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The World Above 50 MHz

VHF Contest Trends

Amateur radio contesting is a fascinating aspect of our hobby. It attracts competitive operators who set out to not only win, but improve their scores from one contest to the next. Contest weekends draw those who chase awards, too. Achieving DX Century Club (DXCC) in a weekend is too good of an opportunity to pass up.

VHF contesting offers the same attractions, with chances to earn VHF/UHF Century Club. It's also a chance for participants to pick up grids that may be heard only during a contest because an intrepid rover made it happen. There are so many ways to enter a VHF contest. Would you like to set up on a hilltop with 10 W? Try a single operator portable category. Do you like to use only a microphone or key? Try an analog-only category.

VHF Contesting History

The ARRL January VHF Sweepstakes began in 1948. That same year, the May VHF QSO Party and the September VHF QSO Party started as well. The following year, the May VHF QSO Party was moved to June, shaping today's ARRL VHF contest calendar. Before that, several events, such as the ARRL UHF Field Day and Relay in 1939, featured three bands: 56, 112, and 224 megacycles!

CQ magazine sponsored VHF contests from 1954 to 1964, using counties as multipliers. The ARRL August UHF Contest began in 1978, marking the first use of 1 × 1-degree latitude-by-longitude squares as multipliers. Maidenhead grid squares, with their 1 × 2-degree grids, were introduced as multipliers in 1983.

In 1987, the CQ World Wide (CQ WW) VHF WPX Contest spanned the bands from 50 to 1296 MHz. As of 2000, the CQ WW VHF Contest has been limited to 50 and 144 MHz.

Participation Levels

If we look only at the start and current levels of VHF contest participation, we find an amazing climb. However, participation levels have been going up and down in recent years despite a slow, steady average increase.

The first January VHF Sweepstakes in 1948 had fewer than 400 entries. It had 1,000 in 1958, but it had fewer than 1,000 in 1968, and the number of entries didn't return to 1,000 until 1993. That number fell below 1,000 in 1999, and it didn't reach 1,000 again until the COVID-19 lockdown in 2021/2022. This year's number is 701, down from 791 in 2025.

The June VHF QSO Party began in 1949, with just more than 100 entries. It didn't reach 1,000 entries until 2006. In 2026, the number of entries was 1,203, which was down from its peak of 2,148 in 2020.

The September VHF QSO Party had 98 entries in 1948. The number didn't reach 500 until 1992, and it fell to 473 in 2017. In 2026, the number of entries was 503, down from 559 in 2025. It peaked at 833 in 2020.

The CQ WW VHF Contest started in 2000 with 102 entries. There were 500 entries in 2006 and twice as many in 2020 and 2021. In 2025, split across both weekends (digital and SSB/CW), the total was 1,071, and there were 1,357 logs received for 2026.

Present-Day Trends

There was a huge increase in VHF contest participation associated with the COVID-19 lockdown. Based on 2023 – 2026 totals, we can see that entries have since been fairly consistent across all three ARRL VHF contests (see Figure 1).

A long list of changes to the entry categories underlie these recent participation numbers. You can find an overview of these changes in my August 2026 "The World Above 50 MHz" column. A 2022 update added analog-only entry categories for Single Operator High Power, Low Power, Three Band, and Portable. This was intended to address the significant number of digital contacts in VHF contests compared to other modes.

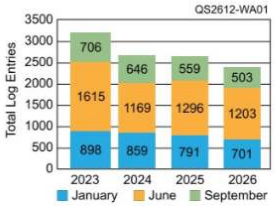


Figure 1 — ARRL VHF contest total log entries.

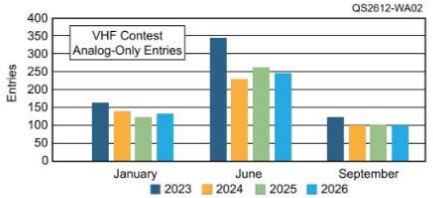


Figure 2 — ARRL VHF contest analog-only entries.

The June VHF Contest is a prime example. The 2022 contest results showed that 52 percent of overall contacts were digital. In 2023, that number jumped to 63 percent, and in 2026, it reached 73 percent. On a band-by-band basis, 50 MHz led with 84 percent digital contacts in 2026. Next, 144 MHz was at 55 percent, 222 MHz was at 29 percent, and 432 MHz was at 28 percent. On 1296 MHz, 9 percent of contacts were digital. After a surge in interest in the Analog-Only category during the 2022 contests, the number of entries appears to have settled to a reasonably consistent level (see Figure 2).

It's interesting to see how the CQ WW VHF Contest has addressed the digital-versus-analog concerns. The organizers established separate SSB/CW and digital contests over two weekends in July. The 2025 contest saw 553 SSB/CW entries and 518 digital entries. The 2026 contest had 651 SSB/CW and 706 digital entries. This compares to the 2023 and 2024 totals of 787 and 665, respectively. This category update has clearly been working, helping hams who prefer one mode over another get on the air, compete, and have fun.

Roving Trends

Apart from state QSO parties, rovers are unique to VHF contests. They move from grid to grid, offering contacts across multiple bands to those stuck in the chair of their home ham shack. Given the nature of roving, all VHF contest participants should encourage and support them.

VHF roving trends have been flat to slightly downward. In the 2002 June VHF Contest, Rover entries were just higher than 80, while in 2009, the number exceeded 100. Entry numbers held steady at around 80 in subsequent years, rose higher than 100 in 2020 and 2021, and fell to 75 in 2026. The January VHF Contest had 46 in 2026, while the September VHF Contest saw 30.



Figure 3 — Kenneth "Ken" Carlson's, K2ET/R, roving setup in the 2024 ARRL June VHF Contest. [Kenneth Carlson, K2ET/R, photo]

All VHF enthusiasts should consider trying their hand at roving. All it takes is packing your car or truck with your equipment and antennas (see Figure 3), and then getting them to work as you move from one grid to the next.

Log Entries versus Participants

The trends are clear, but the entry numbers mask the actual number of participants. For example, log checking yielded 7,459 call signs in the logs of the 1,296 entrants in the 2025 June VHF Contest. Many of those were casual participants just trying to work some 6-meter grids, and others didn't submit their logs; don't be that person — remember to send in your log.

For more detailed information on contest trends and results, check out the VHF contest results articles at **https://contests.arrl.org**.

Here and There

As of September 2026, the list of Fred Fish Memorial Award recipients totaled 73. The new recipients are K1TO, N5NA, K6EME, W5TRL, WQ0P, K7BG, K0SIX, K5ND, N5TJ, K0TPP, and KX4R.

Congratulations to everyone who has completed the journey of collecting all 488 grids in the contiguous US. Good luck to the rest of the grid chasers on 6 meters.

When sporadic E is absent, try meteor scatter. The Ham Radio Science Citizen Investigation Meteor Scatter QSO Party is happening for the December Geminid and January Quadrantid meteor showers. You can find more details at **www.hamsci.org/msqp**.