

Joining a Net

One of the ways to get some more time on the air, learn new information, and make new friends and acquaintances is to join a “net.” A net is an on-the-air roll call and round-table discussion that pertains to a particular topic or organization. Radio clubs have nets, as do organizations such as ARES, RACES, Skywarn, Satern, and the American Red Cross. Nets are also used to pass traffic, another way of saying “exchange messages.” Some nets are held for the purposes of either testing your equipment or making DX contacts. Other nets are used to practice your emergency communications skills. Nets are also popular with special interest groups, hobbyists, and for buying and selling ham radio equipment. Some of the “special interest” nets might pertain to off-road vehicles, antique ham radios, sailing, flying, surfing, and just about any interest or activity that comes to mind.

Begin by finding out what nets are available. If you belong to any organizations or clubs, ask them if they have weekly nets. If you belong to a Yahoo group or a similar online discussion group, read the messages or the FAQ to learn about any nets that might be available, or else ask the moderator for the group. You can also search online for available nets, either by topic, or by area, or else you can get complete lists of ALL nets, but these can be quite lengthy and confusing to read through!

It is usually best to start with one net on a topic that you are very familiar with or a group or club that you actively participate in. What you need to know is the frequency, the day, the time the check-in begins, or the time the net begins. Some nets go “on-the-air” early, such as a half-hour before the net begins, to allow people to check in early rather than having to wait until their name is called. It is not necessary to join a net early, but you do sometime have that option. For HF nets, you need to know the band and the frequency, and for VHF and UHF nets, you need to know the repeater that will be used (the frequency, offset and PL tone).

You might want to spend your first week just listening. If you understand the procedure before you actively join in, you are less likely to make any embarrassing mistakes. Before we go on, I should clarify that in the field of ham radio fellowship, there really is no such a thing as an embarrassing mistake – most hams are forgiving if you do something incorrect, and they will be happy to explain net etiquette to you so that you are better prepared next time. But there are a few individuals out there that tend to take things more seriously, and could possibly say something to embarrass you if you do not follow proper net procedure.

Every net has its own unique protocol, and net procedures differ depending on the nature of the net, but there are certain similarities that we can discuss. Most nets begin with a call to club officers or net officials for news bulletins or information. This is usually followed by a roll call of general net members. How you respond to the roll call depends on how many “go-arounds” the net will have. For example, if the net only has one “go-around,” you will respond to your call sign when it is announced by “net control” and state your traffic. By “state your traffic,” I mean that you will either announce what is new

concerning you, mention what you want to buy or sell, give a synopsis of local weather or driving conditions, make comments based on the “theme” of the net, pass along any messages that you are holding for other areas, or simply say “no traffic.” Many nets operate in this “round table” fashion and are focused on discussion and hearing the viewpoint and comments from all of the net members. Others may be brief and consist only of a quick check-in process. Do you see now why it is a good idea to “listen only” the first week?

On a net with two or more “go-arounds,” the first time you name or call sign is announced, you just indicate your presence. For example, I will listen for net control to call out my callsign, and then I will say “This is Tom, AA6TS, from Dulzura, California.” The net control marks you “present” and you are invited to participate in the second “round.” After the first round where all the net members present are “checked in,” callsigns are announced sequentially a second time. This time when you hear your call, you might be expected to contribute some information for the net. This is where each net differs from the others. You might be expected to comment on the topic of discussion for this evening that was announced, either in advance or at the beginning of the net, you might give or receive a signal report, you might have the opportunity to make a DX contact with another net member, you might pass on message you are holding for another area, you might list an item that you have for sale or list an item you are looking for, or make some other contribution to the net based on the guidelines for this particular net. Make sure that you understand this part of net protocol before you decide to speak up and participate. It is OK to make mistakes the first time, but your goal will be to try to make no mistakes and to “fit in” the best you can. Once you speak up that first time, you now become familiar to everyone else on the net, and you are one step closer to being a “regular” net member. Next week, it will be much easier to check in, and by the third week, you will be having a lot of fun and all of the nervousness will have completely disappeared!

Some nets go around several more “go-arounds” until net members run out of things to talk about, Some of these nets can last hours while others are over in ten minutes.

Whenever you decide that you want to end your participation in the net, when your name is called, you give your salutations to the group, such as “73’s everyone” and announce somehow that you are signing off from the net, such as “we’ll be signing off,” or “I’ll be QRT,” or “I’ve going to sign out and listen on the side,” or whatever you deem appropriate after listening to how the other, more experienced net members handle it.

Most nets have a policy that if you don’t check in on a regular basis, your name may be dropped from the roll call. You can always rejoin the net later if this ever happens and you still want to participate.

Now that you know how the net operates, you will want to listen for the net control operator to announce “are there any new net members?” This is where you say your callsign, and then wait to be acknowledged. Once acknowledged, the net control operator will usually want to know your first name and possible your location (QTH).

Your net control operator will let you know what they need. The net control operator might even ask “do you want to be added to the net?”

Sometimes people make mistakes, so next week, if you do not hear your name or callsign called, wait for the net control operator to ask “are there any late or missed net members?”

Once you understand how the net operates and decide to join, you should try to check in each week, or daily, if the net occurs every day. Don't feel bad about missing the net if you have something important to do, but try to check in as often as you can. Now that you are a member of the net, you can look forward to hours of enjoyment using your ham radio. You will keep in touch, make new friends, and learn new things. It is not unusual for ham radio nets to often get together in person for picnics, dinners and barbeques, or to host an annual Christmas party. Also, once you meet people through the nets, you may want to contact them individually at other times for a QSO (chat) or to ask a question or exchange information. You have made a new friend and contact! Another benefit of participating in weekly (or daily) nets is that sometimes, after the net has concluded, net members hang around and talk back and forth among themselves for a while longer. If you like to talk on your ham radio, this is a good way to pick up some more opportunities to do so!

Once you are having fun participating in nets, please email me and tell me a little about your experiences. Remember that it is your communication that gives me ideas what is most important and most useful for me to write about!