



It's OK To Call Him A Ham

Scott Williamson, Northwestel's manager of transportation and facilities, spends his weekends helicoptering to mountaintop radio transmitters as part of the Yukon Amateur Radio Association. By [Jacob Boon](#)

Nov 22 2019

From the [NOVEMBER 2019 Issue](#)

When an emergency happens, the Yukon Amateur Radio Association (YARA) springs into action. Across the territory, some 48 transmitters spread out on mountaintops and through remote locations are maintained by this small group of volunteer hobbyists. The network aids in emergency communications and provides a link for travellers, covering all major traffic corridors in the Yukon. All of those relays are off-the-grid, relying on battery or solar power.

“So no matter what else happens that system stays working,” says Scott Williamson, vice president of YARA.

It's not the only communication network he has a hand in managing. Williamson is also the manager of transportation and facilities for Northwestel. He took some time away from his day-job to talk to about his hobby and the importance of maintaining open communication.

What is an amateur radio enthusiast?

It's a hobby that spans all sorts of different aspects and spectrum, all tied to radio and

communications. There's your stereotypical ham that's got an antenna farm on his house and hides in his basement and talks around the world at night depending on atmospheric conditions.

I think that's what people would picture.

One of my claims to fame is I had an invisible radio installation in my car that I drove around. Nobody would have realized there was a radio in it because I buried wires in the bumpers and hid things behind the ashtray covers and stuff like that so it was completely invisible.

What does the Yukon Amateur Radio Association do?

One of the unique things it's achieved is we've built a pretty extensive network of repeaters—I think we're up to 21 mountaintop sites now in this area—that are all linked together. So from a mobile rig like what I have in my car, when I'm out on the snow-machine or whatever, I can raise one of those mountaintop repeaters and talk to anybody else that's connected to that same network of repeaters all over the territory. We've always got a way to talk to somebody, which is obviously an important thing.

Building a backup communications network is interesting, given your job with Northwestel.

Yeah, that's somewhat coincidental. I've been involved with YARA a long time before I worked with Northwestel. The Yukon has proven to be a place that maybe values some of those backup communication systems more than other jurisdictions, simply because it's a fairly remote place where communities are far apart. Small jurisdictions, they can't build radio systems and repeater networks all by themselves. In the case here, they give us a little bit of support and in exchange, a bunch of volunteer effort maintains that radio system. When disasters strike or when communication failures happen, we come out of the woodwork and chip in to help.

When did you first get into amateur radio?

I got my license in 1991. A long, long time ago. I lived in northwestern Ontario in a remote community that didn't have lots of communications infrastructure, either. So a buddy and I decided that was a neat way that we could go trekking about the bush and stay in contact. I left that area in 1999 or something like that and spent four years living in Winnipeg. I didn't use or do anything related to the hobby for that period of time, primarily because I was living in a big city. I moved to the Yukon in 2003. Shortly after that, I realized it was a useful hobby to have in the remote and backcountry here in the Yukon. Since then I've been sort of a major player with the association.

What other things are the association involved in?

We're gearing up for one of our big community involvements, the Klondike Road Relay. *[Editor's Note: The relay is an annual 175-kilometre foot race between Skagway and Whitehorse that raises funds for Sport Yukon.]* We provide communications for all the checkpoints between Skagway and Whitehorse. We relay communications and help both the race officials coordinate some of their efforts and track down people. If there's a more severe incident then we would be engaged to call an ambulance or the RCMP. We also participate in a lot of the emergency preparedness exercises. I think it was 2010 when we had a major communications failure in the community and basically all landlines and cell phones and all that stopped working. That morning I think we had more than 20 volunteers stationed around the community. We had

somebody at the airport. We were relaying communications from the government and to the public about what was going on and what to do if there were issues and things like that. We're kind of always ready to go when things like that happen.

What is it about amateur radio that speaks to you?

I would say, and this is probably common in most of our membership, there's a certain technical geek in all of us that likes to play with stuff. So that's certainly a big part of this. This has been the first hobby I've ever had that involves riding on helicopters several times every summer.

These repeater sites that we have around the territory are very remote. As a result, I've been able to get to places that I don't think I would have ever seen any other way. Our highest one is at the top of Mount Decoeli near Haines Junction at 8,400 feet. That's not a place that most people get to every day and I usually get there once a year.

Helicoptering to a mountain peak is pretty far from the geek in their basement.

That's right.