

A Guide for the Virgin SOTA Activator

Activating Skiddaw LD-004 at 931metres / 3,054ft

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Equipment Taken: Yaesu FT817, 2 x 3Ah gel cells, roach pole, HF inverted V, home made five element 144MHz beam, 145MHz handy, various tools, logbook, MFJ-904 ATU, Garmin GPS, digital camera, warm clothing, three litres of water, lunch (x2).

Date: 20th July 2008, 10.00am
Start location: Lat 54° 37' 4.76"N / Lon 3° 6 '54.84"W
Starting ASL: 295 metres
Distance Walked: 5.2km (each way)

If you have ever visited the Lake District, you will know this area provides some of the best hill walking in the UK. The Lake District is also SOTA country, with some 56 recognised sites, and provides both hard and easy opportunities to activate summits.

The program is accessible for both SOTA activators, and for operators at home working stations on the hills. The full rules of SOTA activation have been very well defined, and the program is based on points, the most points being given to the hardest to activate summits.

In the Lake District (code LD) you have the option to activate / work 56 recognised locations, ranging from LD-001 Scafell Pike at 978 Metres (worth 10 points) to LD-056 Arnside Knott at 159 Metres (worth 1 point). The full list is at <http://www.sotawatch.org/summits.php>

Our chosen activation site was LD-004 Skiddaw, mainly because we could identify a clear route up the mountain and the site was located just seven miles from our campsite near Keswick. We had pencilled in the SOTA activation on two previous days, but the weather in the Lake District is changeable and we could see no point in trying to complete the walk in wet and windy conditions.

Sunday, 20th July was chosen mainly because the weather was forecast to be “reasonable” and activity is usually high at the weekend, giving us the maximum chance of working as many stations as possible. The VHF calendar also showed Sunday was a 144MHz backpacker’s contest day, so we knew this would add further band activity.



Dave M0TAZ (left) & John M0UKD (right)

John was keen to try out HF, while I was mainly focused on VHF, so we opted to take both antennas. We had already completed some hill walking earlier in the week, although never with this much equipment so we were prepared for a slow ascent taking everything in our stride. The route we chose meant that the car park was at 295m ASL, meaning we already had a head start over other routes. Parking was limited, and if you don’t arrive in good time you will find no spaces available.



9.30am: We head for the car, having had a good breakfast and nervously re-check our backpacks once again.

10.00am: Arrive in the car park, check backpacks once again and prepare for the ascent. Start off GPS to track our progress, clip handy onto rucksack to monitor S20. The path is well defined; we have a large scale map, compass and GPS, so feel re-assured in our navigational skills. The start of the path is quiet, just two or three other people seen at the start of the route.

Temperature around 13°C, so reasonably warm once you're walking. The sky was a mixture of sun / broken cloud, but it looked nice and bright with a light wind.

11.00am: Stopped at 600 metres, time for a rest and to take in some water. John was carrying the VHF beam, having been fabricated from water pipe we joked with the odd person he was "off to fix a leak on Skiddaw" and "no job was too small". Most people thought we were mad, and we did get a few strange looks en-route.

12.50pm: Arrived on the summit – temperature had dropped significantly and wind chill was now becoming a problem. Thankfully we had packed hat, gloves and extra layers and this was needed as soon as we reached altitude. We had gained around 630 metres in total ascent, and the temperature had now dropped to 9°C, this coupled with the wind-chill could have been a real SOTA stopper. Thankfully our preparation paid off, and we headed for some shelter behind some rocks.

Our first activation was going to be VHF - SSB, and we quickly setup the VHF beam and FT817 getting on the air in around 15 minutes. The

wind was quite strong, maybe gusting to around 30MPH, so we decided on a two-person strategy. I would hold the antenna support, and rotate the beam, leaving John to log and operate. The band was very busy, and we decided to use 2.5w to conserve battery power. Almost immediately we received calls, and once the spot had been placed on the SOTA website we had some mini pile-ups. We worked 27 stations in quick succession, many stations wanted to work us for the back



packer points, but we also completed some SOTA to SOTA QSO's with GW4EVX on NW-051 and 2E0PHL on NP-016.



I had planned to take some video footage of us operating VHF, but this was nearly impossible due to the wind and cold. We decided it was best to operate first, completing as many QSO's as we could in our limited operating time, fighting against the wind, cold and limited battery power.

Lunch was taken sheltering behind the rocks, after a successful VHF SOTA activation. Here you can see the operating location on the summit of Skiddaw.

Other walkers looked on inquisitively with the odd person asking “Can you get channel 5 from up here?” We were conscious that the summit is enjoyed by many people, and tried to make our activation as unobtrusive as possible.

Once we had completed around two hours of operating, and explored the summit, we decided to move down a little for the HF activation. It would have been impossible to setup the roach pole and large HF antenna right on the summit, as this would have caused a major obstruction to walkers. SOTA does allow for this, and recognises the need to operate in a way sensitive to the needs of other hill walkers.

4.00pm: HF Activation - Having found a suitable location a few metres away from the summit, we setup the roach pole. Our plan was to try 3.5MHz, 5MHz and 7MHz using a 66ft doublet, fed with 300Ohm ribbon and tuned with a MFJ-904. HF was slow to start, needing quite a few CQ SOTA to generate some activity, we did manage to get one of the contacts to add a SOTA spot on the cluster, and that prompted many of the stations that had worked us on VHF to find us on HF. We completed 18 contacts and still had plenty of battery power available.



At one point, very strong gusts of wind, probably 40+MPH almost ripped the ribbon feeder from the tuner. Everything worked as planned, although we did have a small drama when the MFJ or maybe the HF antenna would not present anything like 50Ohms to the radio. Having checked and re-checked all the connectors the problem cleared. I was quick to blame the “high quality” MFJ tuner, although I have no evidence to suggest this was the cause.

6.00pm: Almost back to the car - Having been on the hills for eight hours, we had packed in a great walk, and highly successful VHF and HF SOTA activation. On arriving back at the car around 6.30pm we both had very tired legs!

The evening was complemented with a nice pub meal and a couple of pints of Sneek Lifter.

We obviously didn't learn our lesson, and Monday was followed with a further SOTA activation of Robinson LD-021 at 731 metres ASL.

The story continues...

73

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Pictures from our Skiddaw SOTA activation

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/m0taz/sets/72157606378691044>

Videos from our Skiddaw SOTA activation

<http://uk.youtube.com/watch?v=E2tKJml03qs>

<http://uk.youtube.com/watch?v=pzGqBvB8RtQ>

