen at the bottom of the cycle. Happened anyway.

Another example of achieving the so-called impossible is in K2RIW’s article, “Wireless Magic,” on page 32. It seems that when I wrote here in January about Dick’s tech net on the LIMARC (Long Island Mobile Amateur Radio Club) repeater, I got some of the details wrong. Dick’s article sets

everything straight ... and makes it crystal clear that the “common wisdom” that range on UHF is limited to line of sight is not only wrong, but *very* wrong. Especially if you’ve got enough power and enough aluminum in the air.

This is why propagation research—such as Dick and his partner were conducting—continues to be important, and why projects such as PropNet (www.propnet.org) are important. We need to remember that all the discoveries have not been made yet; that there is still quite a bit about propagation that we don’t know; that the best way to find out if a band is open is to be on it, and that experts and “common wisdom” aren’t always right.

Cultivating New Hams

Speaking of things “everybody knows” that aren’t really right, there was an interesting thread of messages recently on the ARRL public relations reflector. One member wrote, “...if we don’t come up with some additional angles that could attract people enough to want to get licensed, I think ham radio will continue its downward slide along with buggy whips, 8-track stereos, telex machines, floppy disks, film cameras, etc.” That pretty much represents the “common wisdom” that amateur radio is obsolete, is in a steady decline and has been for a few decades now. The truth is that the all-time peak in amateur licenses came in 2003, just before the first round of code-free Technician licenses issued in 1991 started falling off the FCC’s rolls (10-year license term plus 2-year grace period). For the past year, though, the numbers have held pretty steady and have even climbed a bit in recent months. Another reflector member, K2GW, took a look at the U.S. amateur population since 1930 as a percentage of the country’s overall population and came up with a picture that was very different from the first one. Taking a snapshot from the so-called “golden days” until now, in 1950, his figures show that hams represented 0.06% of the overall population. By 1960, thanks to the Novice license and Sputnik, our population had nearly tripled (from 87,000 to 230,000) and at that point represented 0.13% of the U.S. population. By contrast, today we have over 655,000 licensed hams, representing 0.22% of the overall population. As I’ve often said before, not too bad for a “dying hobby.”

BUT ... this doesn’t mean it isn’t important to bring in new blood and to actively recruit new hams. The ARRL has set a goal of bringing 30,000 new people into amateur radio during 2008. It’s ambitious but entirely achievable. We support and encourage this effort, but the keyword here is effort. And we can’t rely on “those people in Newington” to get it done on their own. The League has a full-time Membership Director, but she is her entire staff. One person cannot recruit 30,000 ... but 30,000 people can each recruit one. So let’s help the ARRL reach its very worthy goal. Virtually every CQ subscriber is an active ham. Our challenge to you for 2008 is to recruit one new person into our hobby, just one (OK, more than one would be even better). Not only that, but do it again in 2009, and in 2010, etc. If 30,000 people each recruit one new ham each year for three years, that’s 90,000 new faces, new callsigns, new opportunities for building worldwide friendships. But that’s not all. You’ve also got to get your new recruits on the air and get them excited about ham radio. That way, they’ll not only be active, but they’ll also start doing their own recruiting. And that is the real ticket to sustained growth.

Now let’s get out there and make it happen! After all, it’s a new sunspot cycle out there... His Royal Highness, Sol XXIV, commands it!

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