

K5P NA89 & N5C NA82

By Mike AB5EB & Skip W5GAI

The story of NA-089 has been a long one for me. As a kid living in Texas, NA-089 was very rare island group, having been activated once by a group of hams which included W5ZPA in 1986. Another operation had occurred in 1994 that involved N5UR, however I was unable to work them on that trip. Those operations took place on the Chandeleur Islands in a Kerr-Mcgee oil facility that no longer exists. The Kerr-Mcgee facility was the only structure with power that existed in the NA-089 group. Most of the Chandeleur Islands land mass from those early operations no longer exists due to the constant onslaught by mother nature. The islands that make up the NA-089 group are basically made of shifting sand and only sit a few feet above sea level. These islands were right in the path of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, which devastated New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Many of these islands disappeared over night as the Cat 5 Hurricane plowed through the region.

In 2011 NA-89 was still on my needed list of IOTAs. For an island that was just a days drive away, it was too much of a draw for this IOTA activator to resist. Having my own bay boat, "Extra Shift", NA-089 was a prime target for me as I looked to start activating the Louisiana IOTA's. I had already activated NA-119 & NA-168. The initial trip to NA-89 came together with Dragan (K0AP) and Hector (XE2K/AD6D). We had decided on going to Halfmoon Island (Grand Island) which was much closer to the coast than the Chandeleurs. That expedition was a large success and it would lead the same group of guys to activate NA-119 and then adding AD5A to the group to activate NA-120. Much was learned about activating IOTA's from these and other ones over the years. Eight years after our last expedition to NA-089 and no activations since, the pull back to NA-089 was becoming real .

Dragan, K0AP, was the first to suggest going back to NA-089 in early 2018. There was another IOTA that had wanted to activate along the gulf coast, Cat Island NA-082. Dallas K1DW and Tom K5EEA activated Cat Island NA-082 in the 2000 IOTA contest. According to K1DW their best QSO was a CQ answered by the famous Jim, VK9NS, from Norfolk Island

Cat Island is 10 miles off the Mississippi Coast. I had the idea of doing both groups in one trip. A look at the map showed Cat Island is 17 miles from Halfmoon. However, that was a longer trip then I really wanted to make with a loaded bay boat in more exposed waters than the protected approach to Halfmoon island from Ansley, MS through Lake Borgne. The time needed to activate both with one team would take longer and twice as much time would be spent in taking stations down and putting them up, which is no small task. So, I went back to the maps and found Isle au Pitre, which locals call "Pete". Pitre Island is a small island, visited more frequently by Mississippi fisherman than those in Louisiana due to its location. The problem was that, from a maritime navigation perspective, Pitre is a very exposed island. It was on the northern edge of Chandeleur Sound and there is no land mass protecting the island from the open ocean to the east. This was of concern, and to do both island groups simultaneously would require 2 teams.

At this point it seemed that doing both was very possible. We could leave out of Gulfport, MS. Cat Island is about 10 miles from Gulfport and Pitre was 7 miles SW of Cat. With a base camp on Cat, I was willing to take the risk of activating Pitre. Weather conditions would have to be right to take my boat to Pitre. One of the first guys that came to mind to ask if there was any interest in going was Skip

W5GAI. Skip is a very active IOTA chaser and he has also activated a couple of IOTA's in P29. He was willing to help put the trip together, so we started planning the trip.

Skip was able to secure a house with power on Cat Island, owned the Boddie family who bought the whole 2500-acre island in 1911. Cat Island had been discovered by French Explorers D'Iberville and Bienville in February 1699. It was initially settled by the French Ladner family; whose many progeny populate the Gulf states. In 1781, with the Spanish now in control, one of their soldiers, Juan de Cuevas, settled on Cat and married Marie Ladner, and Cuevas' progeny can be found all over the Gulf states as well. Most of Cat Island is now owned by the Federal Government and MS as part of the Gulf Islands National Seashore.

The house at the Boddie camp stood on stilts, it is 3BR/2BA/Liv-Din-Kit with A/C and a 12KW generator and a full patio deck on the ground floor, plus 100 ft. of dock, which was rebuilt after Katrina leveled all structures on the island in 2005. The camp is located on a channel inside Cat Island and offers excellent protection from the weather making it a good place to operate. We decided that AD5A, K0AP and AB5EB would set up the Pitre station, with the chance for everyone to operate on the island and vice versa. Skip was able to get 4 more operators interested in going. Alan W5XMD from Gulfport had made a 4-hour day trip activation to NA-082 Ship Island just east of Cat, and he had a 27ft twin outboard boat. Lee N5LN from nearby Slidell Louisiana also offered his 26ft twin outboard boat. Both boats were made for the more rigorous offshore weather that can be found in these waters. David W5XU from Covington, LA, an excellent CW operator who had been on several DX-peditions such as South Sandwich and Mellish Reef, and Hickey W5ULR from Folsom, LA also joined the group for his first IOTA trip.

Dragan K0AP, Mike AD5A and AB5EB made their way to Southern Mississippi on Thursday and we all met at the marina in Gulfport MS on Friday morning October 4 to depart for the islands. The predicted sea conditions had been 1 to 2-foot seas all weekend. It looked like everything was going to go well, however just prior to leaving there was a change in the forecast with a weak cold front moving through on Saturday evening and the winds shifting to the east. Murphy had struck before we left the dock, so it was starting to feel like a normal IOTA Expedition. There was a delay in the team departure, more fuel and food provisioning on the way to the harbor and during loading at the launch site Hickey W5ULR misplaced his truck key which was never located after a thorough search.

The seas were as flat as you could ever wish to see on the way to the islands. The only waves were those made by the three boats as we quickly made our way to Cat. Alan and Dragan lead the way and after a short 9-mile trip we entered the channel on Cat Island and easily made it to the cabin. Cat Island got its name from the early French explorers who, thinking that the bandit faced Racoons on the island were cats, named it Cat Island. Cat is a natural paradise. With its tall Pine trees and moss-covered Live Oaks, it is an amazing natural habitat for many creatures. We were visited daily by a cute cottontail rabbit that followed us like a dog. One of the most consistent sounds on the island is the screech of the eagle-like Osprey and the call of the Belted Kingfisher. The house that N5C operated out of was an excellent spot at the end of the channel, close to saltwater to the north and south.

After a quick stop at Cat to unload supplies and radios the K5P team, consisting of AD5A, K0AP and AB5EB made their way towards Isle au Pitre. With the excellent weather and flat seas, the team made the 5-mile trip with no problem. Pitre is a very low-lying island with a ridge of piled up oyster shells that is close to 6 feet tall. The dune is only a few feet wide at its peak and then drops into a marsh which is the rest of Pitre island. We arrived at the island at low tide and started to unload around noon on Friday. There was about 75ft of mud at low tide that we had to walk through to get the equipment onto the island. We had chosen the Eastern side of the island which appeared to have the best

anchorage for the boat, it would end up not being the best choice. It was challenging unloading the equipment. Ashmore Reef (VK9AR) was very hot with no wind, however it had no mud and a fairly short walk to the operating site, St Paul (CY9M) involved scaling a 20ft cliff and hoisting equipment up for several hours, in very cool weather. Pitre was very hot, humid, no wind. Slogging through the mud brought the team to a point of exhaustion. We took multiple breaks, drinking close to a case of water over about a 6-hour period. One could easily sink a foot into mud with a misplaced step. After a few hours K5P was up and running with K3 and KPA500 amps with ¼ wave verticals and Kenwood TS590S with a 20m vertical. With the large pile ups we all forgot about the ordeal of setting up.

The weather conditions had started to change that first evening. The winds were picking up from the east and the seas had built to 1 foot with a few 2-foot waves. The changing conditions were becoming an issue for the boat which was anchored in about 3 feet of water. Unlike the other IOTA's I have done in Louisiana, Pitre offered no place to hide from the waves. You had to pick a side of the island and then take whatever mother nature threw at you. As the QSO totals grew so did the waves and as we approached sundown I was becoming increasingly uncomfortable with the weather conditions. With the stronger east wind, I moved the boat to the Northwest side of the island and found a spot for the boat that allowed me to float it to the beach. This would have been a better place to operate but we had put lots of work putting up the stations and the sun would be down soon. We would have to overnight in place. However, I knew a "weak" cold front was supposed to blow in around 10pm that night which would make the Northwest side of the island the exposed side and would leave the original location of the boat the more protected area. The front was forecast to blow in from the northeast with 5 mph winds and after midnight the seas were to calm back down to 1 foot. This sounded promising for Saturday, however Saturday afternoon the prediction was 2 to 4-foot seas from the east. Right where our camp and boat were located. It would be impossible to load the boat on Sunday morning with 2 to 4-foot seas beating down on us. The idea of carrying all the equipment by hand for a ¼ mile to the other side of the island did not even seem physically possible, given the time needed. So as quick as we got on the air, the weather conditions were already starting to change our plans. My head was spinning at this point, I was glad to have cell service and was able to call Alan, W5XMD, who has good experience in the area. We both felt the best place for the boat was on the Eastern end of the island overnight then rethinking things Saturday morning. I moved the boat back to her original spot and set a good anchor in the bow and ran a second anchor to the beach from the stern to allow us to pull her in when we needed access to the boat.

The seas continued to build Friday night and we had occasional 2 to 3-ft seas that made my boat Extra Shift float around like a fishing cork. The anchor held well though. I left the stern side with enough slack so that she could nose into the waves as the winds dictated. It was not a comfortable position to be in at all. If she lost anchorage the boat would be blown onto the beach at high tide, possibly leaving her beached in the morning. Even worse, I could not tell if she was taking much water over the bow, this could drive the bilge pump all night until the battery was dead and possibly even sink the boat, although it was only in a few feet of water. I did think of moving her in the dark to the northwest side and take my chances with the cold front, however the maneuver seemed too dangerous at night. She would have to stay put; I was eager for the cold front to calm the seas.

As I was struggling with the concerns of being the boat captain Dragan and Mike were working the pile ups. Conditions were excellent, working Europe, Asia and Australia with relative ease. I was operating the 40m cw pile up when the front blew in. It was from the northeast and it seemed like it was going to be OK. However, the winds shifted from the northwest to due north at about 20 mph. After a few hours the winds died around 2 am and Extra Shift was still in place. I woke AD5A up at 3am to

continue the 40m pile as the JA's built. It was an exhausting day. Even in the hot, muggy tent I managed to fall asleep.

As I woke Saturday morning, after a solid 3 hours of sleep, AD5A was finishing up a large JA run. Dragan was still sleeping in his tent and to my delight the Extra Shift was right where I left her. I discussed with the team about the change in weather and we all agreed that we should leave the island that morning, given that we would not be able to load up in 2 to 4-ft seas and it was not practical to carry all the equipment to the western side of the island. The bay would have 3 to 5-foot seas on Sunday, more than I was comfortable with in a loaded bay boat. I went back to Cat that morning, just in time for some breakfast sausage and eggs. Lee N5LN was the camp chef and he did not disappoint. It was unfortunate for the guys left on Pitre who had potato chips and some grapes for breakfast. I had no intention of letting the guys know, but upon Team Pitre's return to Cat, Lee could not help but ask if they were aware of the excellent breakfast they had missed. I was busted! Alan W5XMD took me back out to Pitre to retrieve the equipment and operators in his boat. It took us a couple of hours and we were headed back to Cat. K5P was done with over 2000 contacts in about 20 hours of operating. Although disappointed in having to leave Pitre NA-089 early we were excited about being able to operate from Cat.

The Cat island team got set up Friday morning after unloading provisions, radios and antennas from the boats. Skip W5GAI set up a fiberglass push up mast $\frac{1}{4}$ wave vertical with wires and radials for 40/30/20/17 while Hickey, W5ULR, set up his FT-950 and Ameritron AL-811 500 Watt Amp for SSB. David W5XU set up his Ten Tec Eagle + Ameritron ALS-500 watt amp station with a Butternut HF9V $\frac{1}{4}$ wave 80-6M vertical with radials for CW on 40/30/20/17. Alan, W5XMD, set up his Yaesu FT1200 with an ALS-600 amp and Crank IR $\frac{1}{4}$ wave vertical with 1 raised radial tuned for CW & SSB on 20 meters.

The operation on Cat suffered from interstation interference. Their band filters were not getting the job done. This had severely limited their ability to operate multiple stations at once and slowed the QSO rate. With the addition of the Dunestar filters and a K3/KPA500 from the now QRT K5P station on Saturday afternoon, this issue was fixed and Cat Is NA-092 was now on 3 bands simultaneously.

Saturday afternoon on Cat consisted of great conversation, food and pile ups. Hickey W5ULR's wife had sent along an excellent spaghetti and Alan cooked up some spicy rice and chicken. There were plenty of adult beverages to be had, and N5C NA-082 was the place to be as the seas continued to build. Saturday night gave us a good opening to JA and far east on 40. Sunday morning allowed for a good 20m opening into EU but as the bands closed, we began to pack up N5C. The QSO total from NA-082 finished up at just over 2,000 QSO's.

We departed Cat island in a convoy of 3 boats around 2pm on Sunday Oct 6. The seas were very rough on the way in with 3 to 5-foot waves. I tucked the Extra Shift into the wake behind Lee N5LN who's twin hull boat was made for these conditions. The low free board of my boat Extra Shift was great for approaches to shallow water islands, but she was not made for these conditions. Lee was able to smooth things out for us on the way in and although the seas were rough it allowed for safe passage to Gulfport harbor. Had Lee not been there to pave the way we would have had to stay on Cat until calmer seas.

Between the two islands we made over 4000 QSO's, and the new friendships showed some of the finest points of this great hobby we share.

	K5P	N5C		
QSO's	2094	2061		
Uniques	1725	1758		
Pct. Uniques	82.3	85.3		
Total Operation Time	20:30	45:07:00		
On Air	18:25	27:13:00		
Off Air	2:05	17:54		
DXCC's	68	66		
Band	40m	30m	20m	17m
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K5P				
QSO's	919	521	649	5
Pct	43.9%	24.9%	31.0%	0.2%
N5C				
QSO's	1016	85	934	26
Pct	40.7%	4.1%	26.0%	1.3%
Continents %				
	NA	EU	JA	OC
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K5P	41.2%	37.8%	17.7%	1.5%
N5C	44.6%	43.0%	10.4%	1.0%
Mode				
	CW	SSB	Digital	

K5P

QSO's	1811	164	119
Pct	86.5%	7.8%	5.7%
N5C			
QSO's	1484	577	0
Pct	72.0%	28.0%	0.0%