Over the river and through the woods, a sly little fox he was. So sly that this little fox sought the help of his twin. That is how Nathan Hardman, N8THN, of Clarksville, Michigan announced that he had deployed a pair of hidden 2-meter transmitters for his friends to find in the next 12 days.

“I hope you all have your fox-hunting skills tuned up for the season,” he continued. “The two foxes are hiding within walking distance of designated parking areas. As this is an extended hunt, you must activate the fox. Key your radio, identify your transmission and press the 1 key. If you are close enough for the fox to hear you, it will begin transmitting a sequence of tones for 30 seconds followed by a Morse ID. When you find one of the foxes, email a picture of it to me and post a note to the Michiganfoxhunter Yahoo group of your success.”

To Nathan and his friends, looking for hidden radio transmitters is a favorite ham radio activity. For 21 years, CQ magazine has sponsored the annual Foxhunting Weekend to encourage hams and prospective hams everywhere to join the fun of using radio direction-finding (RDF) techniques to track down transmitters that their fellow hams have put in unusual places. “Foxhunting” is just one name for this activity when it’s done in vehicles. You also may hear it called T-hunting or bunny hunting.

As always, my 2018 Foxhunting Weekend announcement in CQ brought a batch of hunt announcements and reports about hams having fun. Rules were determined locally so few hunts were alike, except for the on-foot radio-orienteering events that followed standard rules of the International Amateur Radio Union (IARU). As you prepare for Foxhunting Weekend 2019, read on to find out how your fellow hams had a blast doing transmitter hunting all last year.

Rolling to the Hidden T
The most popular form of RDF contesting in the U.S. is the mobile T-hunt on 2 meters. Hunt-when-you-can opportunities like Nathan’s in Michigan and those of the Connecticut Foxhunters, provide a no-stress way to carefully test out RDF equipment and learn how to use it effectively. They are also suitable for those who have work commitments on weekends and other prime foxhunting times. But more popular are mobile hunts in which everyone starts at the same time and a winner is determined, either by time-to-find or by driven mileage.

Foxhunting on the Hudson
A good example is the annual Foxhunting Weekend event of the Peekskill/Cortlandt Amateur Radio Association (PCARA),
based along the Hudson River in New York, about 40 miles north of the Big Apple. This year’s fox team was Jay Albano, N1NRP, and Marlon Henriquez, KC1EHW. They were visitors from Connecticut who had won the 2017 hunt.

At the Beach Shopping Center starting point were three PCARA teams and three visiting teams from Connecticut. Malcolm Pritchard, N9MJ, reported, “Jay and Marlon took turns at the microphone, keying up for short periods as they talked, rather than leaving the carrier on continuously. The signal was reasonably strong at the start as alert hunters began swinging their antennas around for the best direction. Maximum signal appeared to be coming from due east.”

Everyone took off and in just 39 minutes, Mike Ardovino, N2EAB, was first to find Jay and Marlon. Others arrived later, with the last team coming in at 90 minutes. Then everyone went to a nearby diner. “Notes were compared, routes were recalled and antennas were evaluated,” N9MJ wrote. “Here’s to next time when N2EAB will be invited to play the fox.”

California Cruisin’
The PCARA foxhunters began their hunt together, but in some first-to-find hunts, teams can start from wherever they are at the time the fox comes on the air. An example is the monthly hunt of Orange County RACES in southern California. Hunt organizer Ken Bourne, W6HK, seeks out RACES members to take the group’s foxbox, place it in an unusual location and turn it on just after the weekly net on a county-wide repeater. By monitoring the repeater output with a separate receiver, hunters can tell when the fox is on the air, even if they can’t hear it on the input. Some of the hunters compare their signal strengths and bearings on a separate UHF repeater and beacon their travels via APRS, while others prefer to maintain radio silence as they hunt.

Before the OC-RACES hunt, the hider announces the city or area where the fox will be located. Some hunters use this information to try to guess the spot and start close to that location. Others prefer a clear, high location within the boundary for the strongest starting bearing.

Moving Around in Chicago
The Chicago area has first-finder-wins mobile hunts almost every Saturday evening at 8 p.m. Unlike OC-RACES hunts, the Chicago hunters start together from the same location, which is different from the usual starting point in Orange County. The location is chosen to provide a challenge for the hunters, and they try to be among the first to find the fox. The hunts are open to all ham radio operators, and participants are encouraged to bring their families and friends to enjoy the packet radio challenge. The organizers of the hunts have been known to set up their foxboxes in unusual locations, such as high-rise buildings or parks, to increase the difficulty of the hunt. The challenges faced by the hunters vary from one hunt to another, but the sense of camaraderie and friendly competition is a recurring theme.

There is always a good turnout for the annual spring foxhunt of the Radio Amateurs of Tacoma. Here, several hunters are getting very close to one of the transmitters. (Courtesy of Rich Patrick, KR7W)

Orienteering enthusiast Addison Bosley, KJ4VCV, wore his competition clothes during the on-foot foxhunt at the Dayton Hamvention. (Photo by Bob Frey, WA6EZV)
ferent each weekend of the month. Mike Brost, WA9FTS, keeps careful records of the results of each hunt so that at the end of the year, the overall best fox-hunting team can be honored. You can read stories of these hunts in the monthly Chicagoland Foxhunters Report³.

Starting the Year Right
In addition to hunt-when-you-can opportunities, the Connecticut foxhunting group gathers at Wapping Elementary School in South Windsor in the afternoon of New Year’s Day for a mobile foxhunt on the input of a local repeater, organized by Paul Gibson, N1TUP. His alternative to college football viewing features a tailgate party at the ending point.

No-Wheels Foxhunting
Another kind of radio foxhunting is done without vehicles and takes place in open spaces of all sizes, from big backyards to wilderness forests. Known as foxtailing, radio-orienteering, and Amateur Radio Direction Finding (ARDF), it rewards those who can get their bearings on the run, or at least at a fast walk.

A wide variety of on-foot foxhunts took place in 2018. Simplest were the informal hunts at hamfests and picnics, such as the annual Foxhunting Weekend get-together of the Ski Country ARC. This time it was hosted by Pat Fitzgerald, KV0K, at his home in Glenwood Springs, Colorado. The huntmaster was Brent Williams, KDOMWAK.

My experience has been that it’s difficult to get folks to run around seeking transmitters after they have completed a big potluck lunch, but that didn’t seem to affect the intrepid Ski Country transmitter trackers. First, they tested their gear on a practice transmitter in plain sight nearby, then they headed out for the main fox.

Once again in 2018, Rich Patrick, KR7W, was huntmaster for the Radio Club of Tacoma’s spring foxhunt at Fort Nisqually in Point Defiance Park. He wrote that he arrived early for a 2-hour walk in the woods to hide four bunnies at locations that were progressively more difficult to find. The farthest was almost a half-mile from the start location, sending its Bugs Bunny cartoon message, “What’s up, Doc? Heh, heh, heh, heh.”

KR7W reported, “Sixteen hunters autographed the sign-in sheet. It’s hard to say who the fastest hunter was, because one third of them did not write their name and call on the self-score sheet and at least three hunters didn’t turn in a score sheet. Twelve of them did fill out and submit the no-name-required comment sheet, indicating that they had a good time, that they didn’t think it was overly difficult, but at the same time they were challenged.”

Hunting at Hamvention®
The annual record for most transmitters in an on-foot foxhunt is almost always achieved by the OH-KY-IN ARC. Their Hamvention® on-foot hunts seem to get bigger every year. With the move to Xenia, the hunt organizers found a new location at James Ranch Gardens, directly across from the Greene County Fairgrounds.

Dick Arnett, WB4SUV, announced, “We will have over 30 low-power transmitters that can be found in any order within a one-hour time limit. Each transmitter has a code number attached that must be recorded to get credit for finding the transmitter. Some of them are disguised to match the surroundings and some are easy finds. All participants will get a sheet with the transmitter frequencies before starting.”

Unfortunately, weather nearly spoiled this event as Bob Frey, W6E2V reported: “On and off rain the entire day caused not just an early exodus from the convention for many on Saturday, but it also kept away several of the fox hunters as threatening storms and lightning were projected to hit near the time of the hunt. This forced us to limit the hunt to 30 minutes, not nearly enough time to find all 33 hidden transmitters. The seven teams that decided to hunt had a good time and we finished just before the rain. Matt Sanderson, KC9SEM, was declared the winner with 14 finds.”

Antennas in the Park
There was no rain to spoil the Fullerton Radio Club’s annual Antennas in the Park session. However, the temperature topped out at 94° as everyone gathered in Hillcrest Park for foxhunting, food, and radio fun. It was pleasant inside the Izaak Walton cabin, where several newcomers built tape-measure Yagis. In the 40-acre surroundings were three easy 2-meter transmitters for training and antenna testing, plus a five-transmitter ARDF short course.

Five of the Hillcrest participants had so much fun that they traveled to San Diego the next weekend to be among the 28 who took part in the annual on-foot foxhunt of the San Diego Transmitter Hunters. This year’s location was Vacation Isle Park, a hill-free grassy site in the middle of Mission Bay. Joe Corones, N6SZO, and Joe Loughlin, KE6PHB, set out a five-transmitter, 2-meter ARDF course. While the hunters were tracking the foxes, they got the grill going for a post-hunt barbecue.

Champions-in-Training
ARDF sessions like those in Fullerton and San Diego are great training for
USA’s annual ARDF Championships. The 2018 championships took place near Truckee, California in June. Plans are now under way for the 2019 USA ARDF Championships, which will be combined with the championships of IARU Region 2 (North and South America). Backwoods Orienteering Klub is organizing these competitions, which will take place near Raleigh, North Carolina from July 28 through August 4. Anyone who can safely navigate the woods with a map and RDF equipment is welcome to go for the gold. My next “Homing In” column will have much more information about this full week of foxhunting fun in the Tar Heel State.

Getting Scouts Involved
This year’s reports show that young persons participated at almost every one of the on-foot foxhunts. Foxhunting teaches useful radio skills and is great exercise. No ham radio or driver’s license is needed to receive and follow the fox signals. That’s why Scouting’s Radio Merit Badge syllabus now includes an option for ARDF activities. The annual Scout Jamboree-on-the-Air (JOTA) on the third weekend of October is an ideal opportunity to introduce foxhunting to Scouts in your town.

For the fifth year, campers at the Cabrillo Youth Center in San Pedro, California, were offered a JOTA foxhunting experience. I put out eight 2-meter mini-transmitters around the 12-acre site for the Scouts to find with help from Tom Gaccione, WB2LRH, and Bob Houghton, AD6QF. There were also some transmitters on the 80-meter band, set by Marvin Johnston, KE6HTS.

The San Diego transmitter hunters provided foxhunting for JOTA at Camp Balboa, which is the northwest corner of San Diego’s famous 1,200-acre urban park. Five mini-transmitters were hidden in the campgrounds and VK3YNG “blue boxes” were provided to the Scouts for RDF. According to Joe Corones, N6SZO, “We elected to use the audio S-meter mode without headphones so that all of the Scouts in a hunting group could hear the tone pitch change to indicate the bearing.”

N6SZO continued, “Each fox transmitter had a piece of colored tape on it so that when the Scouts returned, they could tell us what color of tape was on the fox they found so we could verify that they found the correct one. This was in response to last year when several Scouts saw others finding a fox and when their turn came, they just went to where they saw the others and assumed that what they saw was the one that they were looking for.”

JOTA isn’t the only time when Scouts can experience foxhunting. In Ventura County, California, Doug Dubrall, WA6RJN, provided hidden transmitter hunting at the Thousand Oaks Boy Scout Camporee in April. The emphasis at this event was competition of all types, so Doug put together a “secret transmitter hunt” to get the Scouts excited.

An October “Scout-O” orienteering event in Cincinnati gave over 70 Scouts the opportunity to try ARDF. Members
of the OH-KY-IN ARC built over a dozen measuring-tape Yagis to use with VK3YNG “blue boxes” so that all participants would be using the same type of equipment. “Each receiver was pro-grammed for two of 15 low-power transmitters that were set out,” wrote Bob Frey, WA6EZV. “Scouts worked in teams of two with the first Scout using the antenna to find a transmitter. Then they switched off to locate the second one.”

**Next Foxhunting Weekend — May 11-12, 2019**

Mobile or on-foot, one transmitter or many, a radio foxhunt is sure to stir up activity in your ham club. Now is the time to plan for this year’s *CQ* Worldwide Foxhunting Weekend, which will be May 11-12. *CQ* doesn’t impose any rules or offer any awards for Foxhunting Weekend. That’s up to you and the hams in your hometown. Your hunt can be for mobiles or all on foot. Use the international rules or make up your own.

If foxhunting is new to your area or you want to get more of the locals to join your foxhunting group, consider a “Tune-up In The Park” like the one in Byron Center, Michigan last April. Sponsoring groups were the Lowell, Allegan, Grand Rapids and Holland radio clubs. According to Tom Bosscher, K8TB, the day started with five micro-transmitters in the park for leisurely learning and equipment checking. Seasoned fox-hunters were on hand to help with equipment and RDF techniques. Then at noon, a fox transmitter went on the air less than eight miles from the park for the mobile hunters.

For many clubs, Foxhunting Weekend kicks off a season of regular transmitter hunts. For others, it’s a special once-a-year event, like Field Day. Since the primary objective is lots of hunt participation, we don’t insist that your event be on that weekend. Any time in the spring is fine with us!

Some hams prefer the formalities of carefully crafted boundaries, specifications for signal parameters, time limits, and so forth. Others are content just to have one or more signals to hunt. No need for any regulations, they say. Talk it up on the local repeater and social media to find out what your friends have in mind.

Foxhunting teaches an important skill — the ability to find the source of signals from afar. RDF is useful for public service and volunteer enforcement. It can even save lives. Most of all, it’s fun. Give it a try, but make sure your group has safe fun. See to it that no one can be injured by your hidden transmitter or by trying to get to them.

Don’t let the excitement of the hunt make you an unsafe runner or driver. Please ensure that all transmitting and receiving antennas are eye-safe. Always be mindful of your own physical limitations and never take chances behind the wheel or in the forest.

Afterward, write up the results and send them to me. The list of information in a complete *CQ* Foxhunting Weekend report is posted on my website. In addition to the details of date, location, hiders and winners, *CQ*’s readers also want to know what was unique about your hunt and what lessons (positive and negative) you learned from it. Don’t forget to include some sharp action photos. The higher the resolution, the better.

Let’s make Foxhunting Weekend 2019 the biggest ever. I look forward to receiving your reports. Happy hunting!

**NOTES**

1. <https://tinyurl.com/y8xzdg82>
2. <www.homingin.com/truckee18>
3. <www.homingin.com/ARDFinRMB>
4. <www.homingin.com/equipment.html#snif4>
5. <www.homingin.com/JoekOov/report>