

Across the Water and On the Air

KD8ZEI(Brandon Nilsson) and N8XQM(Doug Mahr) activate remote North Bass Island using adaptable antennas, a private boat, and two portable stations.

By KD8ZEI and N8XQM

DATE	BANDS	ANTENNAS	TOTAL QSOs
Sept. 12, 2026	40, 20, 15 & 2 m	Dipole • Vertical • EFHW	472



KD8ZEI and N8XQM at the North Bass Island activation site beside the antenna installation and Lake Erie shoreline. Photo supplied by the operators.

North Bass Island is the kind of destination that makes a portable activation feel like an expedition. On September 12, 2026, KD8ZEI and N8XQM arrived aboard a private boat, bringing their stations and antenna systems to one of Ohio’s most isolated Lake Erie islands.

A Remote Lake Erie Destination

Also known as Isle St. George, North Bass Island is secluded and largely undeveloped. The Ohio Department of Natural Resources describes the island as accessible only by private boat, charter service, or aircraft. Much of the island is protected as North Bass Island State Park, and its quiet shoreline provides habitat and an important spring and fall stopover for migratory songbirds. The limited access and absence of routine ferry service give North Bass a character very different from the more heavily visited Lake Erie islands.

“Everything needed for the activation had to arrive with us aboard the private boat.”

The operators planned for activity on 40, 20, and 15 meters, with 2-meter FM simplex available for local and over-water contacts. Their antenna choices combined a fixed dipole with two adaptable field systems, allowing them to respond to band conditions without carrying a full-size antenna for every band.

Building the Stations

N8XQM used a 20-meter dipole installed about 20 feet above ground and operated that antenna throughout the activation. The straightforward wire antenna provided a dependable station for making contacts while the second station changed configurations.



N8XQM operates from the sheltered field station near the Lake Erie shoreline.

Lake Erie on 146.520 MHz

A GP-15 antenna mounted about 22 feet high supported 2-meter operation. Both operators made contacts on 146.520 MHz FM simplex with amateur radio operators in Ohio, Michigan, and Canada. From a small island near the international boundary, those direct simplex contacts were a fitting reminder that VHF can be especially enjoyable from an open, over-water location.

The 2-meter contacts added a distinctly local dimension. While HF signals reached beyond the Lake Erie region, the FM simplex exchanges connected the island station with nearby amateurs on three sides of the lake and across an international border.



KD8ZEI operates from the North Bass Island station. A laptop and Dentrion Super Tuner are visible at the operating position.

KD8ZEI used a Buddipole antenna system reconfigured as a vertical. A 17-foot telescoping whip served as the vertical radiator, while two horizontal 6-foot telescoping whips served as elevated radials. With help from a Dentrion Super Tuner, KD8ZEI obtained a usable match and put the antenna on the air.

The arrangement demonstrated one advantage of a modular portable antenna: when the original plan needs refinement, the available parts can be rearranged into a workable system.

KD8ZEI also deployed a 68-foot end-fed half-wave antenna in an inverted-V configuration. Together, the vertical and EFHW provided flexibility for 40, 20, and 15 meters, while the 20-meter dipole gave N8XQM a dedicated antenna for sustained activity on that band.

Radio Equipment and Power Systems

KD8ZEI operated a Yaesu FT-450D paired with a Signalink interface for digital operation. N8XQM operated an Icom IC-7300 as the primary HF transceiver, while a Yaesu FT-100 provided 2-meter FM simplex capability for local and over-water contacts.

Power for the activation was supplied by lithium-ion batteries, power inverters, and supporting portable power equipment. Expecting a completely self-sufficient deployment, the operators transported everything required for a full field station, including radios, antennas, batteries, power distribution equipment, computers, accessories, and station hardware.

One surprise awaited the operators upon arrival. Significant improvements and renovation projects were underway on North Bass Island through the Ohio Department of Natural Resources. Recent ODNR projects have included restoration and modernization of historic island facilities and visitor accommodations. To the operators' surprise, shore power was available at the activation site, along with a small pavilion that provided protection from changing Lake Erie weather conditions. This reduced the need to rely exclusively on battery power and helped create a comfortable operating position throughout the activation.

472 Contacts from the Island

By the end of the activation, KD8ZEI had logged 294 QSOs and N8XQM had logged 178 QSOs, for a combined total of 472 contacts. The result reflected both steady operating and a station layout that allowed the two operators to stay active with different antenna choices.

The 20-meter dipole delivered consistency, the GP-15 opened a path to regional 2-meter simplex contacts, and KD8ZEI's reconfigured Buddipole and inverted-V EFHW expanded the HF options. None of the antennas was unusually elaborate, but each served a clear purpose.

Minor Obstacles and Challenges

The available power outlets under the pavilion were protected by GFCIs, and operation on 20 meters repeatedly tripped them. A line noise isolator provided temporary relief, but the GFCI continued to trip. Fortunately, the team had brought multiple extension cords and extra connectors. That allowed the stations to be connected to direct power at the marina, where the available outlet did not have a GFCI. Without the spare cords and connectors, the activation would have been limited.

The operators also encountered substantial QRM and, at times, other stations began transmitting on frequencies the team had occupied for hours. Despite these minor setbacks, the operators adapted, kept the stations running, and completed a successful activation.

Lessons from North Bass

For portable operators, the North Bass Island activation reinforced several useful lessons. A remote site rewards careful transportation planning, especially when every mast, feed line, tuner, power source, tool, and spare part must travel aboard a private boat. Antenna flexibility matters, too. A modular system may not be used exactly as first envisioned, but it can still become an effective radiator when paired with thoughtful deployment and a capable tuner.

Most of all, the activation showed how Amateur Radio can connect a secluded place with a much wider community. From an island reachable only by water or air, KD8ZEI and N8XQM put North Bass Island on the air, crossed Lake Erie on VHF, and completed hundreds of HF contacts. The private-boat trip got them to the island; radio carried the island to everyone else.

North Bass Island background: Ohio Department of Natural Resources, "North Bass Island State Park," ohiodnr.gov.