

VK5CE/P DXpedition to Flinders Island (OC-261)

By Craig Edwards

Wednesday August 14 – departure day

After a 4:00am wake up call I departed by car from Middleton in South Australia very early on the Wednesday morning at 5:00am and drove 3½ hours to the coastal town of Wallaroo. From there I went on the SeaSA car and passenger ferry for 1½ hours on quite rough seas but it saved many hours of driving and gave me a chance to close my eyes and rest. It was then a 2 hour drive to the major coastal centre of Port Lincoln to stay there for the night. The logical thing to then do was venture to the Port Lincoln Hotel sports bar to enjoy some Coopers Pale Ales to contemplate life and try to calm down as I was so excited. One thing of concern was the big low pressure storm system approaching Eyre Peninsula with gale force winds later in the week.

Day 1 Thursday August 15 – And we're off and running

There are only two residents on Flinders Island and so everything had to be taken to the island. On departure day from Port Lincoln I was fortunate to be blessed with blue skies and a mild breeze for the tiny little single engine 2 seater plane flight north west to Flinders Island. It's normally a four seater plane but the pilot had to remove the seats in order to fit in all of the DXpedition gear. It was pretty funny landing as there is no airstrip, it's just the flattest paddock they have where the sheep keep the grass low. The plane has to buzz past the paddock at low levels to scare the sheep into one corner of the pasture so the plane can land.



I was greeted by the 2 island residents who took the opportunity to depart from the island for a few days and so for day 1 to day 6 I was all by myself on the island. While I had blue skies it was quite windy which as you can imagine makes erecting a 12m long Spiderbeam fibreglass pole for the 20m vertical dipole an interesting experience. The antenna was put right

on the beach with the guy rope anchors just a few metres from the high tide mark. At this point it was nothing but saltwater on the short path to North America and long path to Europe. The vertical dipole was finished by 0500 UTC. I then quickly put together the HF9V had a shower and was on the air by 0600 UTC (3:30pm local time).



It just took a few calls on 20m before 11JHS went into the log and then the expected bedlam and chaos broke loose for the next 3½ hours until the band closed. There were forecasts of doom and gloom for propagation to North America and so I was constantly holding the Europeans up for a few minutes every 15 minutes to listen out for North America. This did slow the rate and I'm sure it frustrated the Europeans to have to wait during their peak propagation time in the first hours of my operation! Despite this everyone was respectful and waited while I would squeeze out a few North America contacts.

Fortunately a few North Americans were around but the nice surprise was how long 20m long path was holding on, at home it's finished by 0800 UTC but signals were still good until 0930 UTC well after my local sunset. I was thinking that 40m might be my best bet for North America so I figured I should leave that pile up and try to increase the proportion of W/VE contacts.

When I went to 40m and found a frequency Luke VK3HJ was there so after I logged him he said he'd spot me on the DX Cluster. There were only a handful of weak North Americans that went in the log after 30 minutes along with JA's and VK's and so it wasn't very productive. To make matters worse the SWR on 40m went high. I tried sorting it out but it wasn't an obvious fix as some other bands were OK such as 80m and 30m but 40m just wasn't happy at all. While stressful I did take a moment to relax and realise that even during the 30 minutes of the antenna working at W/VE East Coast greyline there was little propagation anyway.

So after a wasted 30 minutes from 1000-1030 UTC in the dark I went to 14260 and called CQ. The QSO's were pretty slow but there was a useful mix of JA with the occasional European or North American. When there was a small run of JA's I'd also get them to stand by for North America. By 1115 UTC I was calling for North America only and the rate was quite good and they began to roll in. It was great to receive feedback from 3 USA stations to say that I was their first ever VK. That was good to know that the modest station set-ups were getting through. The majority of stations were from the east coast of Canada and USA which was the area I wanted to focus on. By around 1200 UTC I didn't even have to ask for North America only as they were stronger than Asia and Europe! North Americans were coming in well past 1400 UTC and it wasn't until my transmit frequency of 14260 kHz all of a sudden became the listening frequency of XZ1A on 14255 that I figured it was best to cut my losses and move higher up the band. This ended my run to North America but it resulted in a couple of hours into Europe until 1645 UTC but my signals were weak.

I was then done, after battling antennas on the beach followed by 10:45 hours of straight SSB operating – I collapsed into bed with 900 QSO's in the log.

After day 1 the breakdown of QSO's by region was exactly what I had dreamt of:

35%	North America
49 %	Europe
16%	Asia/Oceania/Rest of the world

This was a great result for North America considering the lack of success I'd had there in the past IOTA DXpeditions. After 5 days on Bremer Island with the same power and the yagi antenna I made just 371 QSO's into North America (from a total of 5149 QSO's), after just the first day of operation today there were 315 North American's in the log with the simple vertical dipole.

Day 2 Friday August 16 – The big storm hits

In the morning at my sunrise there was simply no propagation on 40m phone/digital or 30m digital. I wasn't too concerned about this because the conditions to Europe on 20m were a better option anyway.

I decided not to put up the 15m vertical dipole because if the storm hit with the forecasted gale force winds and destroyed the 20m and 15m vertical dipoles then the DXpedition would be a complete failure. The troublesome HF9V was still OK for 15m with its SWR and so I decided to leave the second 12m

Spiderbeam fibreglass pole on the ground until the storms passed in a couple of days.

I can't describe how lucky I was to fly in yesterday because there were terrible winds today and the forecast was for the worst of them to be occurring over the next couple of days and so I would have ended up having a 3 day DXpedition instead of 7 days.



The severe weather warning was spot on and massive seas and winds hit the island. The HF9V was the first victim, while it stayed vertical, the radials were a tangled mess of seaweed stuck in the rocks and the coax was damaged. I tried fixing it and got 40m working again. There was one point where a rogue wave hit me and I almost got swept onto some nasty rocks. After that experience I figured that the risk wasn't worth the reward for 40m.

Power on the island comes from solar panels and a large wind turbine that charge batteries which then go into an inverter for 240V AC. Unfortunately the wind was so strong that the wind turbine alarm was going off and the island resident said this might occur and so I needed to disarm the wind turbine to prevent it from taken off and flying into the Eyre Peninsula. There was obviously no sunshine and so now I had to be conscious of power conservation as there'd be no power charging over the next few days of the storm. Despite this I still operated the amplifier with 400 watts.

My operating position looked out over the beautiful water of the bay short path to North America sweeping to the right to long path Europe. Right in from on me was the 20m vertical dipole and it wasn't happy. The top guy rope for the 20m vertical dipole was at the balun so that the coax could run along one of the guys. This meant there was no guy rope for 5m from the thin fibreglass tip at the top of the 12m mark down to the balun at the 7m mark. This section was really under duress and we can thank the Germans for making a quality product to survive the hours and hours of gale force winds – well done Spiderbeam!

I commenced operating today at 0400 UTC on 20m and the European pile up was massive until 0830 UTC and this included the occasional request to wait for North America to squeeze in some of the west coast USA stations. By 0830 UTC the band started to close to Europe and a fun mix of JA, Europe, North and South America occurred over the next hour. In the 0930-1100 UTC period I tried on 40m and 30m to no avail. It was too noisy with the storm. After a break for dinner I headed back to 20m at 1100 UTC to look for North America. Conditions weren't as good but there was a slow trickle of East Coast and Central North Americans going into the log.

At 1430 UTC it was now midnight local and time for bed. I was up and at the dials at 2030 UTC (6:00am local) before my local sunrise to try 30m. There were some European signals on the digital modes but they couldn't hear me, my CQ's only resulted in a tiny run of JA's.

Day 3 Saturday August 17 – gale force winds and electrical storms – Houston we have a problem.

It was still WAY to windy to consider putting up the 15m vertical dipole and I was expecting the 20m vertical dipole's fibreglass pole to be destroyed overnight but it somehow still survived. In the light of day there was lots of storm surge damage to the beach but the 20m vertical dipole guy anchors were hammered very deep into the beach despite the water crashing over two of the guy points – yikes!

In the morning I went on to 15m to work JA's (Saturday morning their local time) and North America. South Australia is VERY VERY different to all of my other IOTA DXpedition ventures to the top end of the Northern Territory (VK8BI OC-185) and far north Queensland (VK4LDX/P OC-138/OC-171/OC-172). It's even worse at this time of the year. Working JA's on these other DXpeditions has been as easy a shooting fix in a barrel, but 15m during the day for a South Australian DXpedition in August was like pulling teeth. There was very little propagation and there was a slow trickle of JA and USA stations. Mind you FM5DN at 0030 UTC was 59+20dB and he couldn't understand why I didn't have a big pile up as he claimed my signal was massive in the Caribbean.

A local VK contest was starting at 0300 UTC and going for 24 hours and so I ventured to 20m early at 0245 UTC to start calling CQ and hold my frequency. The first European signal occurred at 0254 UTC and it was another massive pile up from 0430 to 0800 and the band closed at 0930. I could only be on the air very intermittently after this time due to massive electrical storms that evening.

As the skies were lit up with lightning and the worst of the storm hit the island, I reflected on the fact that the Spiderbeam yagi which I've used for my past few

IOTA DXpeditions would have been destroyed in the first day. From now on I'll only ever use these wonderful vertical dipoles on the Spiderbeam poles at the high tide mark of the beach. Their performance is amazing and there are no beam headings to worry about. If I want to "beam" to North America then I just ask other parts of the world to stand-by!



Day 4 Sunday August 18 – gale force wind warning finishes – able to put up 15m vertical dipole. 20m keeps producing endless pile-ups while the band is open.

The winds were still strong but I knew the 20m vertical dipole could survive the rest of the DXpedition. So in strong winds I erected the 15m vertical dipole. There was a slow and unspectacular run of JA stations on the Sunday morning from 2230 UTC-0230 UTC. I couldn't understand this as it wasn't a working day. As I mentioned previously, 15m in South Australia in August is..... now what's the technical term?..... absolutely crap!!!!

Before starting the business end of the day on 20m I walked along the beach to check on the HF9V and the previous evening's storm surge had confirmed my fears and now the antenna was a right off. I wasn't too concerned because I was getting all of the European and North American QSO's on 20m with big signals and long openings. The HF9V will go into surgery after I return home.

I started operating on 20m as per the regular routine but as it was a Sunday and there was so much QRM and the band was crazy being full of light house operators too. I had to work simplex as 14260 +/- 30kHz was bedlam. Despite this people were pretty well behaved and the rate was actually much faster than when I have been operating split over the previous few days. When you operate split, people just call and call non-stop. At least when I was operating simplex, people would give a burst of calls for 5 seconds and sort of listen. Mind you this wouldn't have worked in the first couple of days of operating

and whenever I got out of rhythm in the simplex pile-up, chaos broke loose and order had to be restored again.

Day 5 Monday August 19 – 20m just keeps on delivering in the 0300 – 1400 UTC marathon period.

While calling CQ on 15m I experienced a microphone problem. I don't have anything fancy like a Heil headset, it's just the standard handheld microphone that came with the Icom IC-706MKIIG. On Bremer Island last year I had the problem of the button sticking on transmit and so I've since purchased a new one. Well after 4 days of calling CQ I must have worn the microphone out as the silver metal clip that compresses the microswitch when you press the push-to-talk button failed and broke.

So now my microphone failure was that I'd press the PTT switch but it would not transmit. Fortunately I brought the original microphone with the sticking PTT button and so I spent my morning doing open heart surgery and interchanging parts and praying to the gods of the ionosphere for some divine intervention. My prayers were answered and it worked – phew.

The usual routine continued this day starting on 20m around 0330 UTC and working long path Europe and a little bit of short path North America until 0800 UTC when the band allowed all three major DX locations of Europe, North America and Asia to come through until 0930 UTC. I then took my meal break, commenced on 20m around 1000 UTC and began working east coast USA from New Foundland to Florida until 1400 UTC.



Day 6 Tuesday August 20 – slow rate on 20m, I don't care though as the “little pistol” stations are getting their chance to work a new IOTA.

For those JA stations that didn't get in the log I apologise but I was trying. Again there were hours of

unproductive CQ calls in the morning as there were very few signals on 15m. The routine continued by visiting 20m for long path Europe but conditions were not as good on 20m with few callers in the 0330-0445 UTC period. With a bit of DX cluster help again from Ray VK4NH the rate increased. I decided to stick with 20m at this time of day to give those stations with modest antennas and power a chance.

I would love to give the big guns 3 bands for the IOTA marathon but the focus was to give everyone the chance to get a new IOTA. So the rate was a lot slower but more people should be happy. An analysis of the log earlier today revealed that the number of JA logs were very low. I was hoping they'd find me on 20m in the 1030 UTC onwards period when I start looking for North America but that only really occurred on the first day.

As soon as the European pile up subsided at 0745 UTC I went to 15m and called CQ and I was getting ready for the JA onslaught as most people there would be home from work at that time of the late afternoon. I couldn't believe that 30 minutes of CQ'ing only resulted in a VK8, two DU's, two JA's and V51GB. It was so unproductive that V51GB kept on calling every 5-10 minutes to say I was strong and he didn't know where everyone else was!!!! This was going nowhere so I went back to my 20m frequency at 0815 UTC and after a couple of CQ's a two hour pile up into Europe occurred. I tried Japan, sorry. As per usual I had a meal break and worked into North America for a couple of hours before the band closed quite early at 1230 UTC.



Day 7 Wednesday August 21 – The marathon is almost over. I'm losing my voice, I'm cold and tired, there are headaches, backaches and tendonitis in my arm from using the PTT switch so much but I'm looking forward to some more pile ups

On the last full down of operation I noticed it was low tide down at the HF9V crime scene and so I salvaged the antenna and put it in a body bag and threw away the coaxial cable and radials. I jumped on 15m in the morning to try and get some JA's in the log and at 0130 UTC after a few CQ calls I worked K0ZRK who said he'd spot me on the DX cluster. This resulted in a nice little 2 hour slow rate run on 15m but I still struggled to work JA' and in this little cameo period I ended up having more contacts into USA than JA.

Even after 7 days of being at the same place at the same time on 20m the long path European QSO's continued to role in with lots of QRP, mobile and Scandinavians making their way into the log today and by now I didn't have worry about getting Europe to stand by for North America.

The west coast guys were getting through on their own and a handful of Brazilian, Namibian and South African QSO's today was a good indication that everyone who could be heard was getting a new IOTA. I decided to leave 20m even earlier than the previous day and venture to 15m at 0650 UTC to give me a solid hour and a half of daylight before sunset to work JA. I was delighted to hear from Shu JN6RZM and I was bracing myself finally for a JA run at the end of the DXpedition. But no it didn't happen. Instead there was a pile up of 15m Europeans who were working me via the long-path. You know things are weird when I'm trying to pick out JA call signs over Europeans and then a long path Mexican XE1AJ is S9+ and breaks the pile up. You also know the 15m band is weird when another V51 station breaks a JA pile up on 15m. Eventually some JA's did get in the log until 0900 UTC when 15m closed.

I was hoping I could finish the DXpedition with a final run into North America on 20m. For the third night in a row at 1030 UTC there wasn't a single station audible on 20m and if this had happened at home I'd simply switch off the radio and watch TV. So again with blind faith I started calling CQ and again the stations from the east coast of Canada and USA started coming in. The amazing thing is that unlike the first evening, for nights 2 to 7 there were no Asian or European signals present. The pile ups into North America were generally small and I was starting to think that my signal wasn't very good and that only big guns could work me and that's why there were small pile ups. But that theory went out the window as this evening and last night there were lots of generals with 100 watts, a number of stations very excited about working their first ever VK, lots of people driving on the way to work mobile and guys who I'd worked in previous nights calling me as QRP this

time. Despite a little disappointment with the small pile ups into North America I was delighted to work 1000 stations and have 21% of the total log to this part of the world. For example on Bremer Island last year out of 5149 QSO's there were 371 QSO's (7% of the total) for North America compared to 3020 QSO's (62% of the total) for Europe. But with this trip there is 4893 QSO's with 1008 QSO's (21% of the total) for North America compared to 3082 QSO's (60% of the total) – so that's a much better share.

Here's the final statistics:

4893 Total QSO's

3020 - 62% - Europe

1008 - 21% - North America

484 - 10% - Asia

312 - 6% - Oceania

52 - 1% - Africa

16 - <1% - South America

1 - <1% - Antarctica

4295 - 88% - 20M

530 - 11% - 15M

40 - <1% - 40M

28 - <1% - 30M

4828 - 99% - SSB

65 - 1% - PSK31



Friday August 23 – Home safe and sound.....my thoughts need to now turn to the rare OC-255 Red Island DXpedition in October.

Well I'm now home in Middleton. The single engine plane ride from Flinders Island to Port Lincoln was a wild 60 minutes with zero visibility most of the way in thick cloud and torrential rain and of course the strong winds were entertaining. So now it's a matter of unpacking all of the gear and then preparing to pack

and freight gear up to Bamaga in far north Queensland for the Red Island OC-255 DXpedition in October – oh shit that’s only 8 weeks way!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

I just sent the photo for the QSL card to UX5UO and so I should receive the QSL cards soon. I’ll post on the blog when the QSL cards arrive.



I’ve sent my log to Club Log and so if you click on the icon on the top right hand corner of this blog site you can check to confirm you’re in the log. If your callsign doesn’t appear then send me an email at vk5ce@yahoo.com.au

Thank you to everyone for you kind words of encouragement during the trip when the bands weren’t quite open and for spotting me when the bands were open but people just hadn’t found me yet. I appreciate everyone’s help. Please monitor the Red Island blog site <http://oc255.blogspot.com.au/> for updates.

Thank you also to those of you who have or are going to help with sponsorship. I can honestly say that every contribution helps to fund these adventures. My wife is happy for me to do 1 or 2 IOTA DXpeditions each year as long as I can figure out how to fund it!! There are a few islands that I’m doing my usual initial feasibility assessments. Of course my wife is not privy to all of my feasibility assessments and for a couple of the islands she thinks it’s early planning for 2015..... in my mind it’s for 2014 – hi hi!