A Long Walk to Waterton

One hundred and fifty miles of ham radio summits and Rocky Mountain hiking, ending at a hamfest that keeps on going.

Rob Kingery, AE7AP, and Barb Kingery, AE7AQ

The Glacier Waterton International Peace Park Hamfest (**www.gwhamfest.org**) commonly known as "Glacier," is the longest continuously running hamfest in the world. It has been held every year since 1934 at the Glacier Waterton International Peace Park in Alberta, Canada and the state of Montana. In 2014, my wife Barbara, AE7AQ, and I decided to combine the hamfest's 80th anniversary and our newly rediscovered love of backpacking by walking to Glacier.

The idea began to brew the previous year, after two memorable events. In July 2013, we attended Glacier for the first time and vowed to return again. Then in August of that same year, we successfully completed an 80-mile wilderness backpacking trip in the Bob Marshall Wilderness in western Montana, that had thwarted us when we were in our 20s. Combining these two activities seemed like a natural fit. Santa arrived that winter and left me an Elecraft KX1 transceiver kit, thus sealing the deal. The radio was soon built, CW practice sessions ensued, and planning began.

Maps and Packs

I imagined a route that would allow us to explore the greatest possible extent of the Scapegoat, Bob Marshall, and Great Bear Wilderness areas, with a starting point in the southeastern corner of the group, near Lincoln, Montana, and an ending point near the northwestern corner at Glacier. I soon had identified a 150-mile/15-day route that included extensive high country traverses and promised to be particularly beautiful (see Figure 1). Concerned about pack weights with a 15-day trip, I trimmed every ounce possible — except, of course, for the radios. I set up a schedule with John Geach, KS7R, and Bill Erhardt, K7MT, who agreed to listen for me on 40 meters every evening at 7:30 PM and also agreed to send progress updates to our family and friends. Bob Solomon, K7HLN, and Barb Jones, W7WON, graciously offered us a ride back to Helena after Glacier, thus saving us a 4-hour shuttle.

We packed three radios for our journey, including a Yaesu VX-8GR for Barbara, a Yaesu VX-8DR for me, and the KX1. The two Yaesu handheld transceivers were handy, as they allowed us to communicate and keep track of each other (via APRS) when we were separated, and also gave us the option to send APRS messages when within range of a digipeater. The KX1 is equipped for 20 and 40 meters and was augmented with a Palm PPK Key (**www.mtechnologies.com/palm**) and earbuds. The antenna was comprised of 30 feet of 26 AWG wire and an additional 26 feet of the same for a counterpoise.

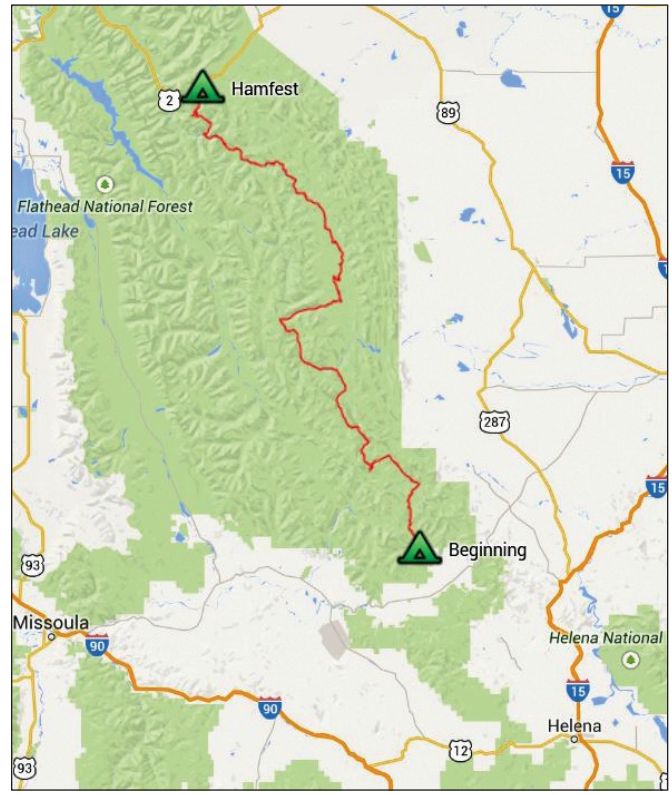

Figure 1 — Route taken from the trailhead near Lincoln, Montana to the Glacier Waterton Hamfest.

Figure 2 — The KX1 in its Pelican 1050 case with the PPK straight key, earbuds, and antenna.

Figure 3 — Barb, AE7AQ, and Rob, AE7AP, packed and ready to begin at the Indian Meadows Trailhead.

This all fits compactly into a Pelican 1050 case (see Figure 2). I fashioned craft foam sheets to size and glued Pick N' Pluck foam (**www.pick-n-pluck-foam.com**) to the interior to provide a protective layer that secured the KX1, key, antenna, and earbuds quite nicely. A test of the Pelican case in the bathtub verified its integrity and gave me confidence that it would survive the trip, regardless of whatever watery mishaps might befall me. The KX1 was powered by six Energizer Ultimate Lithium AA cells that I loaded in its internal battery pack. The lithium cells are considerably lighter than standard alkaline cells and offer improved energy storage and cold weather performance. The entire kit weighed a manageable 2 lbs, 1oz.

Figure 4 — Rob, AE7AP, uses the VX-8DR with a Pryme AL-800 telescopic antenna to send an APRS message from the Continental Divide.

A Go in the Snow

The winter of 2014 saw near-record levels of snowpack in the high mountains of Montana. As our July 3 launch date approached, concerns about snowy passes and high river crossings were on our minds, but knowing that we could alter the route if necessary, we decided to "go for it" (see Figure 3).

The first day we were able to contact Tom Mandera, KE7VUX, using my VX-8 on the 2 meter Capital City Amateur Radio Club repeater, which was 35 miles away (see Figure 4). It was reassuring to hear a friendly voice over the air and to let our friends know we were on our way north. As the day progressed, we climbed higher — and suddenly found our path blocked by a grizzly bear on the trail before us. The bear was 500 yards away and oblivious to us with his nose to the ground as he foraged. Fortunately, we were able to encourage him to move along — with a bit of noise and a lot of hopeful thinking.

The third day proved to be an eventful one. We climbed from our camp at Welcome Creek to the Continental Divide near Scapegoat Mountain. Lying before us were miles upon miles of peaks and sky (see Figure 5). From this vantage point, I was able to contact Tom, KE7VUX, again on the club repeater (now 44 miles away) and send brief Short Message Service (SMS) e-mails to my three sons using APRS-Winlink. It was exciting and comforting to make contact with the outside world. The remainder of the day was spent traversing talus and snow fields beneath the towering cliffs of the Scapegoat Massif.

Without ice axes or crampons, our progress was sometimes painfully slow, as we had to take great care with each step to ensure that we did not slip and injure ourselves on the rocks below. Evening found us at a beautiful streamside campsite in remote Half Moon Park beneath the vertical cliffs of Scapegoat Mountain with an actual half-moon above. The evening CW exercise proved fruitful, as I made my first contact with both KS7R and K7MT. While the contact was brief, we both had excellent copy and it was gratifying to have success with the KX1.

A Rare Day

The miles quickly melted away. As each day passed, we hiked farther and farther through the wilderness, across streams, rivers, and mountain passes. Each night I would set up the antenna and attempt to contact KS7R and K7MT. My low power and modest antenna made things challenging at their end — I was very fortunate to have such skilled and dedicated operators to listen for me.

After 6 days of hiking, we decided to reassess our planned route. The challenges of the icy Scapegoat traverse were still fresh in our minds when we encountered a weary Continental Divide trail hiker. With an ice axe protruding from his pack, he described a "snow nightmare" for the higher portions of the trail before us. After much consultation with the map, and a promise to return some day to see the areas we might miss, we altered our route to avoid most of the high passes. Our new path added an extra 10 miles to the journey and the lure of some fine backcountry trout fishing.

We were taking a break on day nine, high above the North Fork of Sun River, when Barbara casually remarked, "Oh look — a mountain lion!" I raised my eyes and saw not a mountain lion, but a Canada Lynx, standing mid-stride in the middle of the trail, staring at us from less than 60 feet away. The Canada Lynx is listed as a "threatened" species under the Endangered Species Act and it was a thrill to see such a beautiful, elusive animal. The lynx stared at us for perhaps 10 seconds, after which it sauntered onward into the forest. That same day, while refilling water bottles from a mountain stream, we

Figure 5 — Barb, AE7AQ, looking back at the morning's climb out of Welcome Creek in the Scapegoat Wilderness.

saw an exotic Lady Slipper Orchid in full splendor. It is a striking flower and it was exciting to see it in the wild. Barbara and I called this our "rare day," as we saw the lynx, the orchid, and nary another human being; it truly was a wilderness experience. To cap this wonderful day, that night at camp, I enjoyed a contact with K7MT.

The following morning, we climbed over Sun River Pass through a profusion of grizzly bear sign — enormous footprints and great piles of scat littered the trail. After our earlier experience, it became our routine to yell "hello" as we walked along the trail in the hopes of alerting any bears of our approach. On this, our 10th day, we were surprised to hear a "hello" back. We met a couple returning from the Middle Fork of the Flathead, now on their way home. We thought to ourselves how sad it was that they were ending their adventure, while we were only halfway through ours with so much more to see.

We traveled onward, following the Middle Fork of the Flathead River (see Figure 6) downstream from its source for 3 days. At night, I would throw a fishing line in the river and occasionally catch a cutthroat trout or mountain whitefish to supplement our dehydrated meals. It was beautiful, rugged country and we had it nearly all to ourselves. Soon, however, it was time to leave the river and climb over the final pass that would take us to Glacier.

A Tough Ending

The trail out of the Middle Fork proved to be the most challenging to date. Dense thickets of thimbleberry obscured the seldom-used path, and the previous winter's avalanches had snapped 1-foot-thick trees into jagged splinters, complicating our passage with their debris and clutter. On Day 14, climbing upward, we made our final camp at the edge of the iceberg-laden Elk Lake.

The next morning, nearing the end of our journey, I turned my VX-8 on as Barbara and I descended from the Great Bear Wilderness toward Glacier National Park and the Glacier hamfest site. I was rewarded with some chatter on 146.520 MHz as the hamfest crew began to set up. Although it was comforting to know that we were at the correct place and time, it was also disappointing to know that our wilderness journey was nearing its end.

We arrived at Glacier in the afternoon of Thursday, July 17. Over the past 15 days, we had traveled 158 miles, waded across

Figure 6 — Barb, AE7AQ, on a wet morning along the Middle Fork of the Flathead.

34 streams or rivers, traversed snowfields, topped the continental divide three times, seen three bears and a lynx, made eight successful CW contacts back to Helena and other parts of the state, and truly enjoyed every minute. After a quick trip to the showers, we set up camp and enjoyed a delicious steak dinner at the nearby Snow Slip Inn with our newly arrived friends from Helena.

A Last Sip of SOTA

As the opening ceremonies of the hamfest did not begin until the next evening, we decided to tackle the mountains in Glacier National Park for a last bit of hiking and scenery. Elk Mountain (7835 feet) is near the southern edge of Glacier National Park and overlooks the hamfest 3400 feet below. Elk Mountain also has the distinction of being a never-before-activated SOTA summit (W7M/FN-110). Barbara, Bill McGuire, N7MSI, and I were eager to bring ham radio to its summit.

We began our hike early Friday morning by crossing the concrete ties of the Burlington Northern — Santa Fe "Hi-Line" railroad to enter Glacier National Park. The trail took us upwards through open timber and fields of Bear Grass to the summit. The trail was originally built for mule trains that supplied a fire lookout that has been gone for 50 years. We announced our presence to those at the hamfest on 146.52 MHz, and enjoyed contacts with friends both old and new in quick succession. I then raised the 22-foot fiberglass telescopic mast (from The Mast Company, **www.tmastco.com**) with my 20-30-40 linked dipole (the SotaBeams Band Hopper 3, **www.sotabeams.com**) in an inverted V configuration, connected the KX1, and prepared for some 20 meter CW action (see Figure 7).

The Band Hopper antenna (see Figure 8) is a three-band dipole constructed of light gauge wire that can be configured for 20, 30, or 40 meter operation. It is fed with RG-174 feed line. Band changes are accomplished by connecting (or disconnecting) the alligator clips that terminate the wires on each dipole segment. The two dipole legs and a third rope suffice to guy the mast.

The high summit location allowed me to "spot" myself on the SotaWatch website (**www.sotawatch.org**) via one of Montana's

Figure 7 — Bill, N7MSI; Barb, AE7AQ, and Rob, AE7AP, after a successful SOTA activation of Elk Mountain. The telescopic 22-foot mast for the link dipole is in the foreground.

Figure 8 — The SotaBeams 20-30-40 link dipole kit.

Summits on the Air

Summits on the Air (SOTA) is an awards program that challenges hams to climb to the top of a summit (defined as a mountain peak at least 150 meters high) and operate from the peak. Those who operate from the peak are called "activators;" those who follow the SOTA program from the "ground" are referred to as "chasers." Each summit is given a unique identifier, as well as an elevation-based point value between 1 and 10. Activators and chasers use the points to measure their progress toward various awards. After accumulating 1000 points, chasers are eligible for the much coveted "Shack Sloth" award and activators may claim the equally desirable "Mountain Goat" award.

Participants can upload their logs to the SOTA website (**www.sota.org.uk**), where the database is updated immediately allowing activators and chasers to assess their progress. The activation history for any summit may be reviewed, as can the accomplishments of the many chasers and activators. There are no rules limiting power levels, modes, or bands — Mother Nature does that quite effectively. Although CW reigns supreme due to the efficiency and light weight of the rigs, 2 meter FM and SSB are also very commonly used. The SOTA program is the brainchild of John Linford, G3WGV, and was launched in England and Wales in 2002. The program has grown rapidly throughout the world since then — over 20,000 summits have been activated to date.

SOTA was launched in the US in 2007 with the creation of the W2 Association; an Association being a group in a country or region that coordinates and manages SOTA operations in that area. The program really took off in the US between 2010 and 2012, when Associations were established for most states. Although SOTA activity is most prevalent on weekends, current activations can be found at nearly any given moment on **www.sotawatch.org**, where active "spots" and "alerts" are listed. Once spotted, a short-term pileup is nearly certain! Some popular SOTA frequencies include 7.032, 7.185, 10.110, 14.062, 14.342, 18.095, 18.155, 21.061, 21.350, 24.905, 24.955, 28.420, and 146.52 MHz.

many mountaintop APRS digipeaters, thus ensuring an instant mini-pileup. Seventeen contacts later, I straightened my weary back and shut off the KX1 to enjoy the magnificent views of Glacier Park. Mount Saint Nicholas awed us with its verticality as it dominated the nearby skyline — its magnificence scarcely diminished by the haze from far away forest fires. We also spent much time eyeballing the hamfest site below and listening to 146.46 MHz as the first foxhunt got under way. We rewarded ourselves on the descent by snacking on wild huckleberries and eventually with warm food, cold beverages, and the friendship that abounds at the Glacier hamfest.

Waterton has an atmosphere that is similar to an extended family reunion. Camping, whether by RV or tent, in the large meadow is the rule rather than the exception, and the swap meet, seminars, foxhunts, and other activities are all held within the context of a gathering of friends. Many participants have been attending each year for most of their lives and newcomers feel instantly at home.

The pilgrimage to Glacier was all we hoped it would be. The amazing scenery, exciting adventures, support of fellow hams both during and after the hike, and the successful SOTA activation, made for a fabulous hamfest experience that came to a remarkable ending when Barbara found that she held the winning ticket for the grand prize — a Yaesu FT-450D!

All photos by Robert Kingery, AE7AP.

Robert Kingery, AE7AP, an ARRL® Life Member, was first licensed as KF7BQQ in 2009. Rob enjoys SOTA, digital modes, contesting, low-power kit building, and special event support activities. He is employed as a civil engineer by the State of Montana.

Barbara Kingery, AE7AQ, was first licensed as KF7BQP in 2009. She regularly calls the weekly 2 meter ARES net and participates in SOTA and special event support activities. Barbara is employed as an environmental engineer by the State of Montana. Robert and Barbara may be reached at 713 N Warren St, Helena, MT 59601, **kingery713@gmail.com**