



Copyright held by WVM GRS and Original Author. No reprinting allowed without prior written permission.

Train Watching Basics

By Mike Carski

Among the many ways people participate in the railroad hobby, the simple act of watching trains is the most popular. Some simply enjoy the train itself whizzing by, while others watch for new locomotives by number and type. Some look for the older first and second generation diesels still running. A few even look for certain styles of freight cars and record the owners markings, that show ownership.

But a great number "chase" trains for the photographic aspect, more on this later. Before you take photo's, you must know where to go to take them. In general, just find a spot by a busy mainline, and sooner or later you'll see a train. Railfans usually try to make the most of their trackside time, so they make use of the many resources available to assist in locating the best spots to view the action.

Maps are a must, state highway maps show rail lines along with major and secondary roads. US Geological Survey maps show the above, along with all back roads, trails, etc. The 7.5 minute, Series 24, U.S.G.S. top maps are usually the best. General purpose atlases that show small areas in great detail can be helpful and there are atlases that show only rail lines, but these usually don't show reference points. Finally, the internet can help. Use a service that lists "trains" as a hobby, click on and look for "railfan" heading, it will list email addresses of railfans nation wide and you can exchange info on the best train watching areas.

The need of good maps is crucial if you are going to attempt "chasing", which is the art of following a train from spot to spot to watch and/or photograph a given train in a variety of locations. For some selected areas, Railfan guide books are available, these include some maps, location of major junctions, railyards, optimum photo locations, where to buy extra film and food or beverage, and sometimes traffic overviews and scanner frequencies.

Photography is an important part of the rail hobby. By taking photos, railfans can have a visual record of what they have seen and where they have been. Many take photos for documentation, while others enjoy mixing trains with the background available. Share your photos with other railfans for input and advice.

A basic question is what format to use; prints, slides, or video?

- A. Color prints: Film and processing are widely available and the finished product needs no special equipment to view.
- B. B&W or Color Slides: also known as transparencies, because of their sharpness, compact size for storage, longer archival life span, versatility (prints can be made from them), and ease of showing to groups when projected on a screen.
- C. Videotape: Video goes beyond still photography, by adding movement and sound and there is no waiting for film to come back from the processor. You can record a train and view the footage when you get home and edit it to your choosing.

Finally, listening in to the radio transmissions of the train crews and dispatcher. Crew members use radio to converse with each other during switching operations and trackside defect detectors "talk" via radio, to report their findings.

Thanks to widely available, easy to use devices called "scanners", a person can listen in on railroad radio talk and obtain info on train locations and general railroad operations.

Scanners are radios that continuously check or scan a group of user selected radio transmission frequencies. When the scanner locates a frequency in use, it stops to allow the user to listen, when the talking stops, the scanner resumes its scan of the channels (frequencies) programmed into it.

There are 97 different frequencies (channels) allotted to the railroad industry nationwide by the FCC. A scanner allows the user to monitor at least twenty channels and up to hundreds, depending on the scanner and amount of storable memory.



Copyright held by WVM GRS and Original Author. No reprinting allowed without prior written permission.

Scanners come in three different types, portable, base, and mobile.

- A. Portable: Are the most popular, because of their compact size and battery power allows them to be taken anywhere.
- B. Base: Scanners run off AC house electricity and have better audio quality and antenna capabilities than portables.
- C. Mobile: Scanners use the DC power of the motor vehicle, have better sound, and antennas. Since the advent of the portable, permanently mounted mobile units are becoming less and less used, as the portable can double for both units.

Railroad frequencies are very easy to locate, Kalmbach Publishing puts out a book entitled "Compendium of Railroad Radio Frequencies," 15th Edition. It sells for \$18.95, and is a must have for radio railfanning.

WVM GRS Editor's Notes: Some additional Internet Resources for those interested.

The Central Virginia Railfan web site at: <http://www.trainweb.com/varail/>

The Railfan Network web site at: <http://www.railfan.net/>

The NMRA Directory of World Wide Rail Sites at: <http://www.ribbonrail.com/nmra/>