

Picnic in Poland

New and experienced hams meet in the woods of Warsaw, Poland, for the annual "radio picnic," an event featuring amateur radio and emergency preparedness activities.



Each fall, amateur radio experts mingle with laymen in a forest hideaway a few miles south of the capital of Poland. About 200 people checked in to this event in 2021, but only some of them stayed for the photo opportunity later in the day.



Henryk Kotowski, SM0JHF

Though the phenomenon of electromagnetic radiation is used by billions of people today, the benefits of the radio communication hobby are not so obvious to newer generations. Different approaches must be taken to initiate newcomers into the ham community.

One method, successfully realized by the Mazovian Amateur Radio EmComm Net, Branch 37 of the Polish Amateur Radio Union, and the Warsaw Amateur Radio Club, is to arrange meetings in the open air for anyone interested in amateur radio. Each fall, they bring radios, antennas, and other accessories, set up camp in a forest outside of Warsaw, and demonstrate how to use all kinds of radio equipment. They call it a "radio picnic," and the emphasis is on showing how radio is used in emergency situations and what amateurs can do to help.

The highlight of many open-air ham radio meetings is releasing a helium balloon carrying radio equipment. A small parachute will allow the payload to land relatively safely. The box usually contains a beacon, a radiosonde reporting altitude and speed, a GPS receiver, a repeater, and a slow scan television (SSTV) transmitter. The modules are easy to acquire today, and the teenage members of a radio club interconnect everything themselves — a great example of "learning by doing." A clearance from the air traffic authorities is received ahead of the release.

Hardly anyone today can get excited about talking to strangers on the radio and exchanging five-nines without context. Learning a little about how it works — and why it is helpful — is much more appealing. The attendees are a diverse group of experienced radio amateurs, their spouses and children, their friends, and teenagers who are just getting involved in radio activities.

Low, shortwave bands are usually activated in order to demonstrate ground-wave propagation, but most transmissions and instructions deal with VHF and UHF range. There are no statistics available on the yield of these get-togethers, but interest is growing, as new adepts of amateur radio are initiated each time; this 2021 event was no exception. The 2022 event is scheduled for October 2. Similar functions are arranged in other parts of the country.



A group of children get ready to find a hidden transmitter in an Amateur Radio Direction Finding (ARDF) activity. Antennas are made of plastic conduit and pieces of tape measure. Receivers are small, handheld 70-centimeter radios.



Many participants are paramedics or firefighters. They all rely on radio, and better understanding how it works helps them in their duties. Here, the paramedics demonstrate first aid that anyone can perform in an emergency.

Transmissions from the helium balloon are followed by several groups at the camp. Many listeners across the country, and even abroad, receive the signals from high altitudes. The 430 MHz band is mostly used, but 144 MHz is sometimes included.

Henryk Kotowski, SM0JHF, was born in Poland, where he got his first amateur radio license in 1960. At 30, he moved to Sweden and had to wait a few years before he could apply for a license. In 1992, while in Florida, he earned his Extra-class license with the call sign K6JHF, which he uses when visiting California. Henryk can be reached at sm0jhf@gmail.com.

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