

The World Above 50 MHz

VHF Contest Categories

Amateur radio contests are fun opportunities for hams to improve their on-air skills. Not only can you find yourself making more contacts than you normally would, but you can also see how you compare to the rest of the competition. Based on your experience, you can explore new ways to improve your station, operating practices, and skills, which you can test out during the next contest.

Contest Changes and Improvements

Like participants, contest organizers follow a similar process to improve their activities, such as reviewing logs and finding new ways to encourage participation. Unlike home stations, they must adhere to carefully managed procedures and obtain approval.

Many changes have been happening to VHF contests over the years, such as the inclusion of new and revised contest categories. This trend is driven by monitoring participation levels and by listening to contester feedback.

VHF contesting began in the late 1940s with the ARRL January VHF Sweepstakes, the June VHF QSO Party, and the September VHF QSO Party. In those early days, there was only one category: Single Operator. The contest score multipliers were ARRL Sections.

Activity levels began rising in the 1950s with the introduction of the Novice- and Technician-class licenses, and the Multi Operator category was added to the official results. The major change came in 1983, when ARRL Sections — previously used as multipliers — were replaced by Maidenhead grids. The VHF/UHF Century Club (VUCC) program was also introduced that year. The challenge of chasing grids spurred significant interest and led to the launch of the Rover category in 1991.

By 1998, there were five VHF contest categories: Single Operator, Single Operator QRP Portable, Rover, Multi Operator, and Limited Multi Operator. Those five categories have since expanded to 14.

ARRL VHF Contest Categories

The ARRL VHF Contest categories are as follows:

Single Operator — Includes Analog-Only and All-Mode Subcategories

- Low Power (200 W at 50 and 144 MHz, 100 W at 222 and 432 MHz, and 50 W at 902 MHz and above)
- High Power (exceeds Low Power)
- Portable (10 W with portable power, equipment, and antennas)
- Three Band (50/144/432 MHz; 100 W at 50 and 144 MHz and 50 W at 432 MHz)
- FM Only (100 W from 50 MHz to 1.2 GHz)

Multi Operator — No Power Limitations

- Limited (four bands maximum, and all-band operation is allowed; you can submit only four band logs)
- Unlimited (no band limits)

Rovers

This category is somewhat unique to VHF contesting, although rovers (see Figure 1) also operate in state QSO parties. They make for fun contesting conditions as you follow the rover from one grid to the next, adding contacts and multipliers to your log along the way.

- Classic Rover (limited to two operators, but there are no power or band restrictions)
- Limited Rover (limited to the low four bands and 100 or 200 W)
- Unlimited Rover (all bands, high power, and multiple operators)

The major expansion in category variety occurred in 2022, when separate single-operator categories were created for all-mode and analog-only operation. Earlier, in January 2013, the Single Operator Three-Band category was introduced to attract operators using HF through 432 MHz rigs.

The CQ WW VHF Contest

The CQ World Wide (WW) VHF Contest has a long history dating back to the 1920s, when 5-meter band contests were held. Multipliers were call sign prefixes, like those used in the WPX contests. Today, grid squares are used, just as in the ARRL contests. The CQ WW VHF Contest covers only 50 and 144 MHz. The current entry categories are as follows:



Figure 1 — Scott Farrell's, KE4WMF/R, rover setup for the 2025 September VHF Contest. [Scott Farrell, KE4WMF, photo]

- Single Operator (all band or single band, high power at 1500 W, low power at 100 W, and QRP at 10 W)
- Hilltopper (100 W and for 6 hours only; any power source is acceptable)
- Rover
- Multi-Operator

Starting in 2025, the contest shifted to two weekends: one for analog-only modes and one for digital modes. The contest dates are always in July.

How to Choose Your Category

The key to selecting your contest category is to match your station and skills to the activity that offers the greatest reward. That includes not only achieving the best score in the contest, but also getting the most enjoyment out of it.

Do you want to go to a hilltop to get on the air? Try the Single Operator Portable category. Do you want to get on the air from multiple hilltops? Try one of the Rover categories. If you want to share your contest activity with others, join a multi-operator station. You can even operate from home with whatever equipment you have. You don't need to be on the air for the entire contest — work the hours that fit your schedule.

Be sure to visit the ARRL Contests website at <https://contests.arrl.org> and review last year's expanded results article to prepare for the next contest. It provides a clear breakdown of the overall level of competition, as well as the competition within your region and across entry categories.

Also included on the Contests website are the top 10 scores in a prospective category. This helps you understand how many points you'll need to aim for to compete with the top performers. You can find a

breakdown for each station in the Line Scores, which includes the score, the number of contacts, the multipliers, and the bands used. This information can help you determine the relative importance of the bands per each competitor's scores. Remember to review the VHF contest rules at <https://contests.arrl.org/ContestRules/JanJunSep-VHF-Rules.pdf>.

The next opportunity will be the ARRL September VHF Contest on September 12 – 14, 2026.

Here and There

The Eta Aquarid meteor shower came and went with little impact. At the start of the shower, Jake, KG5DRT, activated DL88 on 6 meters from April 23 to 25, and he contacted 31 stations. DL88 is a very rare grid for Fred Fish Memorial Award (FFMA) chasers.

Francis, KV5W, has added an excellent online resource (www.gridzilla.us) for those who chase 6-meter FFMA, all-band VUCC, Worked All States, and DX Century Club. It's superb for planning rover grid activations. Check it out and upload your log and/or connect it to Logbook of The World®.

The Central States VHF Society Spring Sprints took place in April and May. The 144 MHz Sprint drew 67 entrants. K1TEO won the high-power category, WA3NUF won the low-power category, and KE7MSU won the QRP category. The 222 MHz Sprint had 40 entries, with K1WHS edging out K1TEO for high power and WA3NUF winning low power. The 432 MHz Sprint had 51 entries; K1TEO won the high-power category and VE3DS won the low-power category. There were 61 entries in the 50 MHz Sprint, and W4MW won high power while KO9A won low power. NV4B/R won the rover category in all four sprints.