

Some thoughts on configuring an emergency radio monitoring post

By Jock Elliott, KB2GOM

Anyone who has been on this planet for more than a decade knows that trouble can show up almost any time. It can be a large event – a hurricane, a tornado, a blizzard, an earthquake – or something small: a tree branch rubbing a transformer, a bit of malware, a civil misadventure, or even a vehicle hitting a utility pole in the wrong place at the wrong time.

As Murphy's Law neatly puts it: *if something can go wrong, it will.*

Whatever the cause, when the fertilizer hits the fan, once you get clear of any immediate physical danger, you will want to find out what's going on and so you can figure out what to do next. To do that, you need information. That's where your emergency radio monitoring post – whether or not your smartphone is working – can prove extremely useful.

News from nearby

At a bare minimum, you will want to monitor local broadcasting. That means you will want a high quality AM/FM radio that will run for an extended period off batteries. You will want to know which local stations have back-up power and have actual news personnel. (In addition, you will want a supply of spare batteries. If you decide to use rechargeable batteries, you will want to figure out – before an emergency happens – how you will recharge them.)

With that in mind, here are three radios that I have used over extended periods and can recommend without reservation.



CCrane Skywave SSB 2

The [CCrane Skywave SSB 2](#) is a radio that brings a lot of capabilities in a diminutive package (3" W x 4.75" H x 1.1" D). It can receive: AM: 520 – 1710 kHz (10 kHz Steps), AM: 522 – 1620 kHz (9 kHz Steps – International), FM: 87.5 – 108 MHz (Regular Mode), FM: 76 – 108 MHz (When 9kHz is Selected), Shortwave: 1711 – 29999 kHz, (Includes SSB Fine Tuning in increments of 10Hz, providing the ability to listen to long-distance ham radio communications), Aviation: 118 – 137 MHz with scan capabilities, and Weather Band with alert capabilities.

It will run for about 65 hours on a pair of AA batteries. It comes with an adapter that can be used to connect to a long-wire antenna for improved reception of shortwave and SSB signals.

The CCrane Skywave SSB was the first radio I purchased when I got back into shortwave listening, and I have employed it to monitor AM, FM, ham communications, air band, and weather alerts. It is a pint-sized powerhouse that delivers a ton of versatility, and I really enjoy using it.



CCRadio SolarBT

The [CCRadio SolarBT](#) measures 6 inches wide by 3 inches high by 2.5 inches deep and weighs just a bit over a pound with batteries installed. The CCRadio SolarBT can receive AM (MW) band from 520 to 1710 kHz, FM from 87.5 to 108 MHz (76-108 MHz in expanded mode), and 7 NOAA Weather Radio channels from 162.400 MHz to 162.550 MHz. In my opinion, it provides a step up in performance on the AM, FM, and weather bands. It does not receive shortwave.

What really sets the SolarBT apart is the flexibility of powering it. There are five options: (1) an 18650 Li-ion 3.7 volt rechargeable battery which provides around 50 hours of playing time (the manual advises fully charging the internal battery before use), (2) 3 AA batteries (not included, but good for about 40 hours of playing time. Don't use Lithium batteries, the manual warns.), (3) a 110 mA solar panel (park the radio in a sunny window to keep it trickle charged), (4) a wind-up dynamo generator (300-500 mA at about two rotations per second. 90 seconds of winding will

power the radio for 8-13 minutes or will charge your cell phone enough to make a few quick calls), or (5) a 5-volt DC, 1000 mA micro USB cable or optional AC adapter.



CCRadio 2E

The [CCRadio 2E](#) is large – 11" W x 6.5" H x 4" D – but very capable. The CCrane company calls the 2E its “flagship,” and I can see why: in my experience, the 2E delivers exceptional performance in receiving AM, FM, and NOAA Weather Band with Weather Alert. In addition, it can also receive the 2-Meter Ham Band, which could be a vital source of useful information during an emergency.

In normal operation, the 2E can run off house power. But when the electricity goes off, it switches automatically to four internal alkaline D cells (user supplied), which offer roughly 170 hours of operation at a moderate volume level with the display light and weather alert feature off.

The 2E isn't just an excellent emergency radio, it's a really great general purpose radio that will please habitual radio listeners and delight DXers who hunt for distant stations.

News from farther out

Once you have your high quality AM/FM radio, and have stored the local stations with backup power and news personnel, you will want to program at least some of the memories with regional rolling news stations in case you want to reach farther afield to find out what is going on. Rolling news stations broadcast news ‘round the clock.

The list includes:

- 780, WBM, Chicago, IL
- 1010, WINS, New York City
- 1030, WBZ, Boston, MA
- 1060, KYW, Philadelphia, PA
- 1090, WBAL, Baltimore, MD
- 1130, WBBR, New York City
- 1500, WFED, Washington, DC

If you live in North America, you can create your own News Cruiser list for your emergency radio by consulting <https://radio-locator.com/> and using the search function to find stations that broadcast in the “News” format.

Once you have assembled your list, test it out with the radio you would grab in an emergency and see how well they perform. You might find the perfect combination that you like or you might discover that there is some room for improvement.

In any event, I heartily recommend that every household has an emergency radio that can be easily deployed to discover essential information when the fertilizer hits the fan. The point is to discover what works for you and to discover it *before* it is needed.

Now, I can almost hear what you are thinking “What if I already have a radio that I really like that runs on rechargeable batteries?”

Fair enough. My answer would be: buy some additional batteries that fit your radio, charge them up, and make sure that you keep them topped up from time to time.



If your favorite radio does not receive NOAA weather band, get yourself a dedicated weather radio to fill in the gap. I own and can recommend the Midland WR120 Weather Alert Radio. It offers excellent performance and very sophisticated alert programming options.

Additional information nearby

Another potential source of information are local public agency radio transmissions in the VHF and UHF ranges that could be heard with a scanner. But – and this is a very big but – that depends a lot on whether your local government (first responders, etc.) transmissions are encrypted. You need to check a source like <https://www.radioreference.com/db/> to see if Public Safety transmissions in your area are encrypted. If they are, you will be unable to decipher them, no matter what equipment you own. However, an inexpensive analog-only scanner may prove very useful for listening to ham transmissions VHF and UHF (2 meters and 440 primarily) as well as FRS and GMRS.

If your local Public Safety radio systems are not encrypted, the RR database will give the details of the radio systems used by those agencies, and that in turn will determine the level of sophistication of scanner that will be required to hear their transmission.

The Radio Reference database also includes [a listing of national radio frequencies](#) including [a list of federal disaster frequencies](#) such as might be used by FEMA. In addition, I have found that the folks at the Radio Reference forum are generous with their time and expertise: <https://forums.radioreference.com/>. If all this sounds a bit daunting, there are scanners that have built-in databases of all available frequencies and radio systems, and all you need to do is put in your zip code and select which services you want to hear. I own one, they work well, but they are expensive.

Once you have chosen the appropriate scanner, you will want CDERN – Capital District Emergency Regional Network -- interoperability frequencies, and Federal Disaster frequencies programmed into your scanner for potential news gathering in a wider emergency.

Extreme reach

It might be helpful to have shortwave radio to listen to shortwave broadcasters, with Single Sideband to monitor ham frequencies.

Summoning Help

Assuming that the power is out, your cell phone may or may not work (during Hurricane Katrina, some people found that they could not make voice phone calls, but text messages would go through).

If the cell phones are not working, two-way radio can be useful to summon help and gather information. There are multiple 2-meter or 440 ham repeaters in our area with backup power, and a robust GMRS repeater system. FRS bubble-pack radios are good for staying in touch while getting around the immediate neighborhood. It's also good to have a few spares to hand to neighbors if the need arises