

# Supermassive Black Hole Binaries and Transient Radio Events: Studies in Pulsar Astronomy

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Swinburne University



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# Abstract

The field of *pulsar astronomy* encompasses a rich breadth of astrophysical topics. The research in this thesis contributes to two particular subjects of pulsar astronomy: gravitational wave science, and identifying celestial sources of pulsed radio emission.

We first investigated the detection of supermassive black hole (SMBH) binaries, which are the brightest expected source of gravitational waves for pulsar timing. We considered whether two electromagnetic SMBH tracers, velocity-resolved emission lines in active nuclei, and radio galactic nuclei with spatially-resolved, flat-spectrum cores, can reveal systems emitting gravitational waves in the pulsar timing band. We found that there are systems which may in principle be simultaneously detectable by both an electromagnetic signature and gravitational emission, however the probability of actually identifying such a system is low (they will represent  $\ll 1\%$  of a randomly selected galactic nucleus sample). This study accents the fact that electromagnetic indicators may be used to explore binary populations down to the “stalling radii” at which binary inspiral evolution may stall indefinitely at radii exceeding those which produce gravitational radiation in the pulsar timing band. We then performed a search for binary SMBH holes in archival Very Long Baseline Interferometry data for 3114 radio-luminous active galactic nuclei. One source was detected as a double nucleus. This result is interpreted in terms of post-merger timescales for SMBH centralisation, implications for “stalling”, and the relationship of radio activity in nuclei to mergers. Our analysis suggested that binary pair evolution of SMBHs (both of masses  $>10^8 M_{\odot}$ ) spends less than 500 Myr in progression from the merging of galactic stellar cores to within the purported stalling radius for SMBH pairs, giving no evidence for an excess of stalled binary systems at small separations. Circumstantial evidence showed that the relative state of radio emission between paired SMBHs is correlated within orbital separations of 2.5 kpc.

We then searched for transient radio events in two archival pulsar surveys, and in the new High Time Resolution Universe (HTRU) Survey. We present the methodology employed for these searches, noting the novel addition of methods for single-event recognition, automatic interference mitigation, and data inspection. 27 new neutron stars were discovered. We discuss the relationship between “rotating radio transient” (RRAT) and pulsar populations, finding that the Galactic z-distribution of RRATs closely resembles the distribution of pulsars, and where measurable, RRAT pulse widths are similar to individual pulses from pulsars of similar period, implying a similar beaming fraction. We postulate that many RRATs may simply represent a tail of extreme-nulling pulsars that are “on” for less than a pulse period; this is supported by the fact that nulling pulsars and single-pulse discoveries exhibit a continuous distribution across null/activity timescales and nulling fractions. We found a drop-off in objects with emissivity cycles longer than

$\sim 300$  seconds at intermediate and low nulling fractions which is not readily explained by selection effects. The HTRU deep low-latitude survey (70-min. pointings at galactic latitudes  $|b| < 3.5^\circ$  and longitudes  $-80^\circ < l < 30^\circ$ ) will be capable of exploring whether this deficit is natural or an effect of selection. The intriguing object PSR J0941–39 may represent an evolutionary link between nulling populations; discovered as a sparsely-pulsing RRAT, in follow-up observations it often appeared as a bright (10 mJy) pulsar with a low nulling fraction. It is therefore apparent that a neutron star can oscillate between nulling levels, much like mode-changing pulsars. Crucially, the RRAT and pulsar-mode emission sites are coincident, implying that the two emission mechanisms are linked. We estimate that the full HTRU survey will roughly quadruple the known deep-nulling pulsar population, allowing statistical studies to be made of extreme-nulling populations. HTRU’s low-latitude survey will explore the neutron star population with null lengths lasting up to several hours.

We lastly reported the discovery of 16 pulses, the bulk of which exhibit a frequency sweep with a shape and magnitude resembling the “Lorimer Burst” (Lorimer et al. 2007), which three years ago was reported as a solitary radio burst that was thought to be the first discovery of a rare, impulsive event of unknown extragalactic origin. However, the new events were of clearly terrestrial origin, with properties unlike any known sources of terrestrial broad-band radio emission. The new detections cast doubt on the extragalactic interpretation of the original burst, and call for further sophistication in radio-pulse survey techniques to identify the origin of the anomalous terrestrial signals and definitively distinguish future extragalactic pulse detections from local signals. The ambiguous origin of these seemingly dispersed, swept-frequency signals suggest that radio-pulse searches using multiple detectors will be the only experiments able to provide definitive information about the origin of new swept-frequency radio burst detections.

Finally, we summarise our major findings and suggest future work which would expand on the work in this thesis.

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Many good people have contributed to the completion of this thesis and to the unique period of personal and professional growth that the past few years have represented.

I owe a big round of thanks to four great supervisors, Matthew Bailes, Dick Manchester, Simon Johnston, and David Barnes, who each in their way has constantly conveyed an excitement for science and the scientific process that I strive to replicate. I appreciate the scientific and personal support offered by all of them at various times, as well as the space and encouragement they gave to explore my own ideas (and patient support through those “bold claims,” as Matthew would say, that came from left-field ideas!). All of these elements were essential in navigating successfully through this period, and my closer supervisors, Dick, Simon, and Matthew, all made crucial contributions to my education and to developing the scientific ideas explored by this thesis. I would like to particularly thank my primary supervisor, Matthew, for being an important role model for balancing the importance of family with a strong astronomical career. I have a great respect for the leadership he has shown over the course of my PhD.

I am tremendously grateful to have had the chance to interact closely with both Ron Ekers and George Hobbs. Ron first introduced me to the Australian scientific community and has always been a valuable sounding board for new ideas, a like-minded brainstorm companion, a constant source of encouragement and way-out-of-the-box thinking, a mentor, and a good friend. George has likewise been an indispensable part of my candidature, often providing a house filled with good music, food, films, and strange board games, and always providing insightful discussions on pulsar and extragalactic astronomy. I must express appreciation for those who laid the seeds of my scientific career early on through dedicated and creative teaching. This includes Doc Stoneback, Steve Boughn, Walter Smith, and the person who first introduced me to the world of scientific research and to the Universe through cosmology, Prof. Bruce Partridge.

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# Declaration

The work presented in this thesis has been carried out in the Centre for Astrophysics & Supercomputing at the Swinburne University of Technology (Hawthorn, VIC) and the Australia Telescope National Facility/CSIRO Astronomy and Space Sciences (Marsfield, NSW) between 2007 and 2010. This thesis contains no material that has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma. To the best of my knowledge, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another author, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis. Several chapters have been partially or in entirety published in refereed journals; these are listed below. Minor alterations have been made to the published papers in order to maintain argument continuity and consistency of spelling and style.

- Chapter 3 has been published by the Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society (MNRAS) as “A Radio Census of Binary Supermassive Black Holes”, 2011, MNRAS, v. 410, p. 2113, authored by S. Burke-Spolaor.
- Chapter 4 was published as “The Millisecond Radio Sky: Transients from a Blind Single Pulse Search”, 2010, MNRAS, v. 402, p. 855, authored by S. Burke-Spolaor and M. Bailes.
- Chapter 5 has been accepted to MNRAS as “The High Time Resolution Universe Survey - II. Single-pulse Search and Early Discoveries”, authored by S. Burke-Spolaor on behalf of the HTRU survey team: M. Bailes, S. Bates, N. D. R. Bhat, M. Burgay, N. D’Amico, S. Johnston, L. Levin, M. Keith, M. Kramer, S. Milia, A. Possenti, B. Stappers. and W. van Straten. It will appear in print in early 2011.
- Chapter 6 was published by the Astrophysical Journal Letters as “Radio Bursts with Extragalactic Spectral Characteristics Show Terrestrial Origins”, 2011, v. 727, p. 18, authored by S. Burke-Spolaor, M. Bailes, R. Ekers, J-P. Macquart, and F. Crawford.

*Sarah Burke Spolaor  
Melbourne, Australia  
June 2011*



*Dedicated to Grandpa Burke, Grandpa  
Munson, Ethel, Dale, and Mickey.*

*Wish you were here!*



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# 1

## Introduction

Are there exotic sources of radio impulses in other galaxies?

Do undiscovered planets exist in our solar system?

What happens to supermassive black holes when two galaxies collide?

How correct was Einstein's theory of relativity?

Strangely enough, all of these questions can be addressed through the study of stars that extend no larger than a few tens of kilometres across. This thesis deals with a wide range of topics—all, however, are endeavours motivated by the broad area of research commonly termed “Pulsar Astronomy”. This introduction and the following chapters aim to communicate the rich body of scientific research related to pulsar astronomy and its related technical requirements, even if studying pulsars is not always the central aim of the research. In this chapter we provide a context to understand the advances made in this thesis. The first section introduces pulsars and relevant properties of the stars themselves. The second section gives an introduction to using pulsars as tools to study other physical phenomena, and the third outlines the relationship that pulsar studies have to the exploration of gravitational wave sources, in particular binary supermassive black hole systems. The fourth section reviews the specialised technical systems designed to study pulsars, and how they are being used to search the vast frontier of undiscovered celestial transient radio emitters.

### 1.1 Pulsars

---

Pulsars have only been the subject of observation since late 1967, when highly periodic pulses were recorded and recognised as a celestial phenomenon by Hewish et al. (1968). The prediction of Baade & Zwicky (1934) stated that compact objects should exist at the

end of the life of massive stars, leading Gold (1968) and Pacini (1968) to draw a connection between this prediction and the observations of Hewish et al. In the just over forty years since that pivotal discovery of the first pulsar, a great deal has come to be understood about these objects. The standard model of pulsars is that they are the compact remnants of massive stars, the core of which has collapsed and received a high-velocity kick as the host star undergoes a supernova. The core forms a dense neutron star, counteracting its own gravitation with the degeneracy pressure from the tightly packed neutrons that make it up. The drastic birth conditions of pulsars leads them to have extraordinary properties, with magnetic field strengths, densities, and energy levels that would be impossible (or, at the very least, highly perilous!) to replicate on Earth. We are able to observe and study radio emission from pulsars due to the highly collimated beams of electromagnetic radiation that form along a pulsar’s magnetic axis (Fig. 1.1). Due to misalignment between the magnetic and rotational axis of a pulsar, these beams can sweep across Earth once per rotation of the star, causing a “lighthouse” effect for an observer that manifests itself in radio light as a train of periodic pulses. Pulsars have exceptionally stable rotational periods (e.g. Verbiest et al. 2008), making them highly accurate astrophysical clocks, a property which has been exploited to build the bulk of scientific advances in pulsar research.

### 1.1.1 Pulsar Energetics and Physical Parameters

At present just under 2000 pulsars have been discovered.<sup>1</sup> While a definitive physical model for where and how radio pulsar emission is generated has yet to be established, the known pulsars provide us with a body of radio-wavelength properties and allow us to infer basic electromagnetic properties of pulsars. First, regardless of luminosity or fluctuations in the intensity of a pulsar beam (e.g. the nulling pulsars of §1.1.3), all pulsars observable in radio emission have a strongly periodic signal, with an observed period  $P$ . In addition, pulsars are observed to exhibit a small lengthening of their periods when observed over a sufficiently long timescale. This *period derivative*,  $\dot{P}$ , is attributable to loss of rotational kinetic energy, which powers e.g. magnetic dipole radiation (Pacini 1968, Ostriker & Gunn 1969), pulsar winds (consisting of charged particles streaming from the pulsar; Gold e.g 1969), electromagnetic emission in  $\gamma$ - or X-rays, with a small fraction of this energy emitted in the observed radio signal. For the purposes of this discussion, we employ a simple pulsar model in which the rotational energy loss implied by the spin-

---

<sup>1</sup>As queried in the most up to date catalogue first published by (Manchester et al. 2005); see <http://www.atnf.csiro.au/research/pulsar/psrcat/>.

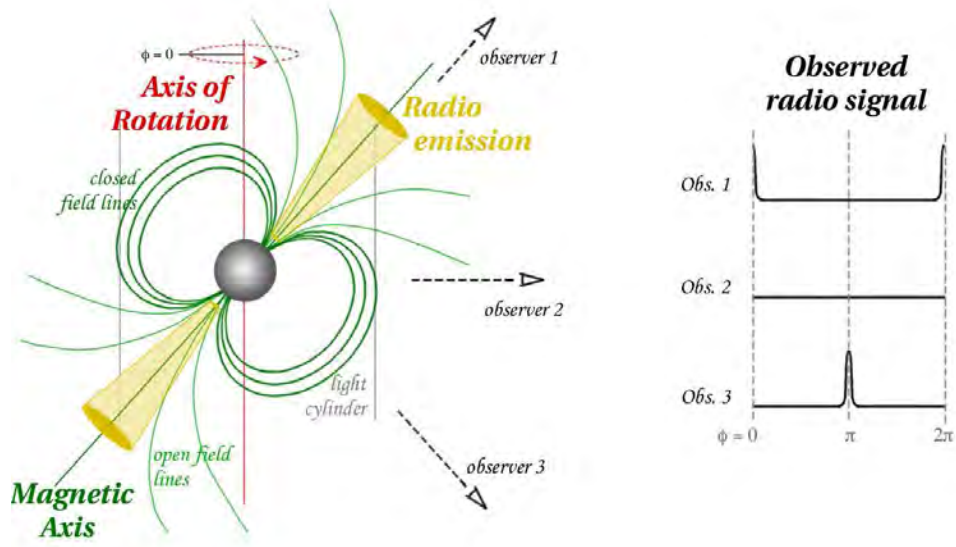


Figure 1.1 A toy model of pulsar radio emission as described in the text, adapted from Lorimer & Kramer (2004). The magnetosphere of the pulsar may co-rotate within the light cylinder, beyond which co-rotation would imply superluminal velocities. The radio beam is shown to originate from both magnetic poles along the open magnetic field lines. To the right, we indicate the signal seen by observers viewing the pulsar from three different angles.

down observed in a pulsar is due entirely to magnetic dipole radiation.<sup>2</sup> We can calculate a pulsar's *spin-down luminosity* ( $\dot{E}$ ) by relating the rotational kinetic energy loss to the pulsar's magnetic dipole radiation. Both of these quantities relate to the pulsar's period and period derivative, giving:

$$\dot{E} = \frac{4\pi^2 I \dot{P}}{P^3} = \frac{2}{3c^3} \left(\frac{2\pi}{P}\right)^4 (|\mathbf{m}| \sin \alpha)^2 \quad (1.1)$$

(Lorimer & Kramer 2004), where  $|\mathbf{m}|$  is the dipole's magnetic moment,  $I$  is the pulsar's moment of inertia, and  $\alpha$  is the angle between the magnetic and rotation axes. From this we can determine the evolution of the rotation period of the pulsar with time:

$$\dot{P} = \frac{dP}{dt} = \frac{8\pi^2}{3Ic^3} \cdot (|\mathbf{m}| \sin \alpha)^2 \cdot P^{-1} \quad (1.2)$$

<sup>2</sup>The pulsar is assumed here to exist in a vacuum, ignoring other energy dissipation effects: most notably, those related to the pulsar magnetosphere. However, this model is the most basic (derived from classic electromagnetics) and is appropriate for most practical pulsar applications. It furthermore allows the derivation of a straight-forward estimator for characteristic age and magnetic field strength of pulsars. No comprehensive model to describe the behaviour of all pulsars has yet been established, but for a recent review of such models, see Lyubarsky (2008).

We now adopt a commonly assumed value for the pulsar’s moment of inertia of  $I = 10^{38} \text{ kg m}^2$  (Lorimer & Kramer 2004). On integrating equation 1.2 over time and assuming that the pulsar’s period when it was formed is much less than its currently observed period, we can define a *characteristic age* of the pulsar by the simple relation:

$$\tau_c = \frac{P}{(n-1)\dot{P}} \quad , \quad (1.3)$$

Where  $n$  represents the *braking index* of the pulsar, which is defined by the energy loss in the system, and relates the evolution of the first frequency derivative of the pulsar’s spin to its period ( $\dot{\nu} \propto \nu^n$ ). For the pure magnetic dipole braking scenario used here,  $n = 3$ .

Under the same pure magnetic dipole radiation scenario, the magnetic field strength at a distance  $r$  relates to the magnetic dipole moment as  $B = 2|\mathbf{m}|r^{-3}$ . Equation 1.2 can thus be used to calculate the pulsar’s surface magnetic field strength at the pulsar’s radius,  $R$ , also in terms of observables  $P$  and  $\dot{P}$ :

$$B_{\text{surf}} = \sin \alpha \left( \frac{3Ic^3}{8\pi^2 R^6} P \dot{P} \right)^{0.5} \quad . \quad (1.4)$$

In practice we use  $3.2 \times 10^{15} \sqrt{P\dot{P}}$  Tesla, which is essentially a lower limit to  $B_{\text{surf}}$ , setting  $\alpha = 90^\circ$ .

The surface magnetic field, rate of kinetic energy loss, and characteristic ages of known pulsars are well-summarised by the so-called “period-period derivative” diagram. This is shown for all pulsars with currently known  $P$  and  $\dot{P}$  in Figure 1.2. The “graveyard” in this diagram indicates combinations of  $P$  and  $\dot{P}$  for which in various models, there is an insufficient supply of energy to trigger the positron-electron pair production that gives rise to radio emission (here we indicate the line given by the polar-gap models of Chen & Ruderman 1993). The different types of pulsars indicated in this diagram are further discussed in §1.1.3. It is presumed that as pulsars evolve, their periods will slow at a rate depending on their magnetic field strength until they can no longer support the production of a radio beam, crossing the death line and becoming unobservable at radio wavelengths.

### 1.1.2 Basic Radio Observables and the Interstellar Medium

When searching for pulsars there are several basic observable parameters: a pulsar’s period, pulse width, and its dispersion measure. To provide the reader with an idea of the typical values exhibited by pulsars, in this section we summarise them and introduce the effects on pulsed signals caused by the interstellar and intergalactic media. Pulse intensity (in

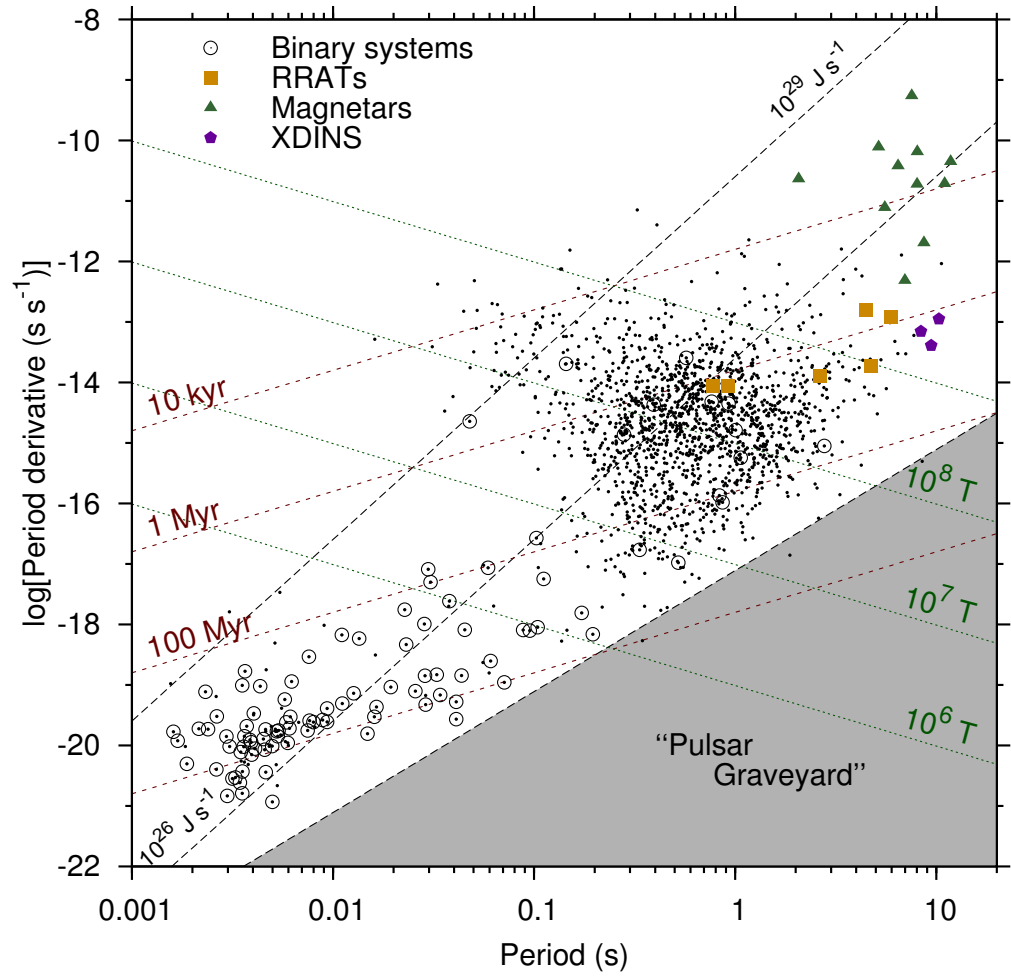


Figure 1.2 Period-Period derivative ( $P - \dot{P}$ ) diagram. Lines of constant  $B_{\text{surf}}$  (green, dotted),  $\tau_{\text{c}}$  (red, dashed), and spin-down luminosity (black, long-dashed) are shown. Binary systems and various neutron star sub-classes, detailed in Sec. 1.1.3, are also indicated. The distinct magnetic field strength of magnetars is illustrated by their positioning in this diagram.

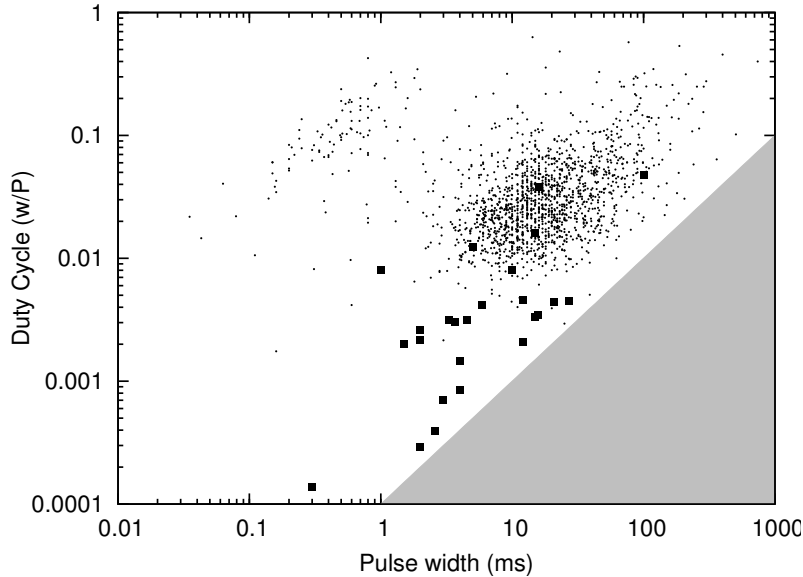


Figure 1.3 Pulsar duty cycles and pulse widths. The vertical striations are the result of the finite precision of pulse width quantification, not a physical effect. RRATs are marked by squares to highlight their apparently low duty cycles (e.g. McLaughlin et al. 2006). With short periods and narrow pulse widths, the upper left island of points is primarily made up of recycled pulsars. The shaded area marks the region for which  $P > 10$  s, above which pulsars will have evolved to beyond the death line. Note, additionally, that continuous sampler level setting on radio telescopes may absorb power from pulses of duration equal to or greater than the level setting cycle. For the system that discovered the majority of radio pulsars, the Parkes 20cm multibeam analogue filterbank, this cycle is 1 second.

single pulses or integrated over many star rotations) also comes into play, however will be addressed in 1.4. The most drastic influence of the interstellar medium is dispersion (which is also a particularly important aspect of Chapters 4-6). Dispersion will be described in detail, while effects such as scattering and scintillation play a lesser role for the 1 GHz frequencies used in this thesis, and will be touched upon.

The range of typical pulsar periods is displayed in Figure 1.2. The lower limit on pulsar periods is closely tied to the equation of state of dense nuclear matter; thus, a pulsar's radius and mass (the relationship between which is highly dependent upon the equation of state of the pulsar interior) define its minimum possible spin period. Discoveries of very fast pulsars challenge models for the equation of state of dense nuclear matter; the fastest pulsar currently known is J1748–2446ad, spinning 716 times per second with a period of only 1.39 ms (Hessels 2007). At the other extreme, the pulsar death line predicts a maximum spin period for observed radio pulsars, however the slowest pulsar, J2144–3933 at 8.5 s, discovered by Young et al. (1999), challenges radio emission models.

We display the pulse width of known pulsars ( $w$ , defined at half-maximum intensity)



in Fig. 1.3 against the duty cycle ( $w/P$ ) of pulsars. It is apparent here that the pulses of pulsars occupy typically  $\sim 10\%$  of the star's rotation. The “rotating radio transients” with small duty cycles on this diagram will be discussed below in §1.1.3.

The intensity, frequency-dependent structure, and observed pulse width of pulsars are all influenced by a number of effects (dispersion, refractive/diffractive scintillation, scattering) caused by the cold, ionised plasmas that make up both the interstellar medium (ISM), through which all celestial signals propagate before reaching an observer at Earth. Any signal of extragalactic origin will also propagate through, and be influenced by, the intergalactic medium (IGM) before passing into our Galaxy.

The existence of the ISM and IGM implies that the space between us and pulse-emitting objects is not strictly a vacuum. In fact, the non-unity refractive index,  $n$ , of the ISM causes light propagating through this medium to travel at a group velocity  $v_g = c/n$ , slower than the speed of light. As noted by Lorimer & Kramer (2004), the refractive index of the interstellar medium is strongly dependent upon the plasma frequency of the ISM and the frequency of the propagating light. The net effect of this is that a radio pulse emitted by a celestial object experiences dispersion, resulting in an observable frequency-dependent delay with time as exhibited in Fig. 1.4. The derivation of the cold plasma dispersion relation in the ISM is summarised by Lorimer & Kramer (2004), and results in a frequency-dependent lag with respect to a signal of infinite frequency:

$$\Delta t_\infty = \frac{e^2}{2\pi m_e c} \cdot \frac{\text{DM}}{f^2} ; \text{DM} = \int_0^d n_e dl , \quad (1.5)$$

$f$  is the frequency of the emission,  $e$  is the elementary charge, and  $m_e$  is the mass of an electron. The dispersion measure, DM, represents the integrated electron column density along the line of sight from the observer to the emitter (at distance  $d$ ). Below we use  $\mathcal{D} \equiv e^2/(2\pi m_e c) \simeq 4.15 \times 10^3 \text{ MHz}^2 \text{ pc}^{-1} \text{ cm}^3 \text{ s}$ . As implied by equation 1.5, higher frequencies arrive before lower frequencies, as seen in Fig. 1.4. The DM is a direct observable, given a pulse observed to arrive at two frequencies  $f_1$  and  $f_2$ , at times  $t_1$  and  $t_2$ , respectively:

$$\Delta t = t_2 - t_1 = \mathcal{D} \cdot \text{DM} \cdot (f_2^{-2} - f_1^{-2}) . \quad (1.6)$$

When creating a frequency-averaged time series for a pulsar, the data must be *dedispersed*, that is, corrected for the frequency-dependent dispersion given by this equation. It is implicit in Equation 1.5 that when the DM is measured for an object, one can infer a distance to a Galactic emitter based on a model for the free electron distribution in the Galaxy's ISM. The current standard model used by pulsar astronomers is the “NE2001”

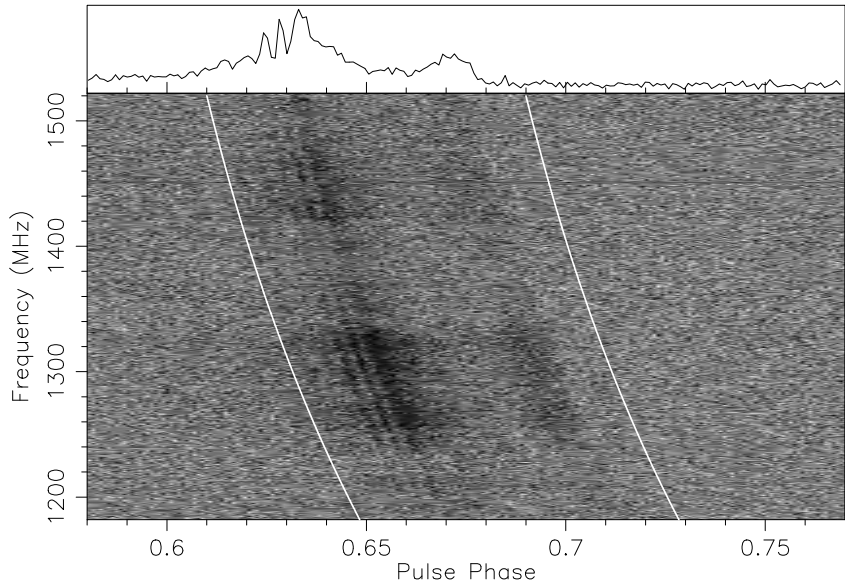


Figure 1.4 One pulse from the low-DM pulsar PSR J1456–6843. The lower panel shows a spectrogram, the power in greyscale as a function of frequency and the pulsar’s rotational phase. The white lines trace  $DM = 8.6 \text{ pc cm}^{-3}$ . Several effects of the ISM are clear here: particularly the dispersion of the pulse and the frequency-dependent amplitude modulation (“scintles”) caused by wavefront distortions in the ISM. The upper panel shows the pulse profile after dedispersion, integrated over the path traced by the white lines.

electron density model of Cordes & Lazio (2002). Pulse dispersion is generally a property that is beneficial to surveys for pulsing objects; it creates a characteristic signal with which to distinguish local (esp. man-made) signals from pulses of astrophysical origin. This will be discussed further in Section 1.4 and is a central element to what makes the properties of the discoveries in Chapter 6 so unexpected.

There are two remaining ISM effects which can influence pulsar measurements that will play a role later in this thesis: the effects of pulse scattering, and scintillation. These are mathematically and conceptually developed in detail by both Manchester & Taylor (1977) and Lorimer & Kramer (2004) based on the “thin screen” model of Scheuer (1968) (in which observed ISM effects are caused by a single screen positioned halfway between observer and emitter). The reader is referred to those texts for details; we report only on their derived results here.

Essentially, interstellar pulse broadening and scintillation both are caused by the fact that the interstellar medium is both inhomogeneous and turbulent. A propagating wavefront incident upon a scattering screen in the ISM will undergo random phase delays, the magnitude of which are dependent upon the scale,  $a$ , of refractive index inhomogeneities (that is, electron density variations,  $\Delta n_e$ ). These delays cause several effects. First, they

will induce a frequency-dependent *scatter broadening* of a pulse, causing a delta-function pulse to have an asymmetric tail. Furthermore, interference induced by the wavefront distortions will cause constructive and destructive interference leading to frequency- and time-dependent flux variations (*scintillation*) with a characteristic timescale and bandwidth, depending on the nature of the scattering screen and the relative velocities of the pulsar, Earth, and screen. These effects can have dramatic influences on an observation, particularly when the characteristic bandwidth of the scintillation is equal to the observing bandwidth. These effects are typically stronger for low-dispersion measure/nearby pulsars (e.g. Fig. 1.4), and can cause a newly discovered pulsar to not be seen in subsequent observations if it was discovered near a caustic peak of scintillation.

For the thin screen model considered by the texts noted above, the scattering timescale,  $\tau_s$  can be approximated by:

$$\tau_s = \frac{e^4}{4\pi^2 m_e^2} \frac{\Delta n_e^2}{a} d^2 f^{-4} . \quad (1.7)$$

Here,  $\tau_s$  is in milliseconds, and the observing frequency  $f$  is in units of GHz. It is clear that the scale and position of inhomogeneities influence the effects of the ISM on the signal. It is often assumed (and, despite the relation below, holds in observations for some objects) that the turbulence of the ISM obeys a Kolmogorov energy spectrum (Kolmogorov 1941), for which  $\tau_s \propto f^{-4.4}$ . The distance dependence indicates that  $\tau_s$  scales with dispersion measure. In fact, although there is significant scatter, Bhat et al. (2004) give a relation that is useful when considering the design of pulsar surveys (§1.4.1, §5.2.2):

$$\log_{10}\tau_s = -6.46 + 0.154 \log_{10}(\text{DM}) + 1.07 [\log_{10}(\text{DM})]^2 - 3.86 \log_{10}(f) \quad (1.8)$$

This relationship indicates the ability of pulsars observations to assess the applicability of turbulence models to the ISM, indicating that on average the frequency dependence of scattering is actually closer to  $\tau_s \propto f^{-3.86}$ .

### 1.1.3 Pulsar Varieties

The vast majority of electromagnetically-emitting neutron stars occupy the island of radio pulsars with intermediate rotational speeds visible in Figure 1.2. However, there are several sub-varieties of neutron stars, segregated both by differences in physically understood properties, and by observed (not always yet understood) differences in behaviour. In radio bands, the behavioural sub-groups most relevant to this thesis are: millisecond pulsars, nulling pulsars, modulated and giant-bursting pulsars, and rotating radio transients.

While they will not be discussed, there also exist a number of high-energy emitting neutron star phenomena, some with little or no associated radio emission such as  $\gamma$ -ray pulsars (e. g. Abdo et al. 2010), X-ray dim isolated neutron stars (XDINS Kaplan 2008, Kaplan & van Kerkwijk 2009; and references therein), X-ray binaries, and magnetars (anomalous X-ray pulsars, soft gamma-ray repeaters Mereghetti 2008).

*Millisecond pulsars* inhabit the extended lower tail of pulsars with low magnetic fields seen in Fig. 1.2. Current theories of neutron star evolution label these pulsars with the name “recycled pulsars”, indicating their origin as a pulsar that has undergone a period of spin-up, powered by the accretion of matter onto the pulsar from a companion star (e. g. Bisnovatyi-Kogan & Komberg 1974, Shibasaki et al. 1989), typically leaving them orbiting a white dwarf or another neutron star. A testimony to this evolutionary track is that  $\sim 75\%$  of millisecond pulsars are in a binary system. Millisecond pulsars are the most stable rotators of all pulsars, and as such makes them the most promising for detecting gravitational radiation with the technique of pulsar timing (Verbiest et al. 2008; see §1.2).

*Nulling pulsars* exhibit periods of time in which the radio emission appears to halt; depending on the pulsar, these “off” periods last anywhere from one to a few stellar rotations, anywhere to  $\gtrsim 95\%$  of the time the pulsar is observed (Wang et al. 2007). Nulling phenomena in pulsars are often accompanied by effects such as mode changing—in which the pulse shape oscillates between two distinct profiles—and sub-pulse drift, in which components of the pulsar’s radio profile appear to wander in an ordered way between a range of pulsar longitudes (these effects are well-reviewed by Weltevrede et al. 2006a).

Some pulsars exhibit extreme (apparently intrinsic) variations in pulse-to-pulse flux density, with some pulses appearing from ten to several thousand times the average flux density of the pulsar’s single pulses. Some such pulsars exhibit *giant pulses* (e. g. Staelin & Reifenstein 1968, Johnston et al. 2001, Johnston & Romani 2002, 2003, Knight et al. 2006), which tend to be of short ( $\mu\text{s}$  or less) duration, while others show a smooth pulse energy distribution with a long tail of bright events (e. g. the extreme emitter of Weltevrede et al. 2006b).

Finally, the *rotating radio transients* (RRATs) recently discovered by McLaughlin et al. (2006) appeared upon discovery to represent a new class of sporadically-emitting neutron star. For RRATs, detectable emission typically occurs for less than one second per day in the form of single, narrow (a few ms) pulses. The scarce emission from these neutron stars makes them more readily detectable by single-pulse search techniques than the usual Fourier search techniques used to discover the majority of pulsars (see §1.4.2). Few RRATs are known, rendering it difficult to understand the origin of their sparse emission

(Chapter 4 addresses this topic). Several observed properties appear to make RRATs distinct from the general pulsar population, including their small duty cycles (Fig. 1.3). Recent measurements of RRAT periods and period derivatives have led to the conclusions that  $B_{\text{surf}}$  for RRATs is distinctly higher than average pulsar magnetic fields, and RRAT periods are statistically longer than those of regularly-emitting pulsars, seeming to further differentiate the RRATs from the typical pulsar population (McLaughlin et al. 2009).

## 1.2 Pulsar Timing and Timing Arrays

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As noted above, the regularity of pulsars' rotations make them not unlike precise naturally occurring clocks. This property has yielded the technique of “pulsar timing,” which involves the measurement and prediction of a pulsar's pulse arrival times. Pulsar timing employs models for Earth's motion relative to the pulsar (that is, due to its movement around the Solar System barycentre), for the ISM effects described in 1.1.2, and for the pulsar itself (e.g.  $P$ ,  $\dot{P}$ , binary motion) based on previous observations of the pulsar. The most stable millisecond pulsars have pulse arrival times stable to the order of  $< 10^{-6}$  seconds over timescales from days to decades (e.g Verbiest et al. 2008). After correction for modelled effects, any physics or systematics that are unaccounted for will manifest structure in the pulsar's *timing residuals*, which are the actual pulse arrival times relative to the predicted times of arrival. It is in the post-model-fit timing residuals that one may search for subtle inaccuracies in the models, or for unmodelled influences on the pulsar, Earth, or the intervening space between.

Greater sensitivity to spatially-correlated effects arises with the concurrent monitoring of multiple pulsars in what is termed a *pulsar timing array* (PTA: this term was coined by Romani 1989, although first rigorously employed by Hellings & Downs 1983 to put limits on gravitational radiation. Foster & Backer 1990 first detailed other physical targets that a PTA could explore). PTAs aim to detect correlated offsets in the timing residuals of pulsars spread across the celestial sphere, forming a measurement tool akin to an accelerometer for Earth within space-time. Targeted effects include errors in Earth's time standards (currently maintained by atomic clocks), errors in solar system ephemerides (planet mass errors, which would produce strongly correlated residuals along the ecliptic, or unidentified solar system bodies Champion et al. 2010), and the ultimate target of pulsar astronomy, gravitational waves (Detweiler 1979).

While there are many efforts in pulsar timing around the globe, there are several projects and pulsars of particular note. Relevant timing parameters of these projects are summarised in Table 1.1.

|                        | $N_{\text{psr}}$ | $\sim 1/C$<br>(weeks) | Data Span<br>( $\sim$ years)    | Lowest<br>$\sigma_n$ (ns) | $N_{\text{psr}}$<br>( $\sigma_n < 1 \mu\text{s}$ ) | ref.        |
|------------------------|------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------|--|-------------|
| <b>P140/J0437-4715</b> | 1                | 1-4                   | 10                              | 199                       | –  | <i>a</i>    |
| <b>J1713+0747</b>      | 1                | 3                     | 6.5                             | 180                       | –  | <i>b</i>    |
| <b>Kaspi</b>           | 2                | 2                     | 7-8                             | 200                       | 2  | <i>c</i>    |
| <b>CPSR2</b>           | 15               | 4                     | 2.5                             | 100                       | 6  | <i>d</i>    |
| <b>PPTA+</b>           | 20               | 1-5                   | 3-14 ( $\langle 10.5 \rangle$ ) | 166                       | 16   | <i>e, f</i> |
| <b>IPTA</b>            | 37               | 1-4                   | ?                               | 20                        | 29   | <i>e, g</i> |

Table 1.1 A summary of notable historical, and ongoing timing programs. P140 is the longest-running timing program at Parkes telescope, dedicated primarily to observing PSR J0437-4715. The Kaspi data set has become a standard in comparing GWB limit/detection techniques. The CPSR2 data were all taken on the CPSR2 instrument at Parkes telescope. PPTA is the Parkes Pulsar Timing Array (parameters noted here include additional data as noted in reference *d*), and IPTA is the recently-formed International Pulsar Timing Array (a collaboration between the North American Nanohertz Observatory for Gravitational Waves, the PPTA, and the European Pulsar Timing Array. The parameters quoted here for the IPTA are optimistic predictions for the IPTA based on optimal performance of the constituent timing arrays. Note that long-term ( $\lesssim 5$  yr) timing can lead to increased RMS residuals due to low-frequency “timing noise” in pulsars’ residuals (e.g. Verbiest et al. 2009); therefore in most cases the shorter-duration projects have generally lower timing residuals, despite that several projects (e.g. P140, PPTA+) share common pulsars.

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Columns: (1) Data ID. (2) Number of pulsars in data set; (3) Typical time between observations (cadence,  $C$ ); (4) Total data span; (5) Smallest RMS timing residuals over full data span (§1.3.2); (6) Number of pulsars with RMS residuals better than  $1 \mu\text{s}$ ; (7) Publication reference: *a*, Verbiest et al. (2008); *b*, Splaver et al. (2005); *c*, Kaspi et al. (1994); *d*, Hotan et al. (2006); *e*, Hobbs et al. (2009); *f*, Verbiest et al. (2009); *g*, Hobbs et al. (2010), Jenet et al. (2009), Ferdman et al. (2010).

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## 1.3 Gravitational Wave Astronomy

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Gravitational radiation is a direct prediction of Einstein’s space-time metric equations of general relativity: a gravitational wave (GW) is a propagating quadrupolar fluctuation in the curvature of space-time that is produced when a mass is accelerated, mathematically analogous to the electromagnetic waves produced by an accelerated electron. No gravitational waves have yet been detected, however the first indirect observational evidence for GWs arose from the timing of the binary neutron star PSR B1913+16 (Hulse & Taylor 1975) by (Taylor & Weisberg 1982), who showed that the system is losing orbital energy at precisely the rate expected from the energy lost from the system due to GW emission (a discovery which resulted in the Nobel Prize for physics!).

As a gravitational wave (GW) propagates, it creates small distortions in space-time perpendicular to its propagation axis. Provided the wave is within the pulsar timing band, such a wave is theoretically directly detectable by PTAs through its quadrupolar fingerprint left as a correlated signal in the array. Given many sources of unresolved GWs, they will produce a stochastic GW background (GWB) that is detectable in PTA data through its correlated signature in timing residuals (Hellings & Downs 1983). Given a well-timed, individual pulsar, limits may be placed on the presence and strength of gravitational radiation or a GWB, however a definitive detection cannot be separated from other effects.

### 1.3.1 Pulsar-detectable Gravitational Wave Sources

Pulsar timing is sensitive to unpredicted changes in the Earth’s movement on timescales between the length of sustained pulsar observations (some timing data sets now reach up to several decades), and the cadence of pulsar observations, at most typically one every two weeks. Consequently, pulsar timing data have sensitivity to the low-frequency ( $\text{nHz} \lesssim f_{\text{gw}} \lesssim \mu\text{Hz}$ ) gravitational wave spectrum, complementary to gravitational wave detectors such as the Laser Interferometer Gravitational Wave Observatory (“LIGO”) and the planned Laser Interferometer Space Antenna (“LISA”). The gravitational radiation spectrum, various theoretical sources and limits of current and future GW detectors are summarised in Fig. 1.5.

Theoretical sources of gravitational wave emission in the pulsar timing band include GWBs from primordial intermediate-mass black holes (Saito & Yokoyama 2009), cosmic strings (Caldwell et al. 1996, Damour & Vilenkin 2005), and tensor perturbations from the rapid expansion of the inflation epoch in the early Universe (Maggiore 2000, Grishchuk

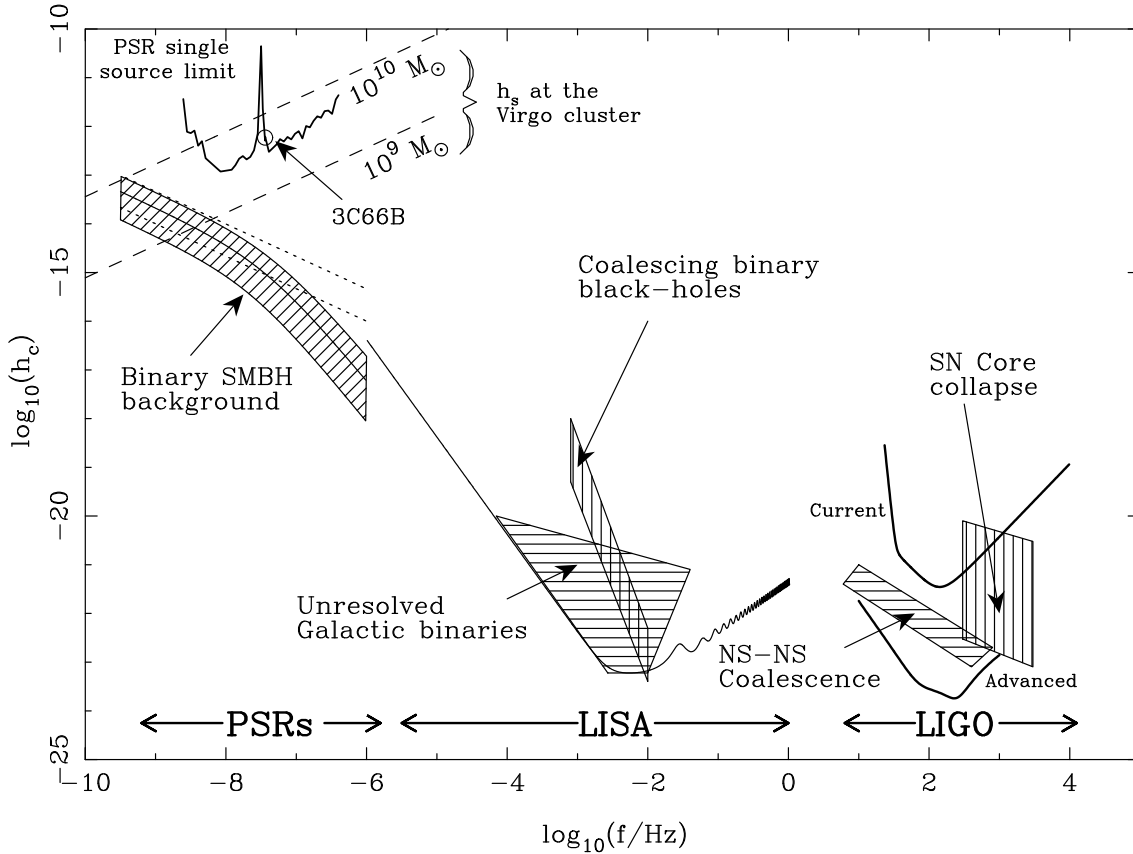


Figure 1.5 The gravitational radiation spectrum for various GW sources in the frequency ranges in which pulsar, LISA, and LIGO are sensitive. The three detectors are complementary in the spectrum, and as such are sensitive to different GW sources. In the pulsar band, we show the expected signal from individual SMBH binaries (shown at the distance of the Virgo cluster of galaxies), and three predictions for the GWB from supermassive binaries; the upper and lower dotted lines show the maximum allowed GWB predicted by Wyithe & Loeb (2003) and the semi-analytical prediction of Jaffe & Backer (2003), respectively, while the hatched region shows the predictions of Sesana et al. (2008), incorporating a range of uncertainties in galaxy formation parameters and exhibiting a spectral turnover caused by the paucity of supermassive systems emitting at higher frequencies. This figure was adapted from that presented in Yardley et al. (2010).



2005, Boyle & Buonanno 2008).

The strongest expected sources of gravitational radiation for pulsar timing come from the most massive compact objects in the Universe: supermassive black holes (mass  $>10^6 M_{\odot}$ , hereafter SMBHs), which reside at the center of nearly all massive galaxies. SMBHs will produce the strongest gravitational waves in the Universe when in a closely bound binary system with another SMBH, emitting gravitational waves with a period half of the system’s orbital period. Therefore, PTAs have sensitivity to these systems when the orbital period of the binary is within the time scale of the pulsar timing experiment: that is, when the orbital separation is  $r \ll 10$  pc (for more details see §2.3). The expected number of individual binary systems detectable by pulsar timing arrays was explored by Sesana et al. (2009). In a Universe built up by the hierarchical merging of galaxies, a stochastic GWB from many SMBH binary systems is also expected, with a strength and spectral form dependent upon the mass, number density, and cosmological distribution of binary systems in the Universe (which, in turn, have a strong dependence on the parameters of galaxy and SMBH growth, such as the time-dependent merger rate of galaxies, the post-merger inspiral timescale for SMBHs, and the contribution of accretion versus mergers to SMBH mass growth). This implies a close link between pulsar timing and galaxy evolution, through which limits from pulsar timing on the astrophysical gravitational wave background can be used to constrain models of galaxy formation. Until a background is detected, pulsar timing studies rely on galaxy evolution models to give predictions for the amplitude and spectral form of the GW signals; however with very strong limits on or a detection of the GWB, pulsar timing will be able to constrain various facets of galaxy evolution that are otherwise difficult to derive through electromagnetic observation. The predicted form of the astrophysical GWB has been explored in basic hierarchical-merging contexts by Rajagopal & Romani (1995), Jaffe & Backer (2003), Wyithe & Loeb (2003), Enoki et al. (2004), and expanded for the inclusion of uncertainties in several galaxy formation parameters by Sesana et al. (2008). However, a major—and potentially detrimental—uncertainty in these models remains in the observationally unconstrained inspiral timescale for SMBH binaries after a galaxy merger, which the predictive models generally neglect. It is currently not known whether there is sufficient fuel for orbital energy dissipation during SMBH binary inspiral for the SMBHs to coalesce within a Hubble time, giving rise to the possibility of “stalled” SMBH binary systems that remain at orbital separations beyond those detectable by pulsar timing. This is colloquially termed the “last parsec problem”, referring to the ineffectiveness of energy dissipation mechanisms to shrink a binary below separations of  $\sim 1$  pc (Begelman et al. 1980, Merritt & Milosavljević 2005).

### 1.3.2 Gravitational Wave Signals and Timing Sensitivity

Here we review the mathematical representation of the signal from gravitational wave backgrounds and individual SMBH binary sources, and the sensitivity of pulsar timing to GW emission. The fractional contribution of the GWB to the energy density of the Universe in a logarithmic frequency interval can be expressed as:

$$\Omega_{\text{gw}}(f) = \frac{2\pi^2}{3H_0^2} f^3 S_h(f) ; S_h(f) = \frac{h_c(f)^2}{f} , \quad (1.9)$$

where  $S_h(f)$  represents the total power spectral density of gravitational waves at frequency  $f$  (using the “one-sided” convention of Jaffe & Backer 2003), and  $h_c(f)$  represents the *characteristic strain* spectrum of the GWB. For most predictions of gravitational wave background, the characteristic strain follows a power law with frequency, as

$$h_c(f) = A \left( \frac{f}{f_0} \right)^\alpha , \quad (1.10)$$

with amplitude  $A$ , and spectral index  $\alpha$  at a normalising frequency  $f_0 = 1 \text{ yr}^{-1}$ . Most backgrounds can be described in this way; e.g for primordial GWs,  $\alpha$  ranges  $-0.8$  to  $-1.0$  with amplitudes  $10^{-17} < A < 10^{-15}$ , while for the GWB from SMBH binaries, predictions typically find that  $\alpha = -2/3$  and  $10^{-16} < A < 10^{-14}$ .

The astrophysical background of supermassive binaries, as noted above, is defined by the density and distribution of SMBHs in the Universe. This is well-illustrated by the simple formulation for the characteristic strain spectrum of SMBH binaries given by Jaffe & Backer (2003):

$$h_c(f)^2 = f N(z, f, m_1, m_2) \int h_s^2(z, f, m_1, m_2) dz dm_1 dm_2 . \quad (1.11)$$

Here,  $z$  is the cosmological redshift of the source (analogous to distance),  $m_1$  and  $m_2$  are the masses of the constituent black holes,  $N(z, f, m_1, m_2)$  represents the number density of systems per  $f, m_1, m_2$ , and redshift bin, and  $h_s$  is the strain contributed by one binary system:

$$h_s = 4 \sqrt{\frac{2}{5}} \frac{(G\mathcal{M})^{5/3}}{c^4 D} \cdot (2\pi/P)^{2/3} \quad (1.12)$$

(Peters & Mathews 1963, Thorne 1989), where  $\mathcal{M} = (m_1 m_2 M^{-1/3})^{3/5}$  is the *chirp mass* of a binary system, and  $D$  is the distance to the object. Note how the strain scales with distance at  $h_s \propto D^{-1}$  (that is, it is not analogous to e.g. a flux density).

Given the steep spectrum predicted for all GWBs in the pulsar timing band, the

most stringent limits set by pulsar timing on GWBs are at the lowest frequency—that is, timing arrays are most sensitive to these backgrounds at frequencies  $1/T$ , where  $T$  is the time span of the arrays’ observations. In fact, pulsar timing’s sensitivity to gravitational waves depends on a number of factors, also including the accuracy of a pulsar’s timing model over the span of the experiment (timing precision is quantified by the root-mean-squared of the timing residuals,  $\sigma_n$ ), the cadence and regularity of observations, and for gravitational wave detection with pulsar timing arrays, the sensitivity depends on the number of pulsars in the array and their distribution on the sky. The sensitivity to gravitational wave backgrounds of  $\alpha = -2/3$  was derived by Jenet et al. (2005) for pulsar timing arrays; they find that an array of  $N_{\text{psr}}$  pulsars can detect a gravitational wave background to a significance of  $S \propto \sqrt{(N_{\text{psr}}(N_{\text{psr}} - 1))}$  (in noise-dominated data as we currently have, however  $S \propto \sqrt{N_{\text{psr}}}$  when  $S$  becomes significant). They furthermore derive the dependence of the lowest detectable  $A$  on PTA observing parameters (or, for the case of single pulsars, the dependence of the limit placed on  $A$ ), finding  $A \propto \sigma_n T^{-5/3} N^{-1/2}$ , where  $N$  is the number of observations for each pulsar in the array. We can see here that data sets of long duration provide significant improvements in pulsar timing’s sensitivity to the supermassive binary GWB, and further critical improvements come with a better understanding of long-term intrinsic pulsar instabilities and observing hardware/software systematics; both of these contribute to a larger  $\sigma_n$  of a pulsar’s timing residuals.

Because of data-fitting procedures performed during timing, the sensitivity of pulsar timing arrays to single sources of gravitational radiation is not straight forward to define. However, it has been formally calculated for pulsars in the Parkes Pulsar Timing Array by Yardley et al. (2010), whose single-source sensitivity curve is shown in Fig. 1.5 as the “PSR single source limit”.

## 1.4 Pulsar Searches and Fast-Transient Radio Astronomy

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### 1.4.1 Considerations in Pulsar Survey Design

As one can infer by pulsar’s fast periods, short impulse durations, and the need to correct for a pulse’s dispersion (§1.1.2), the systems employed for observing pulsars are highly specialised.

An ideal pulsar search system will sample the sky at intervals of  $t_{\text{samp}} \lesssim 1$  ms in individual frequency channels of width  $b$  over a total bandwidth  $B$ . Blind surveys must search a range of DMs, and aim to minimize  $b$  and  $t_{\text{samp}}$  such that the observed width of a pulse with intrinsic width  $w_{\text{int}}$  is usually dominated by  $\tau_s$  (Eq.s 1.7, 1.8), rather than

instrumental pulse-broadening effects. The effective pulse width is given by

$$w_{\text{eff}} = \sqrt{t_{\text{samp}}^2 + w_{\text{int}}^2 + \Delta t_{\text{Dsm}}^2 + \Delta t_{\text{Derr}}^2 + \tau_s^2}, \quad (1.13)$$

where  $\Delta t_{\text{Dsm}}$  represents the inter-channel smearing of a pulse due to its dispersion, quantified by  $\Delta t_{\text{Dsm}} = 8300 \text{ DM } b/f^3$  seconds, while  $\Delta t_{\text{Derr}}$  is the broadening of a pulse due to an error of magnitude  $\Delta \text{DM}$  from the source's true DM, given by  $\Delta t_{\text{Derr}} = 8300 \Delta \text{DM } B/f^3$  seconds (where  $b$ ,  $B$ , and  $f$ , the centre observing frequency, are in units of MHz). These instrumentation requirements are realised by filterbanks, which can provide the necessary sampling to preserve the condition  $\Delta t_{\text{Dsm}}^2 + \Delta t_{\text{Derr}}^2 < \tau_s^2$ . However,  $b$  and  $t_{\text{samp}}$  may not be made infinitesimally small due to limits of data transfer, processing, and storage speeds, and the necessary limitation that  $\sqrt{B \cdot t_{\text{samp}}} > 1$ . Sampling  $n_{\text{pol}}$  polarisations in each of  $N_{\text{ch}} = B/b$  channels at  $n_{\text{bits}}$  digitisation levels, data is produced at a rate of  $n_{\text{pol}} n_{\text{bits}} N_{\text{ch}}/t_{\text{samp}}$ . Current algorithms and computing hardware cannot maintain a search of significant dispersion measure space in real time without considerable expense, so data typically must be stored for later offline processing. As such,  $N_{\text{ch}}$  and  $t_{\text{samp}}$  are limited by the rate that data may be archived, and surveys must carefully consider their target sources, and trade-offs between the various observing system parameters.

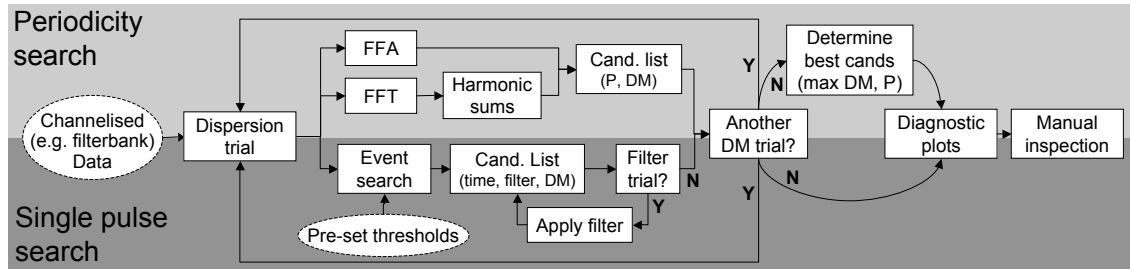
Nevertheless, a search's sensitivity to a pulsar whose peak flux is  $S_{\text{peak}}$  can be determined based on the radiometer equation:

$$S_{\text{peak}} = \frac{m T_{\text{sys}} \beta}{G \sqrt{n_{\text{pol}} t_{\text{int}} B}}, \quad (1.14)$$

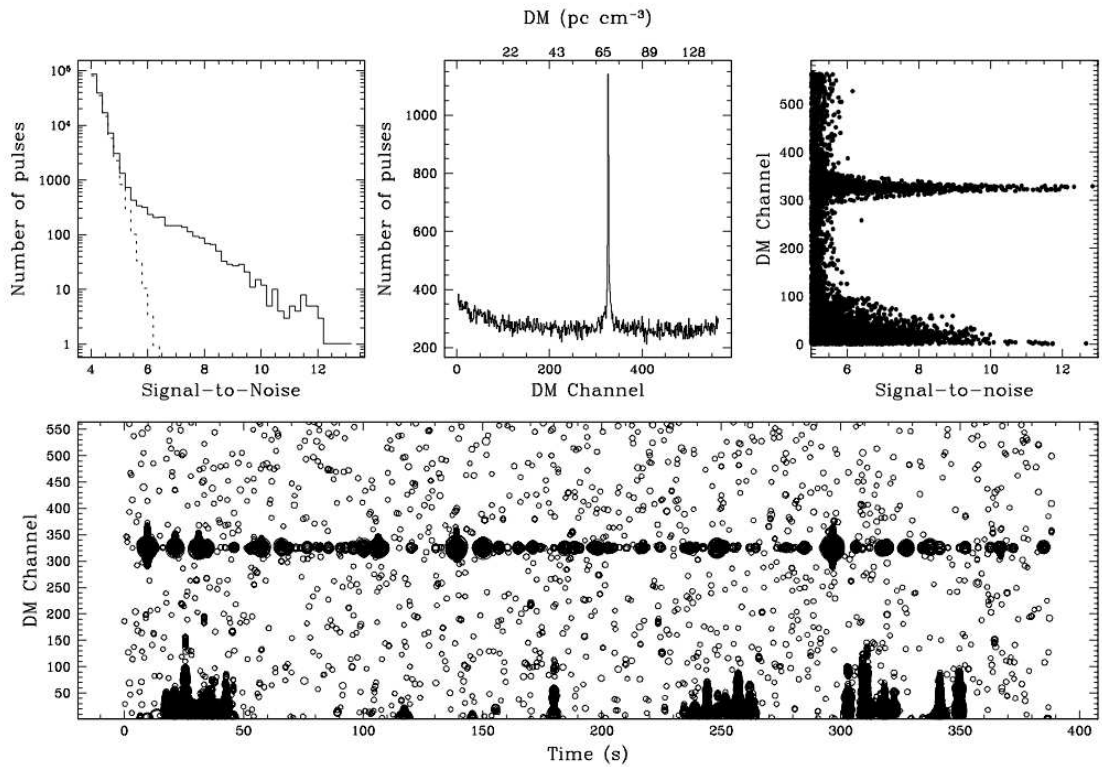
where  $T_{\text{sys}}$  is the ‘‘system temperature’’ of the telescope in Kelvin,  $G$  is the telescope's gain in  $\text{K Jy}^{-1}$ ,  $m$  is the signal-to-noise ratio of a detection (with a minimum threshold usually set for blind pulsar searches), and  $t_{\text{int}}$  is the total integration time of the observation.  $\beta$  is a factor included to represent signal losses due to system imperfections e.g. one-bit digitisation or non-rectangular channel bandpasses (e.g. Manchester et al. 2001, Lorimer & Kramer 2004), and is typically  $\lesssim 1.25$ .

### 1.4.2 Periodicity Searches and the Re-advent of Single Pulse Searching

The first pulsar was discovered using a chart recorder by Jocelyn Bell, marked by its bright, periodic single pulses. In fact, the first  $\sim 50$  pulsars were discovered by searching for their single-pulse emission. However as computing power advanced, the development of filterbanks and digital signal processing allowed the use of search techniques that use Fourier Transforms and/or the averaging (‘‘folding’’) of data over a range of periods to



(a)



(b)

Figure 1.6 (a) Here we show the basic flow of periodicity and single pulse searches for broadband pulsar and transient phenomena. The periodicity search is described in §1.4.2. Both search modes share the most computationally heavy aspect of searches—dedispersion—and benefit therefore in computation time and cost if performed contemporaneously. The dark grey panel lays out the primary components of the single pulse search methods outlined in Cordes & McLaughlin (2003): dedispersion, thresholding (setting a limit on candidate numbers based on the local interference environment), matched filtering, and diagnostic plotting. As noted in their paper, the choice of matched filter shape should be designed to match an expected pulse shape, for instance the exponential tail a delta pulse may acquire after propagation through the interstellar medium; however, in practice a progressive “smoothing” (i.e. the boxcar filter used in Chapters 4 and 5) is generally sufficient. Below, we reproduce an example single-pulse diagnostic plot from (Cordes & McLaughlin 2003). In their method, single pulse candidates are assessed across the entirety of the pointing (resulting here in a clear detection of pulses from the millisecond pulsar B1937+21).

allow increased sensitivity to the periodic signals exhibited by pulsars. Today, a typical pulsar search proceeds as outlined in the left panel of Figure 1.6, beginning with the dedispersion of multi-channel data into a band-integrated time series for each DM trial (with trial step intervals usually chosen to maintain  $\Delta t_{\text{Derr}} \lesssim 2\Delta t_{\text{Dsm}}$  for pulsars with a DM between two steps). The time series are then used to perform periodicity searches (e.g. using the Fast Fourier Transform, Brigham 1974, Ransom et al. 2002, or a fast folding algorithm, Staelin 1969), performing harmonic summing of Fourier components to increase sensitivity to pulsars of small duty cycle (Ransom et al. 2002). Such techniques have allowed the discovery of great numbers of pulsars, many that would have been too weak to discover by their single pulses alone.

However, given the specifications of the pulsar search systems outlined above, it is not surprising that pulsar data and observing systems are ideally suited for performing searches for single-event, short-duration pulses from not only neutron stars, but other myriad other possible celestial sources. Single celestial impulses will, too, be dispersed, requiring fast sampling and narrow sub-bands with which to correct for dispersion effects. As such, past pulsar surveys represent one of the few historical records of the sky capable of detecting transient radio events of duration  $\ll 1$  second, while new surveys present further search opportunities, and (given sufficient computing power) the chance to find events in real-time, allowing prompt follow-up observations.

In the past decade astronomers have begun to recognise this fact, returning to archival pulsar surveys that have already been rigorously searched for periodic signals, and applying new algorithms to search for transient, one-off pulses that would have been missed by Fourier search techniques; Fourier transform searches are insensitive to single bursts of emission, and become less sensitive to some periodic sources due to erratic or sparse emission, short duty cycles, and long rotation periods (the latter due to low-frequency noise in the data, e.g. Deneva et al. 2009). While the first blind searches for single pulses began a number of years prior to its publication, Cordes & McLaughlin (2003) first laid out the known sources of transient radio emission, considering a “transient phase space” that exhibits these phenomena (Fig. 1.7), and developing a set of standard methodologies for single pulse searching (see section §4.1 for a more complete review of blind single pulse searches). The primary features in the Cordes & McLaughlin search methods are outlined and discussed in Figure 1.6.

It is now recognised that there may be many transient phenomena detectable in pulsar surveys that, if detected, may provide insight into a variety of emission sources. These are reviewed below.

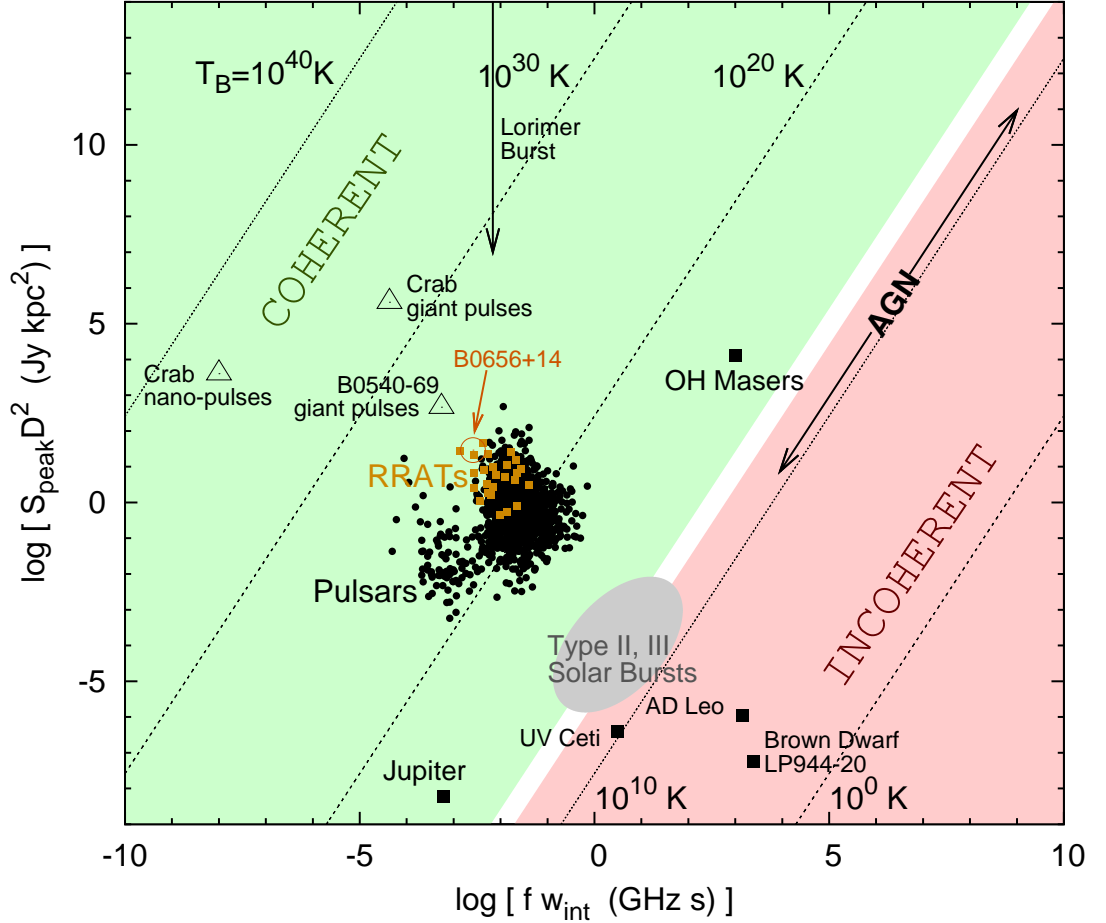


Figure 1.7 Here we show an augmented display of the transient radio phase space of Cordes & McLaughlin (2003). It reflects the known sources of transient radio emission, most of which are detectable in pulsar data streams given sufficient  $t_{\text{samp}}$ ,  $b$ , and flux sensitivity. These are detailed in §1.4.3. Overlaid are contours of constant brightness temperature,  $T_B$ ; recall that at low frequency (suitable for radio wavelengths),  $T_B$  can be represented by the Rayleigh-Jeans approximation to the Planck law, allowing the derived expression  $T_B \simeq S_{\text{peak}} \lambda / (2 k_B \Omega) = S_{\text{peak}} D^2 / [2 k_B (f w_{\text{int}})^2]$ , where  $\lambda$  is the observing wavelength,  $k_B$  is Boltzmann’s constant,  $\Omega$  is the solid angle of emission,  $D$  is the distance to the source, and  $f$  is the observing frequency.  $T_B \simeq 10^{11-12}$  K represents the maximum brightness temperature of an incoherent synchrotron emission source; above this limit, Compton self-scattering prevents incoherent processes (Readhead 1994, Singal 2009). The large range in luminosity space for the Lorimer Burst reflects the unknown distance to the object (see §1.4.4).

### 1.4.3 Known Sources of Fast Transient Radio Emission

It is clear in Figure 1.7 that there are only a handful of known classes of radio transients. We note that above  $T_B \sim 10^{15}$  K, this phase space has until recently been restricted to periodicity-focussed searches using Fourier techniques.

**Pulsars** form a fairly compact island on this diagram. Several neutron-star related objects, all of which have distinctive single-pulse emission, have isolated positions; for instance, pulsars such as the Crab, which in its integrated emission lies within the pulsar island, emits giant ( $10^5$  Jy) single pulses as well as high-intensity bursts of nanosecond duration. High pulse-to-pulse modulation and periodic nulling represent other types of signal variance observed in the single pulse emission of some pulsars (e.g. Herfindal & Rankin 2007, Kramer et al. 2006). Such neutron star-related phenomena promise insights into the localisation and power source of radio pulsar emission. Single pulse searches have the ability to discover extreme examples of these sources, and may serve to reveal a bridging population or define a distinction between steadily-emitting pulsars and pulsars with excessive nulls. This could help reveal whether the rotating radio transients of §1.1.3 are (in physical mechanism) just extreme examples of nulling pulsars (see Chap. 4) or distant, modulated pulsars, such as radio pulsar B0656+14, which has a lognormal pulse energy distribution with a high-energy tail that sets it apart from typical pulse energy distributions. This pulsar was found to have a single-pulse energy distribution with a long high-energy tail, leading to the supposition of Weltevrede et al. (2006b) that the pulsar is a source which, if it were more distant from Earth (thus making its average emission undetectable), might be observed as an RRAT.

Non-neutron star transient phenomena that exist in the transient sky, however were not discovered through pulsar-data searches, include **active galactic nuclei**, which exhibit intrinsic intermediate-duration flares (e.g. Aller et al. 1985, Kawai et al. 1991, Robson et al. 1993) as well as intra-day variability caused by interstellar scintillation (see discussion on AGN variability in §3.3). Flares have been observed to arise on second- to hour-long timescales from a number of sources: for instance **brown dwarfs**, giving us insight into the magnetic activity in these stars (Berger et al. 2001), **active stars** (e.g. UV Ceti, AD Leo, and several others Jackson et al. 1989)—revealing cycles possibly similar to those of the sun—and even **Jupiter** (Goldreich & Lynden-Bell 1969, Aubier et al. 2000), which emits decametric radiation interpreted to arise from the volcanically active Io causing currents to flow between Jupiter and its moon. Such signals, if detected in other star systems, could indicate the presence of extra-solar planets (Willes & Wu 2005). It has long been recognised that **the sun** is very active in short-duration radio signals,



emitting  $\sim$ MHz-wavelength, swept-frequency solar bursts classified into several spectral types. These typically arise from non-thermal emission formed in interactions of solar flares with the stellar wind or with the solar magnetosphere Loughhead et al. (1957a), Poqerusse et al. (1988), Mann et al. (1996).

#### 1.4.4 Unknown & Theoretical Sources of Fast Transient Radio Emission

Theoretical arguments predict fast transients from a variety of non-neutron star origins, such as **coalescing systems of relativistic massive objects** (Li & Paczyński 1998, Hansen & Lyutikov 2001), **evaporating primordial black holes** (Rees 1977), or **supernova events** (e.g. Colgate & Noerdlinger 1971). If such bursts could be routinely detected they would provide a powerful cosmological probe. Because the intergalactic medium harbours the vast majority of baryonic matter in the Universe, and we expect a high ionisation fraction of this matter, measurements of DM as a function of redshift would provide a descriptor for the density of the Universe over a range of cosmological redshifts, elucidating the baryonic content and ionization history of the Universe. In addition, if bursts associated with relativistic-object coalescence were discovered, an electromagnetic indicator of the gravitational coalescence of such objects would provide the direction and event time of a gravitational wave signal; this would lower the detection threshold of detectors such as LIGO manyfold.

Given this, perhaps the most exciting recent discovery from single pulse searches arose coincidentally to the author’s initiation of doctoral research. The discovery was a one-off burst tentatively identified as having an extragalactic origin (Lorimer et al. 2007), that has come to be known in the community as the **Lorimer Burst**. This discovery was a  $\sim 30$  Jy pulse, which appeared to show frequency-dependent pulse scattering consistent with that predicted by a Kolmogorov spectrum (with  $\tau_s \propto f^{4.8 \pm 0.4}$ ; recall §1.1.2) and showed a strongly swept-frequency signal consistent with cold plasma dispersion, at a dispersion measure of  $375 \text{ pc cm}^{-3}$ . The consistency with the signatures expected from pulsed astrophysical phenomena led to the suggestion that this was the first detected radio impulse of extragalactic, cosmological origin; based on its large dispersion measure, the pulse appeared to originate from a redshift of  $z \sim 0.3$ .

The discovery of this pulse was the result of reprocessing an archival pulsar survey of the Magellanic Clouds, at the time representing one of the few data sets of significant volume ever searched for single pulses. The fact that the search uncovered such a “gold standard” event,  $\sim 100$  times the detection threshold of the data, seemed to imply that many more should be detected in subsequent searches. At the inception of this thesis,

the origin of the Lorimer Burst remained ambiguous, with no similar detections since the original discovery (Deneva et al. 2009, Keane et al. 2010). However, we provide a curious advancement on this story in Chapter 6.

## 1.5 Thesis Outline

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The aim of this chapter has been to provide a backdrop to the diversity of topics within Pulsar Astronomy. We have outlined the extreme birth, lifetime, and physical properties of pulsars, and have revealed how pulsars are being used to study a vast range of astrophysical topics. We have shown that the prediction of pulsar arrival times, and the use of many pulsars in a “pulsar timing array,” can reveal insights into the study of binary supermassive black hole systems through pulsars’ potential to detect gravitational radiation. Additionally, we have stressed the important role that specialised pulsar observing systems have in making contributions to fast-transient radio astronomy: in particular, how searches for single short-duration radio events in pulsar data can reveal insights into pulsar emission through the discovery of sparsely-emitting neutron stars, provide valuable probes of the evolution of the Universe and explosive extragalactic phenomena, and discover yet unknown celestial radio emitters.

In Chapters 2 and 3, we explore the binary supermassive black hole population. Chapter 2 examines whether currently recognised electromagnetic tracers of SMBH binaries will be able to discover sources emitting gravitational waves in the pulsar timing band, and discusses the prospects of finding such a system. Chapter 3 then reports on an extensive survey for SMBH binaries in archival radio data, developing further one electromagnetic identification technique discussed in Chapter 2. The results of this search are interpreted in the context of the “last parsec problem” (§1.3.1) and the measurement of the inspiral efficiency of SMBHs after a merger.

Chapter 4, we introduces new methods of single pulse searching and their application to search for transient events in archival pulsar data at high galactic latitudes. This search resulted in the discovery of 14 new neutron stars, 12 of which are sparse emitters (e.g. RRATs or extreme nulling pulsars), and one of which, J0941–39, appears to represent a cross-over between a nulling pulsar and an RRAT. We use the new discoveries to explore the origin of RRAT emission, and compare RRAT properties to those of normal pulsars.

Chapter 5 presents the search of the ongoing High Time Resolution Universe Pulsar and Transients Survey (HTRU). This survey covers a sky area which overlaps with previous pulsar surveys, however the new hardware systems used in HTRU afford a greatly increased sensitivity to narrow single impulses. In this chapter present software which employs the

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search methods of Chap. 4, and explain the integration of this transient-searching software into the traditional Fourier-based search used in the survey. We quantify the survey's sensitivity to single pulses, and discuss the 12 new discoveries in comparison to previous surveys of the same region and in the context of the dynamic radio sky.

Chapter 6 introduces the discovery of Perytons, a terrestrial, swept-frequency phenomenon with remarkable similarity in their frequency sweep-rate to the cold plasma dispersion relation. The delay distribution of these objects peaks at an equivalent dispersion measure of  $\sim 380 \text{ pc cm}^{-3}$ , drawing significant doubts on the extragalactic interpretation of the Lorimer Burst's origin (§1.4.4). We suggest a possible origin for the Perytons, and discuss the consequences for future radio transient searches.

Finally, Chapter 7 reviews the results and conclusions made in this thesis. We also include a brief discussion of key future projects that would build on the advances of the work presented here.



# 2

## The Co-detectability of Electromagnetic and Gravitational Wave Emission from Binary Supermassive Black Holes

*The world thus appears as a complicated tissue of events, in which connections of different kinds alternate or overlap or combine and thereby determine the texture of the whole.*

—W. K. Heisenberg

In the next two chapters, we explore the link between pulsar timing and SMBH evolution by considering several methods that can identify small-orbit supermassive binary black holes. Directly detecting SMBH binaries through their electromagnetic signatures at a range of orbital separations will make important contributions to the prediction of the strength and detectability of SMBH-origin gravitational waves, enabling the determination of the post-merger SMBH inspiral efficiency and exploring the prominence of “stalled binaries.” That relationship is explored in Chapter 3.

In this chapter, we lay a quantitative outline for several binary identification methods, including pulsar timing and two techniques of supermassive binary identification through electromagnetic emission from regions closely associated with SMBHs. The discovery of a system through its electromagnetic emission that is in the detectable frequency range of timing arrays would elucidate a definite target for pulsar timing arrays, and lead to a great number of scientific returns in the system’s study, reviewed below. We determine the mass, distance, and orbital separation of binary black holes which may be co-detectable by both electromagnetic and gravitational wave identifiers, and touch on the prospects of finding such a system in a targeted survey.

## 2.1 Introduction

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Binary supermassive black holes play an important role in a number of areas in astrophysics, including the formation of galaxies, galactic dynamics, and, as outlined in §1.3.1, current and forthcoming gravitational wave science. Although few binary supermassive systems are known, given that merging galaxies are observed in the local Universe, as detailed below, it follows that numerous binary SMBHs must exist in the local Universe. While pulsar timing progresses down to the sensitivity limit to detect these objects through their gravitational emission, the electromagnetic identification and observation of such systems has thus far been sparse, due primarily to the lack of identified observational signatures of the systems.

However, at present identifying electromagnetic signatures of SMBH binaries has significant merits, especially if a system can be identified which should be emitting gravitational radiation within the sensitivity limits of pulsar timing. For such cases, the knowledge of the sky position and a rough orbital solution of the source will raise the sensitivity of a PTA to the object manyfold (e.g. Jenet et al. 2004). Binary systems are also intrinsic cosmological distance tools; given an orbit known through either the long-term presence of a gravitational wave signal in timing data, or through constant electromagnetic monitoring, a spatially resolved binary is a precise standard ruler. Furthermore, the knowledge of a host galaxy for a gravitational wave signal through electromagnetic identifiers allows one to break the degeneracy between the source distance (measurable by the GW signal, Corbin & Cornish 2010) and the cosmological redshift, making the source a standard candle (or, as it has been called for the GW case, a “standard siren”, Schutz 1986). Finally, the measurement of the differences in effects of the GW signal on a pulsar and on Earth (commonly termed the “pulsar” and “Earth terms” of a signal) can afford clues into the history of the binary’s inspiral, and a comparison with the current state of AGN emissivity for the SMBH binary identification techniques discussed below. The electromagnetic identification of current SMBH binaries in galaxies will aid in the understanding of the nature of binary hosts: e.g. galaxy morphology, large-scale radio emission features, galaxy type, dynamical state, etc., can lead to more precise estimates of binary merger rates, and would allow measurements of the influence of accretion versus mergers in SMBH growth. These merger rates can feed back to providing direct predictions of the expected gravitational wave background signals for pulsar timing.

Below, we explore the overlap between various currently recognized techniques for the detection of binary supermassive black hole systems, and determine whether there is a set of binary sources that can be co-detected through their observable gravitational

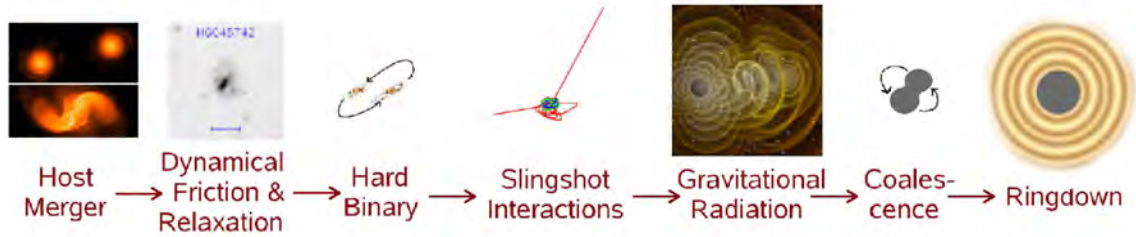


Figure 2.1 A broad sketch of the birth and evolution of a supermassive black hole binary. Some physical processes are ongoing, to some degree, throughout the entire evolutionary process (e.g. dynamical friction, emission of gravitational waves), however this sketch accents the sequence of significant events and dominance of various energy dissipation mechanisms contributing to the binary’s inspiral. Image credits: Panel 1, S. Kazantzidis (KICP/U. Chicago); Panel 2, De Propriis et al. (2007); Panel 5, C. Henze (NASA)

and electromagnetic signatures. The sensitivity of pulsar timing arrays to gravitational waves from single supermassive black hole binary systems was outlined earlier (see §1.3.2). We outline hypothesised electromagnetic signatures of SMBH binaries in §2.2 below, and the physical parameters of systems in §2.3. We then consider the systems identifiable using two currently recognized methods of small-orbit binary black hole detection through electromagnetic radiation: 1) spatially resolving a binary system’s active galactic nuclei (§2.4.1), and 2) spectrally resolving offset or double-peaked broad- or narrow-line regions from a binary active galactic nuclei (§2.4.2). In §2.5 we investigate what systems could be co-detectable by these electromagnetic identification techniques and pulsar timing arrays, and discuss the prospects of actually finding a system which is simultaneously identifiable by both its GW emission and one or both of these electromagnetic identifiers in §2.6.

## 2.2 Electromagnetic Signatures of SMBH Binaries

Details of the formation and evolution of supermassive black hole binaries are reviewed in detail in the next chapter, however to initiate the reader, a broad sketch of supermassive black hole binary evolution is laid out in Fig. 2.1. While very few post-merger binary SMBH systems are known, observationally there are several ways to identify galaxies with binary nuclei, which are reviewed briefly below (see also Komossa 2006 for a good overview).

Pairs of galaxies/quasars with small angular separations and similar redshifts, as well as galaxies which show disturbed structure and tidal tails in the optical and infrared, can indicate interaction between widely separated stellar cores containing SMBHs in the early stages of host galaxy merger (e.g. Myers et al. 2008, De Propriis et al. 2007, Wen et al.

2009). However, after sufficient relaxation of the host galaxy, pairs are difficult to identify through electromagnetic signatures without a direct tracer (for instance, distinct emission from an active galactic nucleus). Nevertheless, secondary signals that have been modelled as a consequence of a close or bound binary SMBH include quasi-periodic oscillations in flux density (OJ287, Valtonen et al. 1988), abnormal jet morphology such as helices or X-shaped radio jets (Saripalli & Subrahmanyan 2009, Lal & Rao 2007), and spatial oscillations of an active galactic nucleus (3C66B, Sudou et al. 2003). For the last of these, Sudou et al. proposed orbital parameters in the range of a system we would endeavour to discover. However, in this instance the Sudou et al. interpretation is also a good example of the danger in using indirect signatures to search for binary black holes. Soon after the Sudou et al. (2003) publication, Jenet et al. (2004) noted that the system could not be a binary with the proposed orbital parameters; if it were, it should be emitting a strong GW signal, which was distinctly absent in pulsar timing data. We reference 3C66B below as a proxy for a system of interest.

A binary identification technique that has arisen in recent years aims to identify sources with abnormal (i. e. double or offset) broad/narrow emission line regions, implying active galactic nuclei (AGN) moving at high relative velocities to each other or to the host galaxy (e. g. Peterson et al. 1987, Comerford et al. 2009, Boroson & Lauer 2009, Decarli et al. 2010). In some of these cases, other explanations have better suited the observed characteristics of each source (e. g. Boroson & Lauer 2009, Gaskell 2010, Chornock et al. 2010), however for some systems most other explanations can be ruled out, and estimates of the binary system parameters support the existence of a sub-kiloparsec, supermassive binary system.

Most promising are systems such as 3C75, which shows two jet-emitting radio AGN cores, NGC 6240 (Komossa et al. 2003), and other spatially resolved double X-ray or radio emitting AGN (e.g. Wang & Gao 2010), which are straightforward to identify and can provide a direct detection of a double SMBH system. The core regions of radio-luminous AGN have been observed to show a distinct radio continuum spectrum which typically peaks at radio frequencies above  $\sim 1$  GHz, giving core components a characteristically flat two-point spectral index ( $\alpha > -0.5$ , where radio flux  $F_\nu \propto \nu^\alpha$ ) at GHz frequencies (e.g. Slee et al. 1994). This feature distinguishes the region most directly associated with the host black hole from outer features such as larger scale jets or hotspots, which show power-law spectra generally at or steeper than  $\alpha = -0.7$ . Taking advantage of these unique spectral signatures of the core regions of radio-emitting AGN at high radio frequency (1 to 90 GHz), it is possible to spatially resolve and identify AGN containing multiple cores



using multifrequency gigahertz spectral imaging. It is this property that has provided the supporting evidence for the existence of the smallest-separation binary supermassive black hole currently known, 4C +37.11 (0402+379; Rodriguez et al. 2006).

## 2.3 Physical Preliminaries of SMBH Binary Systems

We use the following conventions in notation: two black holes have masses  $m_1, m_2$  where  $q \equiv m_2/m_1 < 1$ . The reduced mass,  $\mu$ , of a system is  $\mu = m_1 m_2 / M$ , where  $M = m_1 + m_2$ . Variables of the format  $Q_{i,ph}$  refer to the value  $Q$  of  $ph$  ( $ph = bin$  for the binary orbital quantity, and  $ph = gw$  for the quantity of the related gravitational waves) measured by  $i$  (where  $i = o$  is observed quantity at Earth, and  $i = s$  the physical quantity in the source rest frame). For example, a binary's source-rest-frame orbital period is  $P_{s,bin}$ .

A binary black hole at redshift  $z$  in a Keplerian orbit will have a period observed at Earth of  $P_{o,bin} = P_{s,bin} \cdot (1 + z)$ , and an orbital semi-major axis of:

$$a = \left( \frac{P_{o,bin} \sqrt{GM}}{2\pi(1+z)} \right)^{2/3}. \quad (2.1)$$

If the redshift  $z$  of a SMBH binary's host is known, we can estimate the observed angular separation of two discrete objects by calculating the co-moving radial distance to the object:

$$D(z) = \frac{c}{H_0} \int_0^z \frac{dz'}{E(z')}, \quad (2.2)$$

where  $E(z)^2 = \Omega_m(1+z)^3 + (1 - \Omega_m - \Omega_\Lambda)(1+z)^2 + \Omega_\Lambda$ , (e.g. Peebles 1993). Here, we assume a geometrically flat Friedmann-Robertson-Walker Universe, with  $\Omega_m = 0.27$ ,  $\Omega_\Lambda = 0.73$ , and the Hubble constant  $H_0 = 72 \text{ km s}^{-1} \text{ Mpc}^{-1}$ . The angular diameter distance to an object provides the observed linear-to-angular scaling at the target object:

$$d_A = \frac{\ell}{\theta} = \frac{D(z)}{1+z}, \quad (2.3)$$

where the projected linear separation  $\ell$  of the objects in a binary of inclination  $i$  at orbital phase  $\phi$  is  $\ell = a \sqrt{(\sin \phi \cos i)^2 + (\cos \phi)^2}$ . Equations 2.2 and 2.3 provide us with the observed angular separation of two such objects:

$$\theta_{\text{obs}} = 2.062648 \times 10^8 \cdot \frac{\ell H_0(1+z)}{c} \left[ \int_0^z \frac{dz'}{E(z')} \right]^{-1} \text{ mas}, \quad (2.4)$$

where  $c = 2.99792 \times 10^8 \text{ m s}^{-1}$  is the speed of light and  $\ell$  is in meters. If the system is in

a stable orbit, the observed line-of-sight relative velocity of the two objects in a binary is given by

$$\Delta v_o = \Delta v_s \sin i \cos \phi = \sqrt{\frac{GM}{a}} \sin i \cos \phi . \quad (2.5)$$

Binary systems will emit gravitational waves at a frequency  $f_{\text{sgw}} = n f_{\text{sbin}}$ , where  $n$  represents the harmonic at which the emission occurs. For the circular orbits to which we limit our analysis,  $n = 2$ ; however,  $n$  increases for eccentric orbits (Enoki et al. 2004).

## 2.4 Capability of Electromagnetic Identification Techniques

### 2.4.1 Direct Imaging of Active Galactic Nuclei

The flat-spectrum emission from radio AGN that is associated with the supermassive black hole is highly compact, and largely unresolved down to scales of tens of  $\mu\text{as}$ . While it was previously noted that these cores exhibit flat spectra between 1 and 90 GHz, they will peak (and, as a consequence, be most readily detectable) at frequencies between  $\sim 2$  and 20 GHz. Radio spectral imaging requires observation at two frequencies, where  $\nu_1 < \nu_2$ , preferably observed simultaneously or near-simultaneously to minimise scintillation and/or intrinsic variability effects (see §3.3). The resolution of VLBI observations is typically diffraction-limited, giving a highest observing resolution of  $\theta_r = c/(B\nu_{\text{obs}})$ , where  $B$  is the longest observing element spacing, and  $\nu_{\text{obs}}$  is the observing frequency of the experiment. This technique likewise requires observations with a sufficient coverage in  $u-v$  space that the morphology of the resulting image is representative of the source. Spectral index imaging (again, the techniques of which are discussed in detail in the next chapter) requires tapering of  $u-v$  data to match  $\theta_r$  of the two frequencies and allow a spectral index map to be made. As such, the resolving power of this technique—and the limiting factor for detecting the small-orbit systems of interest—is  $\theta_r$  at the lower observing frequency.

For our computations, we focus on the power of Very Long Baseline Interferometry (VLBI) and in particular the Very Long Baseline Array (VLBA) to resolve components of AGN to high resolutions. For the VLBA,  $B = 8611$  km, however the effective maximum baseline depends on a target's sky position, and decreases most significantly for sources of declination  $\delta \ll 0^\circ$ .

### 2.4.2 Offset Emission Line Identifiers

There are a number of emission-line identifiers that have been put forward as evidence of a SMBH binary (including broad lines offset from narrow-line emission, a superimposed

set of blue- and red-shifted emission lines in the same series, and AGN line emission with a line-of-sight velocity offset from the host galaxy). Given that the relative velocity of SMBHs in a pair increases as the binary system evolves—rendering multiple line systems more readily resolved with optical spectrometers—the identification of offset line systems associated with small-orbit binaries is not limited by observing hardware.

Instead, the limiting factor for identifying small-orbit SMBH black hole binaries through offset-line identifiers is a physical one; for binaries within a sufficiently small orbital separation, the broad-line-emitting regions gravitationally bound to a black hole will be tidally disrupted by the other. As noted by Dotti et al. (2009), this occurs when the radius of the broad line region (BLR) associated with a black hole exceeds the Roche Lobe of that black hole; that is,  $r_{\text{bl}} < R$ . Following the Roche Lobe radius approximation of Eggleton (1983), we are limited to

$$r_{\text{bl}} < R = \frac{a 0.49 q^{2/3}}{0.6 q^{2/3} + \ln(1 + q^{1/3})} . \quad (2.6)$$

The size of the BLR can be measured by “reverberation mapping,” which maps the time delay,  $\tau$  between changes in the continuum flux in an AGN and the changes in the intensity of a broad emission line in the source. This allows the estimation of the BLR radius as  $r_{\text{bl}} \leq c\tau$  (e.g. Bentz et al. 2009). Bentz et al. note that  $c\tau$  is typically on the order of one light day ( $\simeq 0.8 \times 10^{-3}$  pc), however  $r_{\text{bl}}$  in galaxies have been found up to several orders of magnitude larger, correlated with the continuum luminosity in multiple wave-bands (Kaspi et al. 2005). For simplicity, here we simply set as an average hard limit that the condition  $R > 0.001$  pc must be met to observe a source. This corresponds to a limit of

$$a > \frac{0.6 q^{2/3} + \ln(1 + q^{1/3})}{490 q^{2/3}} pc \quad (2.7)$$

for the minimum orbital semi-major axis detectable through offset line-emission identifiers.

## 2.5 Systems Co-observable in Electromagnetic and GW Emission

Pulsar timing and electromagnetic searches for binary AGN are related in two ways. First, as stressed in this chapter, they can provide interesting scientific results in the co-observation of electromagnetic and GW emission from a binary supermassive system. Second (stressed more highly in the next chapter), the discovery of binary AGN at various stages of post-merger SMBH binary inspiral can help reveal the currently unknown timescale taken by the binary to evolve from host-merger to the gravitational-wave dom-

inant regime observable by pulsar timing. This latter aspect is exemplified by Figure 2.2, which indicates the capabilities of VLBI to resolve a binary radio AGN at various stages of its inspiral. Within  $a \simeq 1$  kpc, these stages of merger are unresolvable by other observational techniques (except for offset-line identifiers, however for these the physical separation between two holes is more ambiguous).

As reviewed in section 1.3.1, pulsars have a sensitivity in the gravitational wave spectrum to frequencies  $1/C_{\text{obs}} < f_{\text{ogw}} < 1/T$ , where  $1/C_{\text{obs}}$  is the observational cadence (how frequently one's pulsars are observed), and  $T$  is the length of the pulsar timing data set. As implied by Eq. 2.1 and the direct connection between the observed gravitational wave frequency and the binary orbital period, the limits of pulsar timing arrays' GW frequency window put bounds on the physical systems detectable by pulsar timing arrays. This is reflected in Figure 2.3, which indicates the systems detectable by the three techniques considered in this manuscript. For the purposes of this plot we have maximised the linear projected separation of the SMBH binary (i. e.  $\phi = 0$ ,  $\therefore \ell = a$ ).

It is apparent in Figure 2.3 that there is indeed some overlap in the systems theoretically detectable by these techniques, with the most significant intersection between the systems detectable by pulsar timing and offset line techniques. Note that the BLR limit shown in this figure is mass-independent, however will increase in  $a$  as the mass ratio  $q$  decreases. For pulsar timing, the detectable systems at  $q < 1$  will have smaller orbital radii; the largest overlap area between these two techniques, therefore, lies in equal-mass systems.

For radio imaging the co-detectable systems are fewer, limited to the most massive end of equal-mass binary systems at low redshifts: restricted to  $z \lesssim 0.01$  for ground-based observations at high radio frequency, and extended to sources of redshift  $z \lesssim 0.1$  when using observatories capable of exceptionally long baselines, such as the upcoming space-based VSOP-2 mission<sup>2</sup>.

## 2.6 Practical Considerations

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### 2.6.1 Prospects of System Co-detection

The probability that a binary AGN has orbital parameters within the bounds of, and detectable by, the radio imaging or offset-line techniques will depend on a number of factors. This includes the number of (line-emitting/radio) AGN in local galaxies, the rate

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<sup>1</sup>VSOP, see <http://www.vsop.isas.jaxa.jp/top.html>

<sup>2</sup>VSOP-2, due for launch in 2012; see <http://www.vsop.isas.jaxa.jp/vsop2>

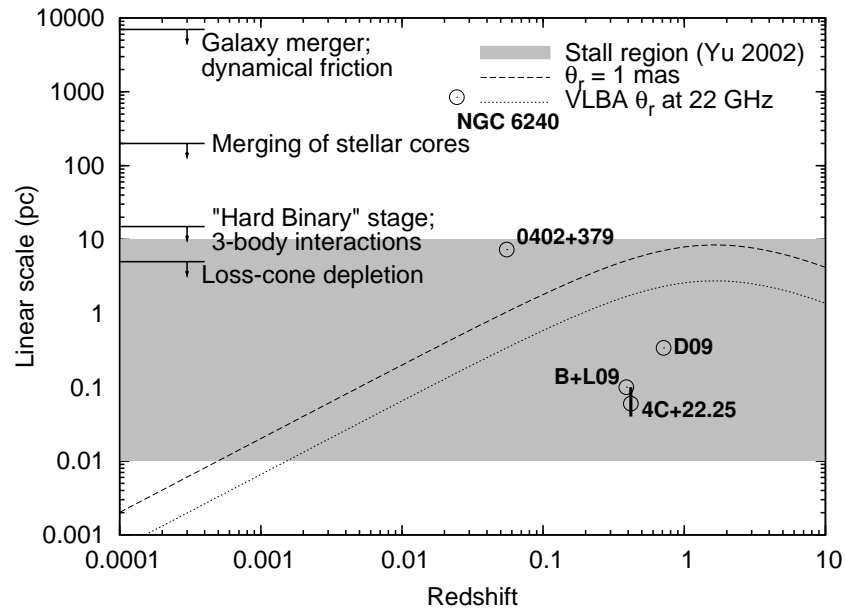


Figure 2.2 The stages of supermassive black hole inspiral as sketched in Fig. 2.1, and an indication of the parameter space explored by VLBI. The inspiral-stage markings on the ordinate indicate a representative semi-major axis for a  $m_1 = m_2 \simeq 10^8 M_\odot$  paired AGN. The “stall region” given above represents stalling radii for a range of SMBH masses and galaxy types, as given by Yu (2002) (see Chap.3). The black encircled points mark the projected linear separations of proposed SMBH pairs (B+L09 is the system put forward in Boroson & Lauer 2009 and D09 indicates the system proposed by Dotti et al. (2009)). Note, however, that the binary SMBH nature of all but NGC 6240 and 0402+379 have yet to be confirmed.

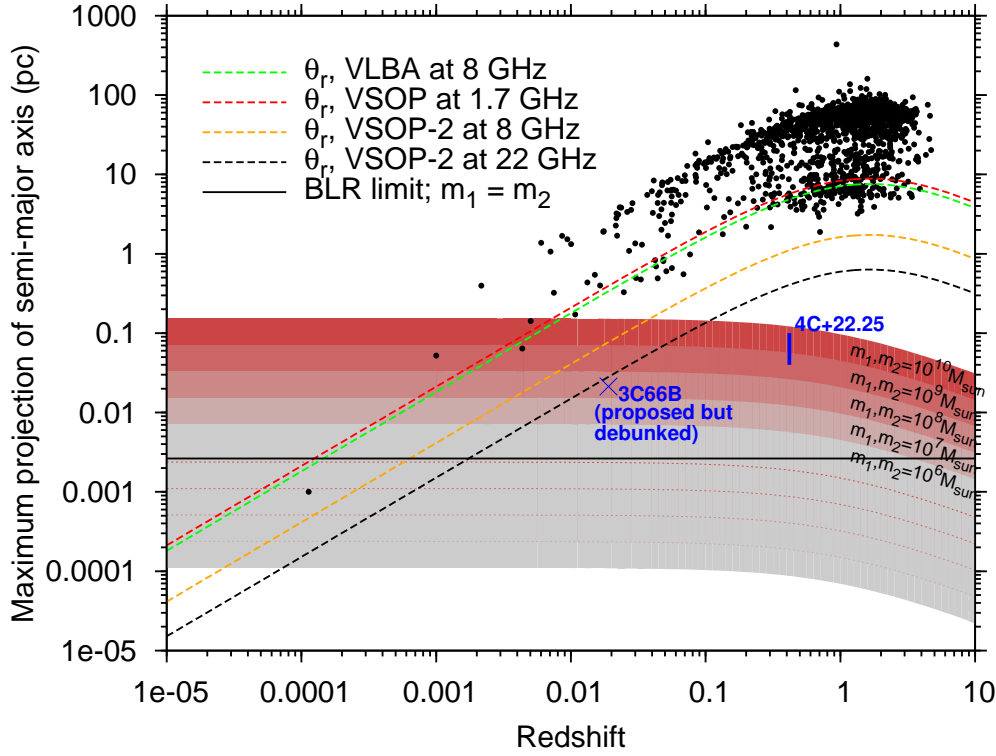


Figure 2.3 A view of binary AGN that are possible to co-detect through their gravitational and electromagnetic emission with the Parkes Pulsar Timing Array, offset emission-line identifiers, and radio imaging (using the ground-based VLBA at its longest baseline at  $\nu_1 = 8$  GHz, and past and future radio interferometers with space-based detecting elements: VSOP<sup>1</sup> operated primarily at 1.7 and 5 GHz, while VSOP-2<sup>2</sup> is planned to operate at 8, 22, and 43 GHz; baseline length estimated from the satellites’ apogee altitude). The coloured contours show systems emitting GWs in the pulsar timing band, with a lower bound at  $C_{\text{obs}} = 1$  wk and upper bound set at  $T = 20$  years. The black points on this plot give an indication of  $\theta_r$  for actual VLBA data (from the data set used in Chapter 3). The scatter is caused by the range of observational frequencies ( $\nu_1 = 2$  to 24 GHz) and sky positions of the target sources in the data set. The cross labelled “3C66B” SMBH binary candidate put forward by Sudou et al. (2003) based on abnormal jet motion, and was subsequently disproven by Jenet et al. (2004) who indicated that the GW emission expected from this system was not seen in pulsar timing data. 4C+22.25 is an offset-line system which, depending on the uncertainties in SMBH masses and orbital period (reflected by the vertical bar length), may be detectable in pulsar data sets.

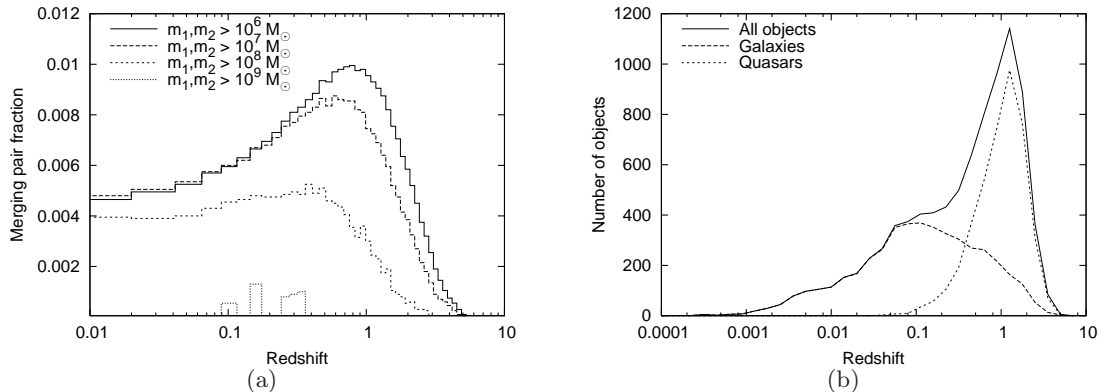


Figure 2.4 (a) The redshift-dependent fraction of merging galaxies ( $f_{\text{mrg}} = N_{\text{mrg}}/N_{\text{gal}}$ , representing the number of merging galaxies where  $m_1, m_2 > m_{\text{lim}}$  over the number of galaxies at that redshift which host a central black hole of mass  $> m_{\text{lim}}$ ). (b) The redshift distribution of radio-emitting galaxies and quasars. This figure reflects all extragalactic objects of radio flux  $S > 1$  mJy with a measurement of redshift recorded in NED.<sup>1</sup>

of galaxy mergers in which both galaxies host black holes of  $m_\bullet \geq 10^6 M_\odot$ , and the delay between host galaxy merger and binary formation (as explored in the next chapter, along with the possibility that these systems stall before the stage detectable by pulsar timing).

In Figure 2.4(a), we show the redshift-dependent fraction of virially bound galaxy pairs, as predicted by the online Millennium Simulation database (see §3.5.4). We use this here as a representative reference for the SMBH mass-dependent fraction of merging galaxies in a hierarchical Universe—and thus the fraction of galaxies containing SMBH binaries, given an efficient post-merger centralisation of the SMBHs.

It is clear that the radio imaging technique is limited to co-detecting systems in only the most nearby galaxies. This is complicated by the fact that the number of radio-active (esp. flat-spectrum) AGN peaks well-beyond the redshift of co-detectable binaries. To accent this point, the redshift distribution of radio-emitting AGN down to a flux limit of 1 mJy are shown in Figure 2.4(b).<sup>1</sup> Taking these numbers at face value, a flux-limited search for binary SMBH systems emitting gravitational waves in the pulsar timing band would be limited to  $\sim 415$  targets at  $z < 0.01$ , and  $\sim 1950$  targets at  $z < 0.1$ . This leaves less than two and eight binary black holes likely to exist in these samples (at  $z < 0.01$  and  $0.1$ , respectively) if the mean merger fraction for radio-active black holes is  $f_{\text{mrg}} = 0.4\%$ .

Given that the flux for many of these sources will be resolved or otherwise very weak at VLBI baselines and the binary systems will have a statistically even orbital phase

<sup>1</sup>Note: this plot was constructed from data in NED and report only the AGN with a radio flux between 700 MHz and 22 GHz of  $S > 1$  mJy and a recorded redshift; it may suffer minor contamination from star-forming galaxies.

distribution, the actual number of detectable targets will in practice be less, leaving little prospect for success in finding a pulsar-detectable, GW-emitting system in a radio mapping survey. However, as previously stated, and demonstrated in Chapter 3, such searches can nevertheless contribute to measurements of the SMBH inspiral timescale.

For the offset-line technique, the lack of redshift limit to which the systems are detectable and the non-constraint of radio activity allows the possibility to search of a far greater number of objects for GW-emitting binaries; the NASA Extragalactic Database (NED) contains over 90,000 catalogued type 1 AGN (that is, Seyfert-1 or Quasars with detected broad-line emission). Based on the merger rates from the Millennium Database (Springel et al. 2005; see §3.5.4) in Fig. 2.4(a), 300 to 900 of these AGN should be paired systems. If data were acquired with enough sensitivity to search for, detect and resolve offset lines in these sources, one would have a strong chance of multiple object detection, even when accounting for the low line-of-sight velocity offsets that some systems will have due to their phase and inclination orientation at the time of observation.

### 2.6.2 Sensitivity Considerations for Pulsar Timing

In the sections above we have considered only the frequency range of gravitational waves explored by pulsar timing. We point out now that in fact some sources emitting in the pulsar timing band may not be detectable because they have too small a GW strain to induce sufficient power in pulsar timing residuals, such that it is above the noise in the timing data set. This will have a complex dependence on the GW frequency of the binary, the constituent masses, the binary’s distance, and the detection method of the pulsar timing array (take, e. g., the curve of Fig. 1.5 as a reference for one pulsar).

We additionally note that although the overlap between pulsar timing and electromagnetic identifiers increases with longer data sets, the lower-frequency binaries will likewise be emitting fainter GW signals. Nevertheless, as timing data sets improve their RMS residual levels and as techniques are developed for using the full power of a timing array—rather than individual pulsars—to search for and detect GW emission, it is not inconceivable that one or more co-detectable systems may arise in the coming decades.

## 2.7 Conclusions

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In this chapter we have shown that three direct tracers of supermassive black hole binaries—VLBI radio spectral imaging, multiple-peaked AGN spectral lines, and gravitational waves—have overlap in the supermassive binary systems that they are able to detect. Radio



spectral imaging techniques are limited on small scales by the instrumental resolution of current radio telescopes, giving this method overlap with pulsar timing's sensitivity to gravitational waves only at low ( $z \lesssim 0.1$ ) redshift (even with the satellite-based long baseline interferometry programs past and planned). Offset-line identification techniques, given sufficient integration times, have no redshift-dependent detectability constraints, so the lower limit on binary separations identifiable using this technique is placed by the radius at which the line-emitting material is tidally stripped by the companion black hole (this should begin to occur at orbital separations of a few milliparsec).

The chance of finding a system detectable through both its electromagnetic and gravitational wave emission will depend highly on the merger rate and the distribution of AGN in the local Universe, and the amount of time spent in a gravitational-wave-emitting state. Using simple estimates for the merger rate and distribution of radio- and line-emitting AGN in the Universe, we find that line-emitting systems should be more successful in identifying these systems. The identification of co-emitting systems by resolving a double radio core it is highly improbable, however this technique should still contribute successfully to identifying larger-separation binaries at an earlier stage of inspiral, contributing to studies of galactic dynamics, merger rates, and other observable signatures of SMBH binaries. The improvements in pulsar timing's sensitivity to individual GW-emitting systems that is expected to occur with a dedicated pulsar timing program on the upcoming Square Kilometre Array should contribute to making the identification of co-detectable systems a more realistic possibility, particularly if it allows a better understanding of low-frequency timing noise over data spans of 10-20 years.



# 3

## A Radio Census of Binary Supermassive Black Holes

*A non-detection is still a detection of nothing!*

—G. B. Hobbs

In this chapter we carry out a search for binary supermassive black holes, further developing the radio spectral index imaging technique noted in Chapter 2. While aiming to detect individual systems co-observable by pulsar timing arrays, we also measure the timescale of post-merger SMBH binary inspiral, a value which was hitherto a significant unknown, and which contributes directly to the predicted strength of the pulsar-detectable gravitational wave background. We provide the first observational evidence against the theoretical possibility that SMBH binaries may “stall” at  $\sim$ pc orbits—a prospect which, if more than a theoretical fancy, would greatly impact the predictions for PTA-detectable binary systems and the strength of the gravitational wave background.

### 3.1 Introduction

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Models of the Universe in which hierarchical merging dominates the growth of galaxies have strong predictions for the presence of binary supermassive black holes at galaxy centres (e.g. Volonteri et al. 2003). As galaxies containing such massive black holes collide, the central black holes are expected to inspiral and form a bound interacting system which will have a significant impact on the central galactic environment (Merritt 2006). Predictions of the strength of the astrophysical gravitational wave background from SMBH binaries, and the expected detection rates for LISA and pulsar timing of individual black holes, are based on parameterisations of merger rates and the SMBH population (Rajagopal & Romani 1995, Jaffe & Backer 2003, Wyithe & Loeb 2003, Enoki et al. 2004, Sesana et al. 2008, 2009), giving gravitational wave detectors (detailed in §1.3.1) the potential to provide unique insights into the processes of galaxy formation.

In theoretical treatments, however, the evolution of post-merger central supermassive black holes still holds significant uncertainties. The steps in binary black hole formation and evolution were first laid out by Begelman et al. (1980). After a galaxy pair becomes virially bound, dynamical friction and violent relaxation drive the stellar cores containing the massive black holes (of masses  $m_1$  and  $m_2$ ;  $m_1 > m_2$ ) to the centre of the merger remnant on roughly a dynamical friction time. When the cores have merged, the black holes independently experience dynamical friction against the merged core's stellar environment. This further centralises each black hole, leading the system to become a bound pair at a separation where the enclosed stellar mass equals the total binary mass. If the stellar core is modelled as a single isothermal sphere with stellar density  $\rho_*(r) = \sigma_v^2 / (2\pi Gr^2)$ , this occurs when the black holes reach a orbital semi-major axis of

$$a_{\text{bin}} = \frac{3}{2} \frac{G(m_1 + m_2)}{\sigma_v^2}, \quad (3.1)$$

where  $\sigma_v$  is the velocity dispersion of the merger remnant.<sup>1</sup> The length of time spent by black holes to reach this stage follows the Chandrasekhar timescale for dynamical friction, and is limited by the inspiral timescale for the less massive black hole (cf. Lacey & Cole 1993):

$$t_{\text{df}} = 1.654 \frac{r^2 \sigma_v}{G m_2 \ln \Lambda}, \quad (3.2)$$

where we have assumed circular black hole orbits, and  $r$  is the orbital radius of the less massive black hole from the centre of the galactic potential. In such a system, we can assume a value for the Coulomb logarithm  $\ln \Lambda \simeq 5$  (a non-circular orbit with ellipticity  $\epsilon = 0.5$  will add a factor of roughly 0.5 to the timescale and the logarithm will be  $2 \lesssim \ln \Lambda \lesssim 3$ ; e.g. Gualandris & Merritt 2008). The black holes will form a binary when  $r = a_{\text{bin}}$ .

The orbital evolution of the black holes proceeds further due to dynamical friction, however as the binary tightens and increases in velocity, dynamical friction becomes an ineffective means of energy transfer and the rate of inspiral slows. In this intermediate inspiral stage, there are significant uncertainties in both inspiral mechanism and timescale. Relaxing stars in radial orbits entering the ‘‘loss cone’’ of the massive binary (Frank & Rees 1976) will undergo 3-body interactions with the SMBH binary system and be ejected, carrying away angular momentum and further shrinking the binary orbit. However, without an additional mechanism for energy transfer or a means to efficiently refill the loss cone, the binary inspiral halts as the loss cone is emptied. Recognising the long timescale

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<sup>1</sup>See Sec. 3.5.2 for discussion of typical  $m_1, m_2$ , and  $\sigma_v$  values.

that loss cone re-population might take for binary systems, Begelman et al. (1980) suggest the possibility of gas ejection from the system or gas accretion onto the larger black hole, which will cause shrinkage in the binary orbit to conserve angular momentum (see also, e.g., Merritt & Milosavljević 2005). If some intermediate process is able to sufficiently shrink the binary orbit, gravitational radiation will cause a binary with ellipticity  $\epsilon = 0$  to coalesce in a timescale

$$t_g = \frac{5c^5}{256G^3} \frac{a^4}{m_1 m_2 (m_1 + m_2)}. \quad (3.3)$$

N-body simulations and semi-analytical models have manifested various intermediate inspiral processes (see, e.g., the extensive review of Colpi & Dotti 2009). The “last parsec problem” is the name given to the hurdle encountered by nearly all merger models in which the intermediate inspiral mechanisms have timescales sufficiently long that they are unable to bring the binary to a regime in which the emission of gravitational radiation can drive the black holes to coalescence in less than a Hubble time. If this is the case, there may be many instances of “stalled” binary objects which spend a large portion of their lifetimes with orbital radii within the range 0.01-10 pc (Yu 2002). A functional form for the stalling radius is estimated by Merritt (2006):

$$\frac{a_{\text{stall}}}{2 a_{\text{bin}}} = 0.2 \frac{m_1/m_2}{(1 + m_1/m_2)^2}. \quad (3.4)$$

If systems are unable to find the fuel to reach coalescence in less than the age of the Universe, then they may appear to stall indefinitely at orbits greater (thus GW frequencies lower, and amplitudes generally smaller) than those in the range detectable by either pulsar timing arrays or LISA. This would have dramatic consequences for GW detectors and for hierarchical formation models alike.

Since few small-orbit binary systems are known and electromagnetic tracers of post-merger galaxy cores are hard to identify, it has been difficult to study the post-merger dynamics of binary black hole systems. To date, there has been no targeted search for small-orbit binary black holes. However, as previously noted, several recent searches for double AGN have looked for characteristic optical/IR AGN emission lines with double-peaks or line-of-sight velocity measurements which are offset from the host galaxy, implying an inspiralling binary at unknown separation (Comerford et al. 2009, Boroson & Lauer 2009; e.g.). The full VLBI Imaging and Polarimetry survey (VIPS, Helmboldt et al. 2007), has the potential for a large volume of spectral index data, and there are plans to perform a search of similar method to the one presented in this chapter. Nevertheless, with only

two confirmed sub-kpc double black holes serendipitously identified, (NGC 6240 at  $\sim 1$  kpc, Komossa et al. 2003; 0402+379 at 7 pc, Rodriguez et al. 2006) there is little possibility to assess the physical mechanism responsible for driving binary systems into the phase when gravitational radiation dominates the binary inspiral.

In §2.2, we reviewed several potential electromagnetic identifiers for SMBH binary systems, revealing that taking advantage of these unique spectral signatures of the core regions of radio-emitting AGN at high radio frequency (1 to 20 GHz) and the sub-milliarcsecond precision of observations using radio Very Long Baseline Interferometry (VLBI), it is possible to spatially resolve and identify AGN containing multiple cores using multifrequency gigahertz spectral imaging. This property has also been utilized to locate gravitationally lensed compact radio sources; if an AGN is lensed, it will also appear as a spatially resolved pair with equivalent radio continuum spectra (note that there is direct overlap in the target of such searches; because e.g. Wilkinson et al. 2001 found no lenses in 300 VLBI images, this implies no SMBH binaries were found, either).

In the case of a genuine physical pair, resolutions of 1 milliarcsecond are able to discern components with a projected spacing of above  $\sim 8.5$  pc at *all* redshifts, and down to sub-pc resolutions for the nearest galaxies (2.2). This makes VLBI observations well-suited to explore double supermassive black hole systems even at very small projected separations, and within post-merger galaxies that are otherwise unidentifiable as double or disturbed systems. Identification of double black holes in post-merger systems and binary black holes in the intermediate stage of inspiral will aid in showing evidence for stalling and may provide statistical estimates of the rate of SMBH inspiral at various phases.

This paper reports on the first systematic search of a large number of radio sources for spatially resolved binary radio AGN using archival VLBI data. We present a brief description of the archival data sample in §3.2, and summarise our search technique in §3.3. The candidates resulting from this search are assessed in §3.4. We outline an interpretive framework for making statistical estimates of inspiral timescales based on our detections in §3.5, and give the results of this analysis in §3.6. In §3.7 we discuss the analysis in terms of implications for black hole inspiral rates, stalling, radio core emission in the merging process, and implications for the pulsar-timing-detectable gravitational wave signal from SMBH binaries.

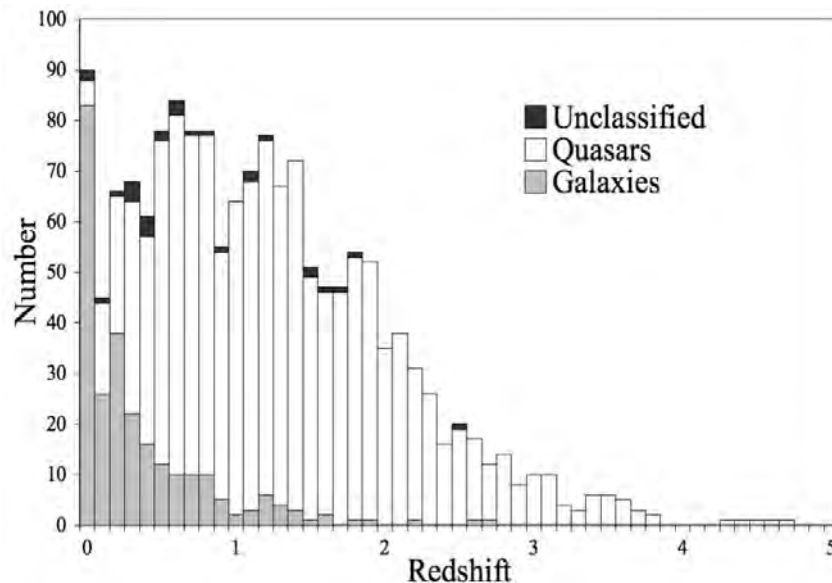


Figure 3.1 The redshift distribution of 1575 objects in our sample. The closest source is at  $z = 0.000113$ , while the highest redshift source is a quasar at  $z = 4.715$ .

### 3.2 The Archival Data Sample

The data used in this search were extracted from the VLBI archives maintained online as the Goddard Space Flight Center astrometric and geodetic catalogues.<sup>2</sup> The catalogue version used was “VLBI global solution 2008a\_astro,” which contains a large volume of calibrated VLBI data from 1980 to early 2008, including data from the VLBA calibrator surveys (Beasley et al. 2002, Fomalont et al. 2003, Petrov et al. 2005, 2006, Kovalev et al. 2007, Petrov et al. 2008). The catalogue contained observations unevenly sampled across 2.2 GHz to 43 GHz for 4169 radio sources. For our search technique, we are limited to sources observed at two or more frequencies, and to avoid potentially problematic intrinsic source variability (see §3.3), we rejected frequency pairs which were observed at times separated by more than 35 days. Our sample was further culled because of software incompatibility for some data, and for the remaining dataset, observations were rejected if the images revealed data which contained no clear source above the noise. Three sources were removed because a literature search revealed them to be Galactic HII regions or stars. In total, we were able to search data for 3114 sources.

Approximately half of the sources in our sample had redshift information available. The distribution for the 1575 sources of known redshift is shown in Fig. 3.1; the source

<sup>2</sup><http://lacerta.gsfc.nasa.gov/vlbi/solutions/> — Please see website and references therein for a complete description of original data sets

|              | <b>2</b> | <b>5</b> | <b>8</b> | <b>15-24</b> | <b>43</b> |
|--------------|----------|----------|----------|--------------|-----------|
| <b>5</b>     | 96       | —        |          |              |           |
| <b>8</b>     | 3101     | 94       | —        |              |           |
| <b>15-24</b> | 190      | 59       | 239      | —            |           |
| <b>43</b>    | 34       | 0        | 37       | 132          | —         |

Table 3.1 Frequency band pairs usable in our search; all frequencies are in units of gigahertz. The frequencies above refer to the rough observing band only. In total there were 3982 frequency pairs for 3114 sources.

types and redshifts were gathered from the NASA Extragalactic Database.<sup>3</sup> The mean redshifts of our sample are  $z_g = 0.402$ ,  $z_q = 1.401$ , and  $z_{tot} = 1.226$  for galaxies, quasars, and all the sources with known redshift, respectively.

### 3.2.1 Notes on potential selection effects

The data sets drawn on to create the VLBI global solution 2008a\_astro catalogue were varied, however the majority were drawn from geodesy/astrometry or calibrator survey programs. While the criteria that went into the selection of sources for each constituent set depends highly on the programs on which the data were drawn (e. g. some were based on spectral index, some on structural indexes, some on flux density), the consequence will generally be to bias the sample towards sources that are compact at  $\ll 1$  arcsecond. While this should not cause significant bias on the scale of the small-orbit systems of greatest interest, it may have a negative effect for the discovery of systems at large orbital separations (i. e. ongoing-merger or recent post-merger systems). In the analysis of §3.6, this will bias the measured limits downward, most significantly for “group 1”.

## 3.3 VLBI Search for Double AGN

Our technique for identifying binary active galactic nuclei using VLBI is essentially a search for objects which show more than one flat-spectrum component. It requires morphological analysis and spectral index imaging across two or more frequencies to distinguish the nucleus of an object from its other components, such as complex extended structure or bright, unresolved hotspots along a jet. These other source components, as was previously noted, show systematically declining synchrotron spectra at  $\alpha \lesssim -0.7$  (note that while we use the terminology “flat” throughout this chapter, the relevant spectra would be more accurately broken down as “flat” and “inverted”, as differentiated from “steep-spectrum emission” from non-core regions). The technique and the use of archival VLBI data

<sup>3</sup>NED, <http://nedwww.ipac.caltech.edu/>



require several precautions, primarily because both the accuracy of frequency-dependent flux density measurements and morphological fidelity of the radio image are important to this method.

We therefore take special precaution in considering AGN variability and coverage of the spatial-frequency ( $u - v$ ) plane for the data sets. The variability exhibited by some radio AGN typically comes in two different flavours. Both particularly affect compact regions of emission with high brightness temperature, such as radio cores. The first is intra-day variability (IDV) due to propagation effects in the interstellar medium. This signal flickering can occur on sub-day timescales and exhibits a significant modulation index at frequencies below 5 GHz, causing fluctuations on average at the 1-10% level (e.g. Walker 1998, Lovell et al. 2008). Intrinsic variability in radio AGN cores is observed most significantly at frequencies above 5 GHz, and occurs on a wide range of timescales. Some radio AGN exhibit slow variations on timescales of years. The existence of such variations place limitations on the allowable temporal spacing between observations at different frequencies. Instantaneous multifrequency spectra will not be influenced by either effect, while observations spaced at less than the characteristic timescales of long-term AGN variability will allay the effects of a wandering high-frequency signal. For this reason we used only frequency pairs with a time separation of less than 35 days. Out of the 3982 usable frequency pairs in our data, 3447 were taken simultaneously, leaving 535 with an average difference in observation time of about 11 days.

All data processing was done using the MIRIAD software package (Sault et al. 1995). For each frequency pair, we inverted the  $u - v$  data, tapering the maxima of  $u$  and  $v$  to give a circular synthesised beam of the same size at the two frequencies. A manual inspection of  $u - v$  coverage for the pairs ensured that the sources were sampled enough to provide an accurate representation of the source morphology at the tapered resolution. Images were cleaned, restored with the synthesised Gaussian beam of the tapered resolution to make images of 512x512 pixels, allowing a typical field of view 1.2 arcseconds to a side (though varying with the resolution of the observation; this equates to a linear scale at  $z = 1$  of  $\sim 9.5$  kpc). An estimate of the image noise level at each frequency was determined using an off-source region of each image. The number of frequency pairs we were able to use is detailed in Table 3.1.

The data were imaged in three ways for manual candidate searching. First, for each resolution-matched frequency pair, the full-field-of-view images at low and high frequency were plotted in greyscale with logarithmic contours beginning at three times the noise level of each image. Enhanced plots of the central image regions were made in a similar fashion,

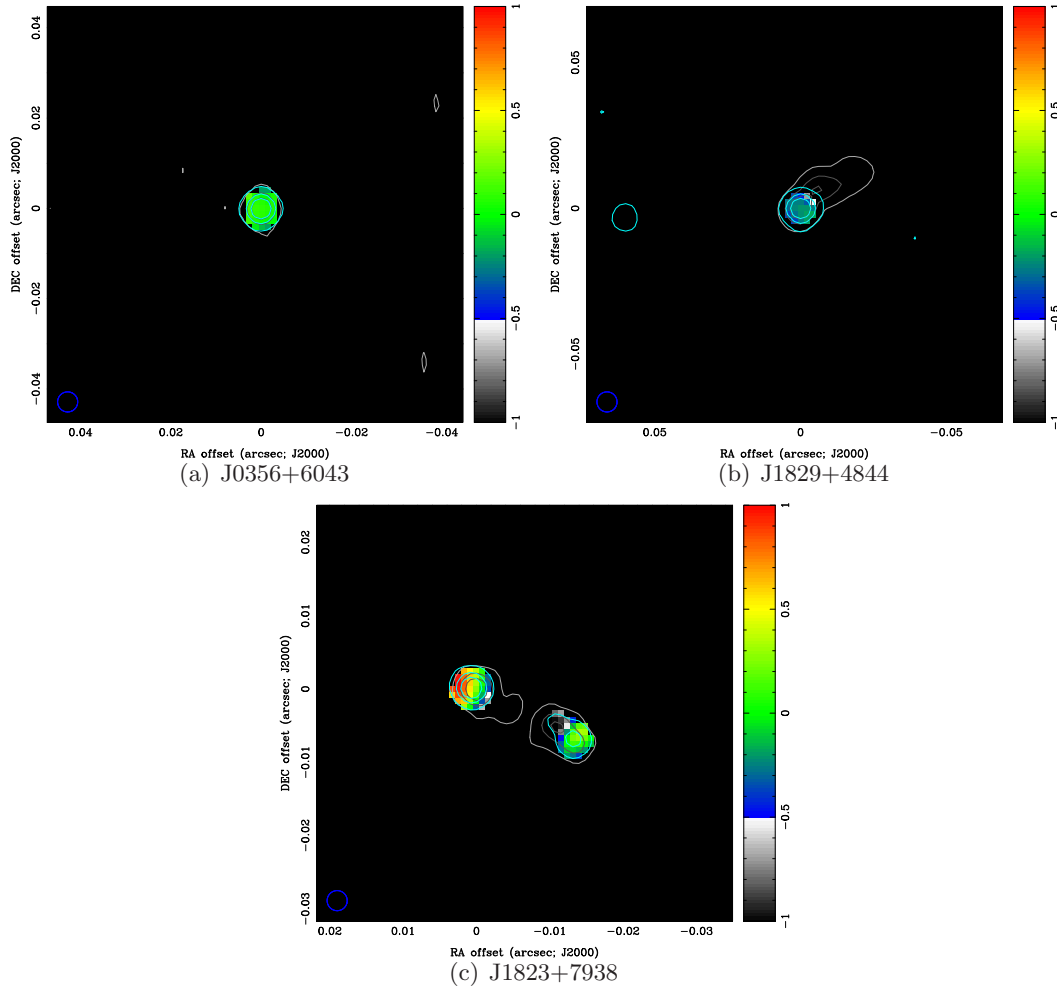


Figure 3.2 Two-frequency spectral index maps for sources tagged as (a) pointlike, (b) resolved, and (c) multiple flat-spectrum component sources. All maps show matched-resolution data. The color scale represents the spectral index calculated from two input maps of differing frequency. The color scale is linear in greyscale from  $-1 < \alpha < -0.5$ , and linear in color from  $-0.5 < \alpha < 1$ . The gray contours show the shape of the source at the lower frequency used to calculate the spectral index map, while blue contours trace the source morphology at the higher observing frequency used to calculate the spectral index map. These sources were randomly chosen from the source list for each category; all show matched-resolution data between 2.3 GHz (gray contours) and 8.4 GHz (blue contours). Contours in these plots are set at 2, 25, and 50 % of the peak flux at each frequency.

and a spectral index map of the inner regions was computed, calculating the spectral index pixel-by-pixel at any point in the image where the flux at both frequency bands was greater than three times the image noise. Spectral index images were superimposed with contours for each respective frequency, and the spectral index value was plotted as a colour image with a sharp desaturation break at  $\alpha = -0.5$  to enhance the appearance of flat-spectrum source components.

We then manually assessed each source, dividing them into pointlike, resolved/extended, and multiple flat-spectrum component categories. Representative sources of each category are shown in Figure 3.2. Sources with multiple flat-spectrum components were considered preliminary candidates. In cases where the sources in multi-frequency images appeared displaced, a manual best-fit alignment was done and the source was reassessed. We considered a component to be “flat spectrum” if its two-point spectral index was  $\alpha \gtrsim -0.6$  at any frequency pair, or if structure was visible at high frequency which was not detected at low frequency. As previously noted, sources which contained no detection above a  $4\sigma$  noise level were removed from the sample.

The nature of preliminary candidates was then assessed by imaging all available observations of each candidate. Sources were then rejected from the candidate list if they satisfied any of the following:

- In the case of discrete compact flat spectrum components, if suspected components showed spectral steepening at later observation epochs (implying a false detection due to a young, evolving jet component).
- If an analysis of the time-dependent movement of suspected flat-spectrum source components revealed the component(s) as members of a steady outward (in some cases, superluminal) flow along a jet axis.
- If the full resolution image revealed beam sidelobes as the source of a spurious, flat-spectrum component.

Our search returned 12 candidates containing genuine multiple flat-spectrum components as discussed in more detail below.

### 3.4 Candidates and Search Results

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Of our 3114 objects, 68% were found to be pointlike at our frequency-matched resolution, while the remaining sources were identified as resolved or otherwise complex systems with one flat spectrum component. The number of sources which exhibited multiple

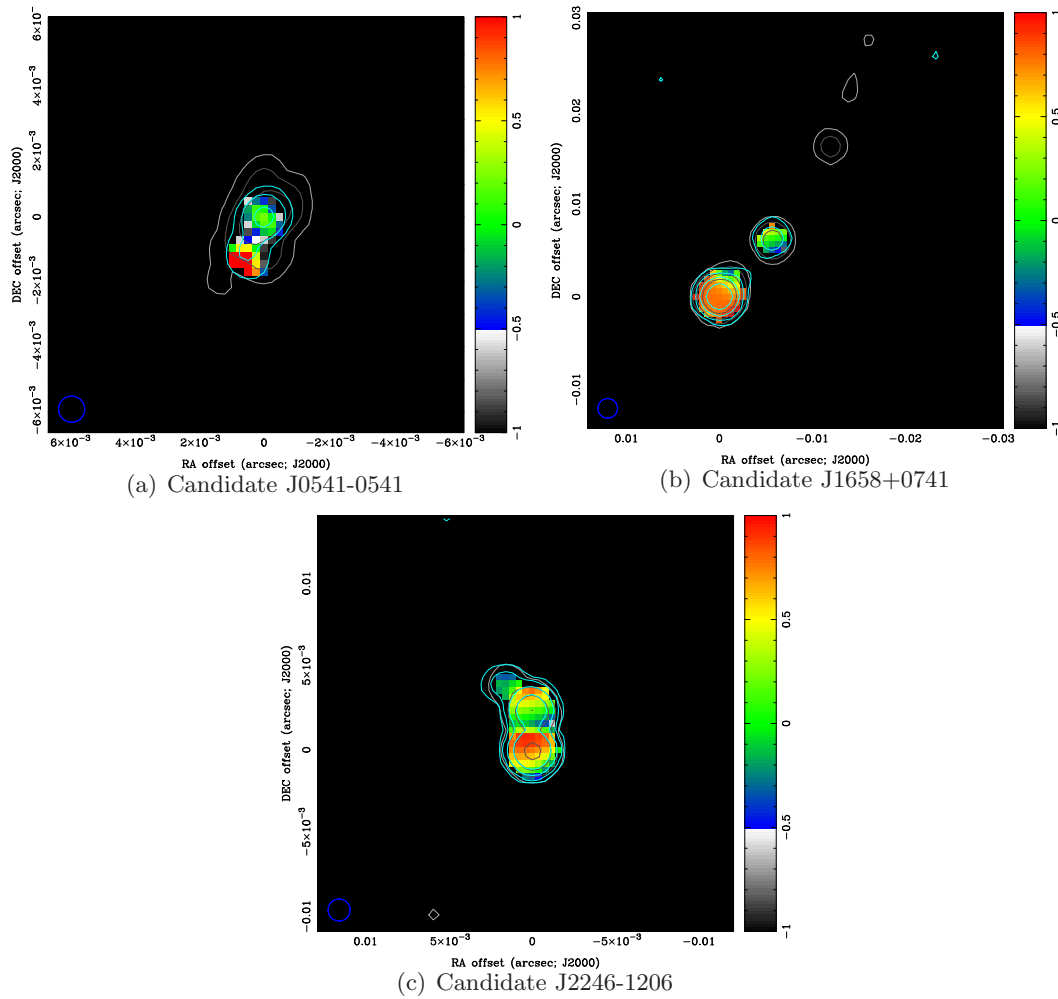


Figure 3.3 Example two-frequency spectral index and contour maps for three of the initial candidates described in §3.4.1. Coloring of the mapped data and contours are as in Fig. 3.2. Contours are set at 4, 16, 64, and 256 times the RMS image noise drawn from the respective frequency’s input image.

flat-spectrum components comprised less than 4 percent of the sample, and after the assessment of preliminary candidates, there remained 12 candidate binary sources. As an example of our candidate data quality, spectral and two-frequency contour images for three of the candidates below are shown in Figure 3.3. One candidate was the binary black hole candidate published by Rodriguez et al. (2006), 0402+379; an investigation of this source is available in their publication. The remainder of our candidates appear to contain regions with active jet injection, which effectively gives rise to a population of contaminants for the radio spectral index mapping technique, requiring further data and analysis to distinguish such a source from a binary black hole. Below we use our data and that available from the literature to further investigate each source and gather evidence for the presence of such processes, and not a binary black hole, in the sources.

Ultimately, we report the detection of no new binary systems. We have searched a sample of considerable size, finding only one spatially resolved binary black hole out of 3114 radio-bright AGN. Therefore, within the limitations of our search and data, we find 0.032% of sources in our sample in which a binary radio AGN was detected. The implications of this are discussed in later sections.

### 3.4.1 Candidates with Active Relativistic Injection

Eleven of twelve candidates were rejected after the examination of all available data (in our data, the literature, or available online<sup>4</sup>) revealed that the multiple flat-spectrum components are in a state of active injection of relativistic electrons in a collimated jet. These sources can be discriminated from a binary SMBH by several indicators, including proper (superluminal) motion, or by the resolving of the emission in higher resolution maps and alignment of the components with a more extensive outflow. Jet components may exhibit superluminal motion depending on the jet angle, and exhibit spectral steepening as the electrons age and lose energy; it is furthermore possible that a steadily fuelled outflow impacting on a dense plasma can maintain a flat spectral index as new relativistic electrons are constantly introduced. In some cases, we could not dismiss candidates because we did not have data spanning sufficient epochs to measure spectral steepening or assess component mobility. However, there are two further indicators that distinguish these sources from double AGN. The first is a morphological trait; by doing component modelling of the source in the highest resolution observation, one can infer the existence of unresolved components in the source. For flat spectrum components best fit by a Gaussian larger

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<sup>4</sup>We made use of the MOJAVE database at <http://www.physics.purdue.edu/MOJAVE>, which is maintained by the MOJAVE team Lister et al. (2009).

than the synthesised beam, it is likely that the flat spectrum emission is due to an active jet or recently impacted screen rather than direct nuclear emission, which will be compact and pointlike in our beam even at our best resolution. Secondly, non-AGN core regions of synchrotron radio emission in the absence of strong Faraday depolarisation may exhibit up to  $\sim 70$  percent polarisation, typically having between 1 and 50 percent polarisation in actual observations. Radio cores, however, are often completely depolarised or exhibit less than one percent polarisation (e.g. Saikia & Salter 1988, Laing 1988; these effects are also visible in the flat-spectrum components of the Helmboldt et al. (2007) survey). Thus, even if a flat-spectrum component is compact, significant levels of polarisation are indicative of a jet component rather than a radio core. While these sources cannot be ruled out as binary AGN only by exhibiting one of the above features, These indicators along with the sources' morphological traits can provide further insight into and constraints on the nature of each source. The following objects could be rejected in this way:

*J0111+3906*: This source was identified by Owsianik et al. (1998) as an “archetypal CSO” with a dynamical age estimate of 370 years. Our spectral index maps agree with the higher resolution ones of Taylor et al. (1996); using their component identifications, we were able to resolve components C5 and C7 of the eastern jet, the extended C1 western jet component, and the compact component C3 identified by Taylor et al. as the source’s core. As in the spectral map of Taylor et al. (1996), ours show flat-spectrum emission from C3 and the nearby C5. The dynamical age of the source and the extendedness and alignment of C5 along the larger source structure indicate that it is a young jet.

*J0541-0541*: The most recent (June 2003) epoch shows the double flat-spectrum source that made this object a candidate. While the resolution of our data at earlier epochs is not good enough to assess component mobility, the southwestern flat spectrum component contains no compact emission at the high-resolution 8.4 GHz observation, leading to the conclusion that the source is a young core-jet system. The spectral and two-frequency contour plot for this source is shown in Figure 3.3(a).

*J0741+3112*: Stanghellini et al. (2005) note that this source is a Farnoff-Riley II quasar with hotspots on the arcsecond scale and a core-jet morphology on the milliarcsecond scale, indicating that the source has long been an active core-jet system. There are two flat spectrum components in our spectral maps, which remain flat over the 10 years that our data spans. The weaker flat spectrum component lies at the position of a nearly  $90^\circ$  turn in the jet which Stanghellini et al. interpret as helical jet structure. While our data were again not sensitive enough to resolve component mobility, the persistent total intensity and polarisation observations by Lister et al. (2009) clearly demonstrate that this

source has a continuous outflow which is fuelling the flat spectrum hotspot apparent in our maps. The northern component in our maps has undetected polarisation at all epochs of the Lister et al. (2009) measurements, further indicating that it is the nucleus.

*J1147+3501*: This was the weakest candidate, showing a spectral index of  $\alpha = -0.6$  for the southwestern, slightly extended, flat spectrum component. Confirming that this is a core-jet source are the VLBA observations of Giovannini et al. (1999), which show superluminal movement and high levels of polarisation for the western components.

*J1223+8040*: Morphologically, this source shows a smoothly curved jet over an extent of approximately 10 mas. There are several components along the curved jet with  $\alpha > -0.7$  with gradually flatter spectral index and that terminate in the southernmost compact, highly inverted spectrum component which we tentatively identify as the radio nucleus. Pollack et al. (2003) indicate that this is a BL Lacertae object, and their measurements of 5-16 percent polarisation tracing a jet along our flat-spectrum components indicate that this is a core-jet system.

*J1347+1217*: This radio galaxy has the most extensive (in size) and complex VLBI structure out of the candidates reviewed here, and has 4-5 discrete  $\alpha > -0.6$  components positioned at various hotspots and bends along its helical jets. While it is possible that an unresolved binary black hole is causing the precessing jet modelled by Lister et al. (2003), the multiple flat-spectrum components seen in our images all appear to be members of an active superluminal outflow, as shown by the five year modelling of Lister et al. (2009).

*J1459+7140*: This source shows a sharp bend in the jet about 50 mas south of the northernmost component, turning northeast by approximately 90 degrees. The two flat-spectrum components of this source lie in the northernmost hotspot and in a bright knot midway between the north component and the jet bend. The southern component of this source, though showing an extremely inverted ( $\alpha > 1$  spectral index, appears at our highest resolutions to be fully resolved, while the northern component, at  $\alpha \simeq 0.2$ , shows a compact component with a small-scale jet pointing toward the resolved flat-spectrum knot. This and the larger-scale 2 GHz emission also lend themselves well to interpretation as a northern core emitting a possibly precessing southern jet.

*J1658+0741*: This source contains two flat spectrum objects which, as for J0741+3112, show little or no spectral change over a span of about 8 years. The weaker flat-spectrum component of this source is resolved in our non-tapered images and coincides with the location of a deviation in the jet alignment of about 30 degrees, as seen in the spectral and contour plot shown in Figure 3.3(b). If we take the northernmost emission to be the fiducial point (i.e. the core), we see a new jet emission component which is projected in a direction

directly incident on the component at the jet bend. The trail of emission between this and the southeastern component, the non-compactness of the northern component suggest that the hotspot is at the location of a dense screen which is deflecting the relativistic jet, causing its reorientation. These morphological clues suggest that the source is not a binary AGN.

*J1823+7938*: There are two key indicators that imply the southwest component is a nucleus while the northeastern component is not. First is the resolved structure of the easternmost component in our data in our high-resolution data at 8 GHz and second the proper motion analysis of Britzen et al. (2008) show a hub of jet activity surrounding the southwest component and find proper motions of the hotspots between our two flat-spectrum components receding from the southwest core in the direction of the bright emission to the northeast. It is clear from the separation between the two flat spectrum components that if the northeast hotspot originated from the southwest core, its emission was not recent. The morphology of the northeast component, however, is reminiscent of a compressed shock region; polarisation studies of this source could clarify the mechanisms at work in this source, however the evidence present here is enough to indicate that it is not a binary radio nucleus. This candidate is shown in Fig. 3.2(c).

*J2246-1206*: This source has two components of  $\alpha > 0.3$  connected by a faint string of emission, with a single stream emanating north-east from the northern component. While suggestive of two cores (one associated with a single-sided jet), by modelling the relative movement of the northern component, the movement is neither consistent with binary motion relative to the southern component, nor is it aligned to the motion of the jet components (Lister et al. 2009). We conclude that this is yet another source in which there is a core (the southern component) actively emitting a jet, which upon impact with a screen is deflected and reoriented. This candidate is displayed in Figure 3.3(c).

*J2253+1608*: This source has two flat-spectrum hotspots traced by a steep-spectrum jet. The westernmost hotspot, like in the case of J2246-1206 and J1658+0741, sits in the position of a jet bend. The careful monitoring of Lister et al. (2009) show the secondary flat-spectrum component to be a jet member.

### 3.5 Framework for Interpretation

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The use of radio data as a black hole indicator puts immediate constraints on both the physical properties and number of sources we will be sensitive to. We adopt the following



expression for the number of sources expected to be found in our search:

$$N_{\text{exp}} = \sum_{i=0}^{N_s} f_{\text{bbh}}(z_i, m_{\text{lim}}) \cdot P_i \quad (3.5)$$

Here,  $N_s$  is the number of objects that have been searched. It is assumed that a target's redshift  $z$  is known (true for 1575 of our objects), and that it contains at least one detectable black hole of mass  $M_{\bullet} > m_{\text{lim}}$ .<sup>5</sup>  $P$  represents the probability that we would detect a second black hole if the system is a binary, being the probability that the secondary black hole is both radio-emitting, and bright enough for a successful detection in our images. This term is explored in Sec. 3.5.1 below. The fraction of galaxies,  $f_{\text{bbh}}$ , containing a SMBH binary system at a redshift  $z'$  to which we are sensitive will be the cumulative number of galaxy mergers over the epoch at  $z'$  until the epoch at  $z''[t_z - t_{\text{vis}}]$ , where  $t_z$  is the age of the universe at redshift  $z'$ , and  $t_{\text{vis}}$  is the duration that a signature of a double black hole in the merging system is detectable in our search. Thus, if a binary stalls at a separation detectable by our technique (bounded by our observing resolution and the field of view of our images; see §3.5.3), galaxies that began to merge when the Universe was the age of  $z''$  will still be occupied by a resolvable binary at  $z'$ . The occupation fraction for binaries at a resolvable separation is then given by:

$$f_{\text{bbh}}(z, m_{\text{lim}}) = \frac{\int_{z'}^{z''} N_{\text{mrg}}(z, m_{\text{lim}}) dz}{N_{\text{gal}}(z', m_{\text{lim}})}, \quad (3.6)$$

where  $N_{\text{mrg}}$  is the number of virialized galaxy pairs with SMBHs of masses above  $m_{\text{lim}}$  at the given redshift, while  $N_{\text{gal}}$  is the total number of galaxies at  $z'$  with SMBH masses greater than  $m_{\text{lim}}$ . The timescale of inspiral over the scales to which our data are sensitive ( $t_{\text{vis}}$ ) can thus be estimated with a prediction or measurement of the redshift-dependent merger rate of galaxies containing supermassive black holes.

Whether we can identify a binary depends on factors explored in the sections below. The timescale over which we can resolve a binary is determined by our spatial sensitivity, the black hole masses and binary mass ratio; the relative time spent at various separations in a binary's inspiral depend on black hole mass. If the radio luminosity of the black holes somehow depends on the stage of the merger (for instance if the radio mechanism

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<sup>5</sup>Throughout our analysis we use a value  $m_{\text{lim}} = 10^8 M_{\odot}$ ; here we make use of the observed property that radio-bright quasars have a distinct mass distribution:  $\langle \log(M_{\bullet}/M_{\odot}) \rangle = 8.89 \pm 0.02$  with a lower cutoff around  $10^8 M_{\odot}$  (e.g. McLure & Jarvis 2004). We probe only this most massive end of the black hole population, and for a double detection to be made, the second black hole must exceed a limiting mass  $m_{\text{lim}} \geq 10^8 M_{\odot}$ .

shuts down as the galaxies begin interacting, or ignites only after a binary coalescence), an additional factor needs to be considered in Eq. 3.5. However, because the evidence for a relationship between radio fuelling and merger events has until now been tenuous and estimates for an AGN timescale are so far inconclusive, we limit this uncertainty by employing two scenarios below that represent the most optimistic and the most pessimistic expectations for the state of radio luminosity in the two black holes.

### 3.5.1 Supermassive Black Holes and Radio Emission

All our targets are radio sources detectable on parsec scales, and it follows that all contain at least one radio-emitting supermassive black hole. If a target is a binary system with a resolvable separation between the two black holes, due to our inspection techniques a second radio-emitting SMBH will have only been flagged as a candidate if its flux density exceeds four times the root-mean-squared noise ( $\sigma_{\text{rms}}$ ) in its image. This  $4\sigma_{\text{rms}}$  flux limit corresponds to a luminosity sensitivity limit of  $L_{\text{lim}}(\sigma_{\text{rms}}, z)$ . To predict the expected number of binary AGN to be found in our search and estimate a timescale for binary SMBH inspiral, we must first quantify the likelihood that the radio emission of a second black hole will exceed this luminosity limit.

The main unknown contributing to the discussion is how strongly the galactic and intergalactic environment relate to the production of radio AGN activity around the central black hole: that is, do the merger and mixing of gaseous, dusty, and stellar environments contribute strongly the production of radio activity? Below we assign two scenarios to bound assumptions at either end of extremes: 1) Pessimistic; the probability that a SMBH paired with a radio-emitting AGN is itself radio-emitting is no greater than the probability that a non-binary SMBH at the center of a massive galaxy would be radio-emitting, and 2) Optimistic; given a black hole that exists in a shared environment with a radio-emitting AGN, the probability of radio emission in the second black hole is unity.

Given that the black holes in the progenitors may not encounter significantly mixed environments until the binary has a relatively small separation, it is also possible that radio ignition is radially dependent. Regardless, we stress that for the third stage of inspiral in which theoretically the binary may stall, the stellar cores around the black holes have merged and the black holes will have shared many orbits within one another's sphere of influence and in a common environment.

### Pessimistic scenario

We can make an estimate of the fewest number of binary sources we would expect to see by setting  $P$  equal to the integrated bivariate luminosity function of galaxies,  $\psi(M, >L_{\text{lim}})$ , where  $M$  represents the absolute optical/infrared magnitude of a galaxy. In this case we assume that mergers have no influence on the radio-active state of a black hole; that is, that the probability that the second black hole in a binary would have a detectable luminosity  $L > L_{\text{lim}}$  is equivalent to the radio active fraction for non-merging galaxies selected from a random pool with  $M_{\bullet} \geq m_{\text{lim}}$ . We calculate  $P$  for each source using a log-linear interpolation of the integrated bivariate luminosity function of Mauch & Sadler (2007) for radio AGNs in galaxies with  $-24 > M_K \geq -25$ , taking such galaxies to be representative of our targets' host galaxies. As roughly 10% of the Mauch & Sadler (2007) sample have flat spectra (based on the measurements of Mason et al. (2009)), we expect that approximately 10% of their sources will be compact down to VLBI scales. To account for this we divide the space density given in their radio luminosity function by a factor of 10. For our 1575 sources with a known redshift, we find that in this scenario  $P$  has a mean and standard deviation of 0.4% and 1%, respectively.

### Optimistic scenario

In the optimistic scenario, we consider that a SMBH in the presence of a radio AGN will itself be a radio-loud AGN. This scenario implies that when the two black holes share a common galactic environment, both black holes will be radio luminous if the conditions are fit for radio ignition; that is, both objects will be either radio-loud or not. We take as a given that one black hole is a detectable radio AGN in each of our images. To determine the detectability of a second SMBH in such a system (the probability that its observed luminosity is greater than  $L_{\text{lim}}$ ), we would like to avoid the explicit use of e.g. relativistic beaming models, correlations between black hole mass and radio luminosity, and the levels of flux resolved by our baselines—the parameters of which are uncertain—by using an estimate derived from observations in which such effects are inherent.

We therefore take the secondary SMBHs in such systems to have a radio luminosity distribution equal to the luminosity distribution of solitary, flat-spectrum radio black holes, which will implicitly include beaming and mass-correlation effects. The use of the flat-spectrum population assumes that the emission observed in flat-spectrum radio sources is largely unresolved, and therefore scalable to the resolutions reached by our VLBI data. We adopt a probability density function for secondary black hole radio luminosities,  $\rho(z, L) dL$ , based on the redshift-dependent, flat-spectrum “pure luminosity evolution model” of Dun-

lop & Peacock (1990). We may then determine the probability that for a given object in the sample, a second black hole will have a luminosity above our detection threshold,  $L_{\text{lim}}$ . The probability that we would have detected the second black hole of a binary AGN is therefore:

$$P = \frac{1}{\rho_n} \int_{L_{\text{lim}}}^{\infty} \rho(z, L) dL. \quad (3.7)$$

The normalisation factor,  $\rho_n = \int_{L_{\text{RL}}}^{\infty} \rho(z, L) dL$ , sets the range of radio luminosities of radio-loud AGN. We use a lower luminosity bound of  $L_{\text{RL}} = 10^{23} \text{ W Hz}^{-1} \text{ sr}^{-1}$  for radio AGN, equal to that given by Padovani et al. (2009). Although the exact value of  $L_{\text{RL}}$  is debatable, the average  $P$  value is not highly sensitive to the value of  $\rho_n$  if  $L_{\text{RL}}$  is decreased. For images in which the  $L_{\text{lim}} < L_{\text{RL}}$ , the probability of detection is set to one. For the 1575 known-redshift sources in this scenario,  $P$  has a mean and standard deviation of 57.9% and 23.7%, respectively.

### 3.5.2 Host Properties and Limiting Radii

The predicted binary formation radii and stalling radii mark key points in possible inspiral rate changes for a post-merger system. In order to determine what stage of inspiral we have probed with our spatial sensitivity limits, we require an estimate of the predicted typical  $a_{\text{bin}}$  and  $a_{\text{stall}}$  for our sample. As mergers between less massive galaxies are expected to be more common than high mass mergers, for this study we expect the least massive (and most common) merger probed in our sample to involve two black holes of  $10^8 M_{\odot}$ . Relevant progenitor galaxy properties can be calculated to estimate the characteristic scales (e.g. stalling radius, binary formation radius) that our study probes. Using two black holes of mass  $10^8 M_{\odot}$ , each progenitor's velocity dispersion,  $\sigma_v \sim 187 \text{ km s}^{-1}$ , and bulge mass,  $M_{\text{host}} \sim 6.63 \times 10^{10} M_{\odot}$ , can be estimated by the  $M_{\bullet} - \sigma_v$  relation of Ferrarese & Merritt (2000) and the  $M_{\bullet} - M_{\text{bulge}}$  relation of Häring & Rix (2004), respectively. If the black holes do not accrete a significant fraction of their mass during inspiral, the post-merger galaxy will contain a black hole of  $2 \times 10^8 M_{\odot}$  and an implied velocity dispersion of  $\sigma_v \sim 216 \text{ km s}^{-1}$ . The binary formation radius for our typical system is thus  $a_{\text{bin}} = 27.7 \text{ pc}$ , while the stalling radius is  $a_{\text{stall}} = 2.8 \text{ pc}$  (equations 3.1, 3.4). In the earliest stage of merger, the virially bound galaxy pair will have a projected separation  $\lesssim 7 \text{ kpc}$ . We note that while these radii are the characteristic values for the sources in the sample, more massive (and less common) mergers between  $10^9 M_{\odot}$  black holes will have larger radii by a factor of  $\sim 10$ .

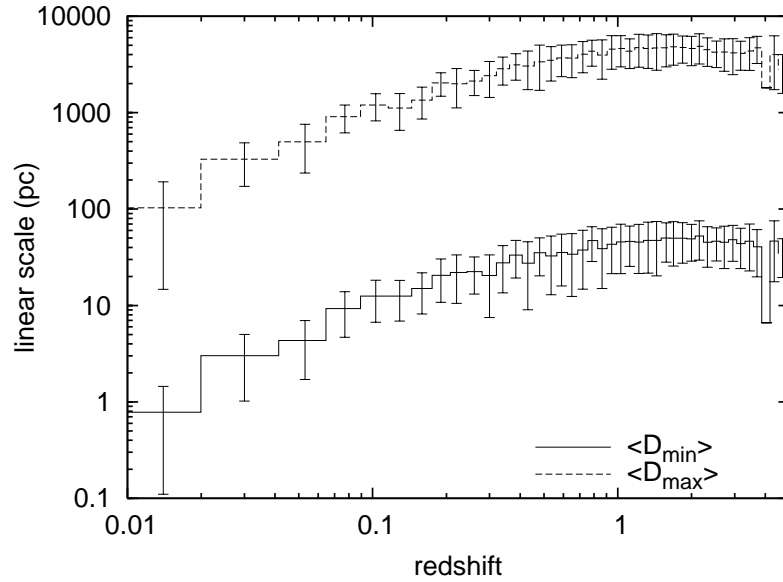


Figure 3.4 The upper and lower bounds of the average linear scales searched as a function of redshift. The error bars represent the standard deviation of  $\langle D_{\min} \rangle$  and  $\langle D_{\max} \rangle$ .

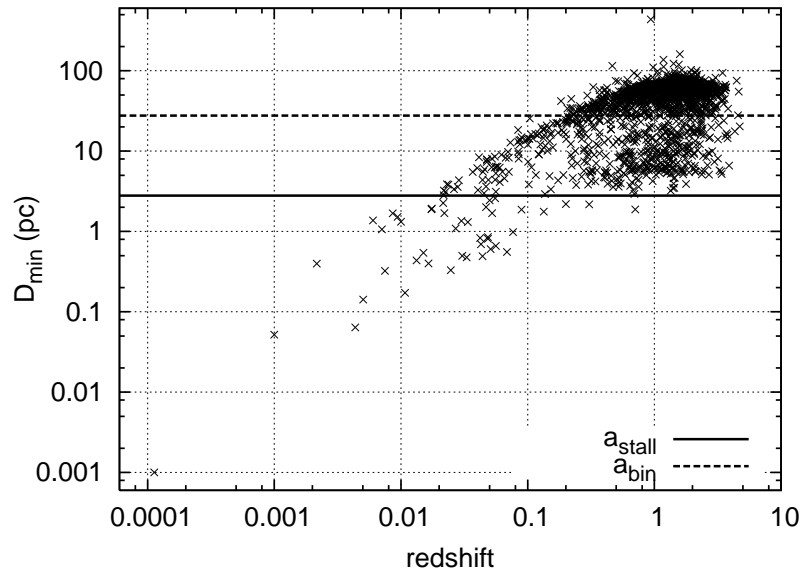


Figure 3.5 The minimum resolvable linear scale for each of the sources of known redshift in our sample. Overplotted are the predicted black hole binary formation radius and stalling radius for two  $10^8 M_{\odot}$  black holes. Note that for a binary in a circular orbit, these radii correspond to a maximum projected separation of twice each value.

### 3.5.3 Spatial Limits of the Search

Our technique resolves a large range of spatial scales, over which an inspiral rate will undergo several changes. To estimate post-merger black hole evolutionary timescales we must determine the projected spatial separation range that our data set is sensitive to. For the 1575 sources of known redshift, the average maximum and minimum projected linear spatial sensitivities ( $\langle D_{\max} \rangle$ ,  $\langle D_{\min} \rangle$ ), both in units of parsec) as a function of redshift are plotted in Figure 3.4. The sources are binned in increments matching the redshift steps of the Millennium Simulation snapshots (see §3.5.4; each step spans an average of 300 Myr).

The observed scales are derived as follows: the minimum and maximum linear projected separation between two objects that we are sensitive to are set by our angular resolution,  $\theta_r$ , and half the field of view of our search maps, given that one AGN will lie at the pointing centre of the observation. Using the redshift of each source and a flat-universe cosmology with  $H_0 = 72 \text{ km s}^{-1} \text{ Mpc}^{-1}$ ,  $\Omega_m = 0.27$ , and  $\Omega_\Lambda = 0.73$ , we calculate  $d_z/\theta_z$ , the distance (in pc) per milliarcsecond at that redshift on the plane of the sky. Our smallest resolved size for that source is then  $D_{\min} = d_z \theta_r / \theta_z$  parsecs ( $D_{\min}$  for individual sources are plotted in Figure 3.5). Because we searched images of 512 pixels to a side and the synthesised restoring beam is 3 pixels in breadth, the maximum linear scale we are sensitive to is:

$$D_{\max} = \frac{512 \theta_r}{6} \cdot \frac{d_z}{\theta_z} \text{ parsecs}. \quad (3.8)$$

This value represents the largest scale size to which the search of each source is complete. For sources with known redshift, the sample averages were  $\langle \theta_r \rangle = 6.5 \text{ mas}$ ,  $\langle D_{\min} \rangle = 40 \pm 25 \text{ pc}$  and  $\langle D_{\max} \rangle = 3415 \pm 2133 \text{ pc}$ .

The limited spatial separation window over which we have searched each source for a double AGN and the potential for drastic changes in inspiral rate at various stages of the binary evolution compel us to divide our measurement of inspiral rates into three stages. We do so by segregating the sources by their spatial resolution into groups which represent sensitivity to three stages of merger evolution: the stage at which the stellar cores have not yet merged (merger stage 1), the stage leading to binary formation in which the cores merge and the binary forms (stage 2), and the final stage to which we can probe spatially, in which the black holes are a binary and evolve to the predicted stalling radius (stage 3). In each of these groups, we consider that a linear resolution of  $D_{\min} = a_{lo}$  will allow the detection of sources with an orbital semi-major axis of  $a_{lo}$  roughly 80% of the time, assuming systems with a random distribution of inclination angles. By setting the constraint on a group that  $D_{\min} < a_{lo}$ , we ensure that the searched nuclei in that group

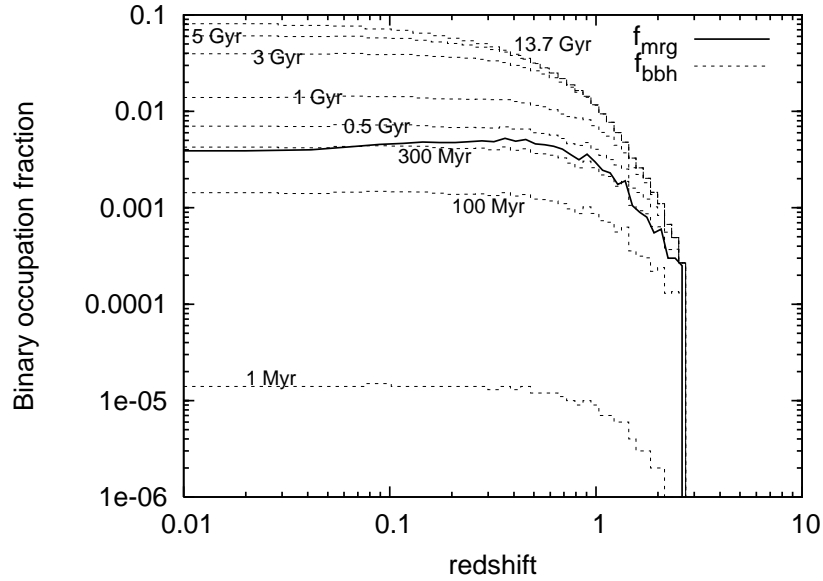


Figure 3.6 The redshift-dependent fraction of galaxies containing binary or double SMBH black hole systems for various inspiral times, based on the merger rate predictions of De Lucia & Blaizot (2007) for mergers with black holes of masses  $m_1, m_2 \geq 10^8 M_\odot$ .

will be sensitive to a binary with axis  $a \geq a_{lo}$  for  $> 80\%$  of the pair's orbit. Each group is statistically sensitive in this way to pairs with an orbital axis of up to  $\langle D_{max} \rangle$  of the group.

The three groups are divided at (1)  $27.7 < D_{min} < 120$  pc, (2)  $2.8 < D_{min} < 27.7$  pc (sensitivity down to our limiting  $a_{bin}$ ), and (3)  $D_{min} < 2.8$  pc (giving sensitivity down to the minimum  $a_{stall}$ ). Because sources with very high resolution observations will not have a large value of  $D_{max}$  and thus not probe large separations, the source group (3) is not included in (2), and in turn these two groups are not included in (1). The divisions give a sensitivity to binaries at separations over three ranges of scales:

- (1)  $120 < a < 4757$  parsecs
- (2)  $27.7 < a < 2519$  parsecs
- (3)  $2.8 < a < 450$  parsecs

There were 1035, 497, and 43 sources in groups one, two, and three, respectively.

### 3.5.4 Galaxy Merger Rates

The merger rate of galaxies containing SMBHs given a  $\Lambda$ CDM universe in which merging is the primary mechanism for galaxy growth can be predicted using results from the

Millennium Simulation (Springel et al. 2005). The Millennium simulation is a large-scale N-body simulation which tracked the evolution of dark matter halos in a co-moving cubic volume  $500 \text{ Mpc } h^{-1}$  to a side ( $h = H_0/100 \text{ km s}^{-1} \text{ Mpc}^{-1}$ ). De Lucia & Blaizot (2007) applied a semi-analytical prescription to the Millennium simulation to track the evolution and merger histories of individual galaxies within the Millennium volume. Their catalogue can be queried through an online interface.<sup>6</sup>

Using the Millennium catalogue, we constructed the redshift-dependent distribution of galaxies and mergers in which each galaxy contains a supermassive black hole of  $M_{\bullet} > 10^8 M_{\odot}$ . For comparison with the black hole binary occupation fraction, we show these values as a pair fraction, where  $f_{\text{mrg}} = N_{\text{mrg}}/N_{\text{gal}}$ ; here,  $N_{\text{mrg}}$  and  $N_{\text{gal}}$  are the number of mergers and the total number of galaxies, respectively, with  $M_{\bullet} > 10^8 M_{\odot}$  at the given simulation snapshot. A “merged” pair in the Millennium Simulation and the De Lucia & Blaizot framework is a pair which has become gravitationally bound in the  $\sim 300 \text{ Myr}$  between two adjacent snapshots.

Figure 3.6 shows the redshift-dependent pair fraction for  $m_{\text{lim}} > 10^8 M_{\odot}$  and the corresponding black hole binary occupation fraction (computed from eq. 3.6) for a range of inspiral times. The merger distribution peaks at a redshift of about  $z = 0.7$ .

### 3.6 Limits on Inspiral Timescales for SMBH Binaries

Following Eq. 3.5, for the merger stage groups with no SMBH binary detections, we place an upper limit on  $t_{\text{vis}}$  at  $N_{\text{exp}} = 0.5$ . The one source in which a binary black hole was detected is part of the second merger stage group; for this group/region only are we able to make a measurement of (rather than put a limit on)  $t_{\text{vis}}$ , with errors bounding where  $t_{\text{vis}}$  gives a value of  $0.5 < N_{\text{exp}} < 1.5$ .

The timescale measurements for the optimistic scenario are summarised in Figure 3.7, which illustrates the number of black holes expected to be found in each group as a function of  $t_{\text{vis}}$ , and Table 3.2, which gives the numerical values of our limits. Under the pessimistic set of assumptions, we would not expect to see any sources, given that even with  $t_{\text{vis}} = 1/H_0$ , we find  $N_{\text{exp}} = 0.025, 0.20$ , and  $0.16$  for groups 1, 2, and 3, respectively. The implications of this will be discussed in the next section.

In Table 3.2 we report the timescales measured from both our 1575 sources of known redshift, and from the full sample with an assumed redshift distribution. While we do not use the less reliable “full sample” timescale values in the analysis below, we stress the limiting power of the sample if we were to have a full sample with measured redshifts, by

<sup>6</sup>See <http://www.g-vo.org/Millennium>



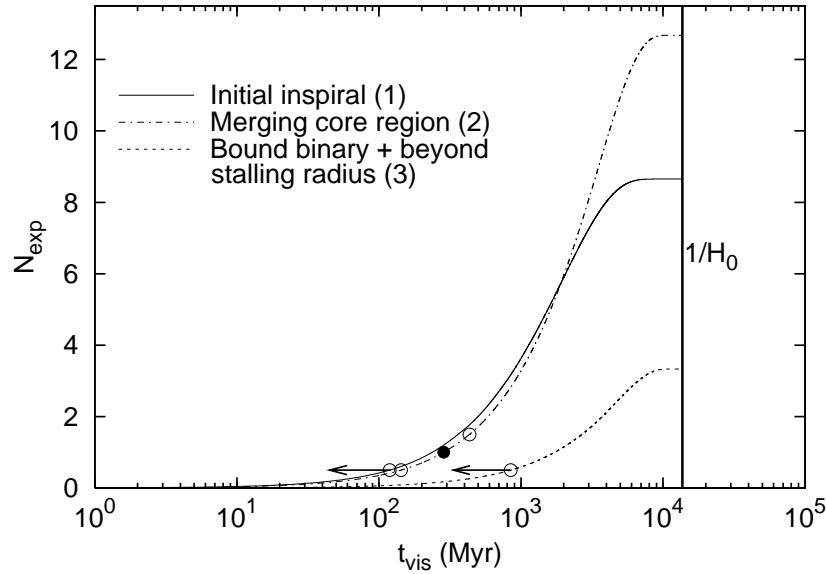


Figure 3.7 The cumulative expected number of sources and limits on the inspiral timescale for each spatial-sensitivity limited group using the optimistic scenario (§3.5.1) in which given one radio-active black hole in a binary, the second will also be radio-emitting. For groups 1 and 2, the upper limit set on  $t_{\text{vis}}$  is marked with an arrow, while for group two the measured value of  $t_{\text{vis}}$  is marked by a filled circle, with open circles indicating the error range.

assuming the remaining sources have a redshift distribution equivalent to the other 1575. This has the effect of roughly doubling  $N_{\text{exp}}$  for each group, and as such works only to lay more stringent limits on  $t_{\text{vis}}$ .

Finally, although the number of sources in group one was the largest, these sources also had a tendency to be of higher redshift, with a net effect of fewer expected detectable binary black holes due to the lower merging fraction of SMBH hosts at redshifts  $z \gtrsim 1$ . For stalling studies, the observation of low-redshift sources is therefore doubly beneficial: not only does it allow smaller scales to be resolved in the sources due to their proximity, but it affords a higher predicted success rate due to the increased merger rate of SMBH-hosting galaxies at low redshift.

### 3.7 Discussion

The question we aim to answer with this search is whether there is observational evidence for stalled supermassive binary black hole systems: that is, what is the evolution timescale down to the stalling radius for a post-merger supermassive black hole pair? For our methods, this question is intertwined with how closely correlated the radio emission is

|                | Known redshift        | Full sample |
|----------------|-----------------------|-------------|
| <b>Group 1</b> | <0.119                | <0.060      |
| <b>Group 2</b> | $0.286^{+148}_{-143}$ | 0.143       |
| <b>Group 3</b> | <0.846                | <0.416      |
| <b>Net</b>     | <1.25 Gyr             | <619 Myr    |

Table 3.2 A summary of the  $t_{\text{vis}}$  measurements (in Gyr) placed by our known redshift sources (1575) and the full sample with an assumed redshift distribution (3114 total). The values given are for the set of optimistic radio luminosity assumptions (§3.5.1). Groups 1–3 are as detailed in §3.5.3. Although the groups overlap in their linear separation sensitivities, we quote a “Net” timescale that gives a limit on the total timescale of inspiral from galaxy virialization to SMBH separations beyond the stalling radius.

between two black holes in a pair. Our sample allows us to address this correlation and inspiral timescales over three stages of post-merger SMBH pair evolution. This is discussed below, followed by a brief consideration of the consequences of our results for the detection of gravitational waves from SMBH binary systems by pulsar timing arrays.

### 3.7.1 Post-merger Efficiency, Radio Ignition, and SMBH Binary Stalling

The timescales measured for our three merger stages represent the time a pair’s orbital separation takes to evolve through the spatial sensitivity window of each stage. For our merger stage groups one and two ( $\sim$ virialisation down to SMBH binary formation), it is expected that purely dynamical friction will act on the black holes. Formally, the dynamical friction timescale in equation 3.2 over the range probed by our first and second merger stage groups is  $\sim 3.7$  Gyr and 900 Myr, respectively, for an object of mass  $10^8 M_{\odot}$ .

For merger stage group one, the optimistic scenario timescale limit is smaller than the dynamical friction timescale by a factor of  $\sim 30$ . From this disagreement, it follows that one of the following must be true: 1) the relative radio state of two SMBHs in merging galaxies is not strongly correlated before the hosts’ stellar cores have merged, and/or 2) The centralisation of supermassive objects in a post-merger system is highly efficient (in excess of dynamical friction).

Considering merger stage group two, in which we have detected one binary SMBH, the timescale under the optimistic set of assumptions gives a value more consistent (a factor of  $\sim 2$  within the error bounds) with dynamical friction. Because in the pessimistic limit we would not expect to see any sources, it is implicit that the pessimistic assumptions are not strictly valid for this stage of merger. This is furthermore indicative of some radial dependence of the relative radio state of two SMBHs in a post-merger environment, such that the SMBHs have a correlated radio active state at later stages of SMBH inspiral,

after the pair has shared a common galactic environment for many orbits.

We have set the cutoff for the third merger stage group to be sensitive to the theoretical stalling radius of Merritt (2006). While the limits that we can place on this stage of merger are the least stringent due to the small source count in the limiting group, they represent the first observational exploration of stalling. If the evidence exhibited by merger stage group 2 holds—that the relative radio state between two black holes is more strongly correlated at late stages of binary evolution—our results are in agreement with a progression through the stalling radius in much less than a Hubble time; that is, we find no evidence for systematic stalling of supermassive binary black hole systems. These results, however, exist with the significant caveat: if the most pessimistic assumptions are true, we would not expect to see any paired SMBHs regardless of the length of post-merger inspiral.

As previously noted and reflected in table 2, we have only used the information from roughly half of our sources to acquire timescale measurements. The lack of detections in the additional 1539 sources suggests that the measured limits will only be more stringent, however would be highly dependent on the redshift distribution of the remaining sources.

### 3.7.2 Consequences for the GW Background and Pulsar Timing Arrays

The measured inspiral timescales and lack of evidence for stalled supermassive systems are pertinent results for pulsar timing arrays. While we have primarily accentuated that the brevity of inspiral timescale implies an efficient passage through the stalling stage, we note also that the timescales measured for merger group two (in concert with time spent at other separations) are sufficiently large that they may have non-negligible effects on predictions of the gravitational wave background signature in the local Universe from SMBH binaries. The GWB prediction models discussed in §1.3.1 typically assume efficient or instantaneous inspiral into the gravitational wave regime, equating redshift-dependent galaxy merger rates with binary coalescence rates. The inspiral times measured here may cause the galaxies merging at a redshift of 0.7, at which the merger distribution peaks, to emit gravitational radiation at a much later epoch, causing a larger expected amplitude for the astrophysical gravitational wave background than previously estimated (recall equations 1.11, 1.12). In addition, it is likely that this effect would cause an increase in the predicted number of supermassive binary sources whose gravitational radiation is strong enough to be resolved from the gravitational wave background by pulsar timing arrays (Sesana et al. 2009).

### 3.8 Summary

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We have performed a search of 3114 active galactic nuclei for the presence of double SMBH systems using a multi-frequency radio imaging technique. Of the sources searched, only 0402+379 was apparent with our method as a binary AGN. While this source has already been put forward as a binary black hole in Rodriguez et al. (2006), this search represents a significant enough statistical sample with which to interpret the existence of this source in the broader cosmological context of binary supermassive black holes.

This search has probed estimates of the inspiral timescale for binary black holes of  $m_1, m_2 \geq 10^8 M_\odot$ . For the 1575 sources that had redshift information with which to discern the linear scales probed in the host galaxy, we obtained timescale estimates for the inspiral of binary systems in three ranges of binary separation. We have demonstrated observational evidence against stalled binary black hole systems by demonstrating that: 1) at late stages of SMBH pair inspiral, the two black holes are more likely to be in a similarly radio-active state, and 2) SMBH binaries proceed from separations of  $a \simeq 500$  parsecs to within the stalling radius estimates of Merritt (2006) in less than  $\sim 0.5$  Gyr. The implications of this are that supermassive binary systems do not stall indefinitely at such radii, suggesting there is a yet undetermined mechanism by which the black holes are able to dispense energy to the surrounding environment and proceed to coalescence.

The results of this study come with the caveat that they stem on very small-number statistics; that is, we detected only one binary AGN in the analysis, and due to unmeasured redshifts, we were unable to use roughly half of the sources searched in the statistical analysis. Definitive studies of this type for large numbers of AGN would become possible with the large collecting area and dense instantaneous  $u-v$  coverage of the planned Square Kilometer Array (SKA). However, as implied by Eq. 2.4 and the analysis of Chapter 2, the SKA will only be a productive research instrument for this method if long baselines are included in its configuration (e. g. baseline length  $B \gtrsim 1200$  km at 5 GHz would give the capability of resolving the stalling regions of the most massive supermassive black hole pairs at  $z < 0.01$ ).

# 4

## An Archival Search for Radio Transients: Implications for RRATs and Extreme Pulsar Intermittence

*The two prime movers in the Universe are Time and Luck.*

—K. Vonnegut Jr.

In this chapter we develop a single pulse search methodology which makes novel additions to the search processes reviewed in §1.4.2. We then explore the nature of RRATs through fourteen new discoveries of sparsely-emitting neutron stars in a blind search for transient radio bursts of between 0.125 and 32 millisecond duration. The new detections provide key insights into RRATs and extreme nulling phenomena in pulsars, and support the premise that RRATs may simply be nulling pulsars that are only “on” for less than a pulse period. The newly discovered object PSR J0941–39 may furthermore represent a direct link between pulsars and RRATs, as it appears to oscillate between a sparsely-emitting “RRAT” state and a  $\sim 10\%$  nulling-fraction “pulsar” state.

### 4.1 Introduction

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As reviewed in §1.4.2, the transient radio sky has revealed many classes of exotic objects since the discovery of pulsars in late 1967 (Hewish et al. 1968), with the recent discovery of sparsely bursting rotating radio transients (RRATs, McLaughlin et al. 2006), and a one-off burst tentatively identified as having an extragalactic origin (Lorimer et al. 2007) spurring renewed interest in the search for single-pulse emission after 30 years of Fourier transform searches dominating surveys for pulsars.

### 4.1.1 A Brief History of Single Pulse Searching

The more recent history of single-burst searches commenced with the search of Amy et al. (1989) for impulsive signals between 0.001 and 800 ms using a transient event monitoring system at 843 MHz at the Molonglo cylindrical telescope. While they found only pulsars and ambiguous events, they were able to put an upper limit on the event rate of  $1 - 25$  ms duration events of  $0.017 \text{ events s}^{-1} \text{ sr}^{-1}$  for pulses with energy density  $> 10^{-28} \text{ J m}^{-2} \text{ Hz}^{-1}$ . Nice (1999) also recognised that some pulsars might be undetectable in periodicity searches and subsequently re-searched data from a  $68 \text{ deg}^2$  area of sky along the galactic plane for single pulses with duration between  $0.5 - 8$  ms, revealing one new, slow (2.3 s) pulsar. The survey which discovered RRATs (McLaughlin et al. 2006; hereafter M06) was the first large-scale examination of a significant data set for impulsive bursts since the early pulsar surveys, while the search of the Magellanic Cloud surveys (Lorimer et al. 2007) and a transient search with Arecibo telescope (Deneva et al. 2009; hereafter D09) and a deeper search of the M06 data (Keane et al. 2010; hereafter K09) followed using similar techniques. A large volume of archival pulsar surveys remain to be searched, however, which may contain single events from yet unidentified phenomena, and will certainly contain further examples of RRATs. Higher sensitivity to rare events in future searches will benefit from further sophistication in radio interference mitigation, which we attempt to address in our search presented below, and from alternate methods of data inspection, which we also address with our search below.

### 4.1.2 The Ambiguous Nature of RRATs

At present it is unclear from the few known RRATs how they relate to the neutron star population as a whole, or how they may relate to other sub-populations of neutron stars such as anomalous X-ray pulsars or magnetars (recall Figure 1.2, in which the position of several RRATs in the  $P - \dot{P}$  diagram appeared to lie midway between magnetars and pulsars. If RRATs are not a distinct class of life-long sparse emitters, it may be that the sparse emission of RRATs represents a temporary phase through which all pulsars undergo when they reach a sufficient age (e.g. McLaughlin et al. 2009, Keane & Kramer 2008), or that are simply distant, low-luminosity pulsars with extreme pulse amplitude modulation (Weltevrede et al. 2006b). Such distinctions are important for reconciling the so-called “birthrate problem”; it has been recently noted that the net neutron star birthrate calculated from apparently disparate neutron star populations (X-ray dim isolated neutron stars (XDINS), magnetars, RRATs, pulsars) exceeds the rate of the core-collapse supernovae that are believed to produce them (Popov et al. 2006, Keane & Kramer 2008).

Recent works are endeavouring to perform analyses that make the distinction clearer from pulse timing (e.g. McLaughlin et al. 2009). Furthermore, continued searches using single-pulse search algorithms promise to reveal further examples of sparsely-emitting neutron stars, providing a larger statistical sample over which to assess the physical nature of these sources. The discoveries presented in this chapter provide key insights into the relationship of RRATs and steadily-emitting pulsars.

In this chapter, we present the discovery of fourteen new neutron stars, resulting from a blind search for single pulses in more than 900 hours of archival data from the pulsar surveys of Edwards et al. (2001) and Jacoby et al. (2009). Our data is described in §4.2, and the new search methodologies used in this search are detailed in §4.3. The fourteen new objects and other results uncovered by this search are presented in §4.4. We explore the nature of RRAT and deep-nulling pulsars, compare the properties of radio neutron star populations, and discuss the implied consequences for the origin of RRAT emission in §4.5. Several other important discoveries made in this search are presented in Chapter 6.

## 4.2 Data Sample

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The data used in this search were the southern-sky ( $-100^\circ < l < 50^\circ$ ) intermediate ( $5^\circ < |b| < 15^\circ$ ) and high ( $15^\circ < |b| < 30^\circ$ ) galactic latitude surveys of Edwards et al. (2001) and Jacoby et al. (2009), respectively; here  $b$  and  $l$  represent galactic latitude and longitude, respectively. Both surveys employed the same analogue 1-bit filterbank as a back-end to the 20cm multibeam receiver system on the Parkes Radio Telescope. The multibeam receiving system allows the simultaneous observation of 13 positions on the sky with approximately 30 arcminutes between beam positions (Staveley-Smith et al. 1996). The twelve outer beams are arranged in two concentric sets of six (see the upper left panel of Fig. 4.1), with a full-width half power beamwidth of each beam at 14 arcminutes. Due to the sharp sensitivity fall-off within 24 arcminutes of each beam's pointing centre, a pointlike astrophysical signal will generally be detected in no more than four beams of the receiver, and unless particularly bright, usually just one or two.

Each survey sampled 96 channels across a 288 MHz band centred on a frequency of 1372.5 MHz. The data were recorded after the polarisations were summed and then sampled at 125  $\mu$ s. Each 13-beam pointing of the telescope lasted 4.4 minutes. The data total 12,090 beam hours (there are 13 beams), taken over the years 1998-1999 (Edwards) and 2001-2002 (Jacoby). The total number of pulsars detected in the periodicity searches of these surveys were 170 for Edwards et al. and 62 for Jacoby et al, giving a total of 230

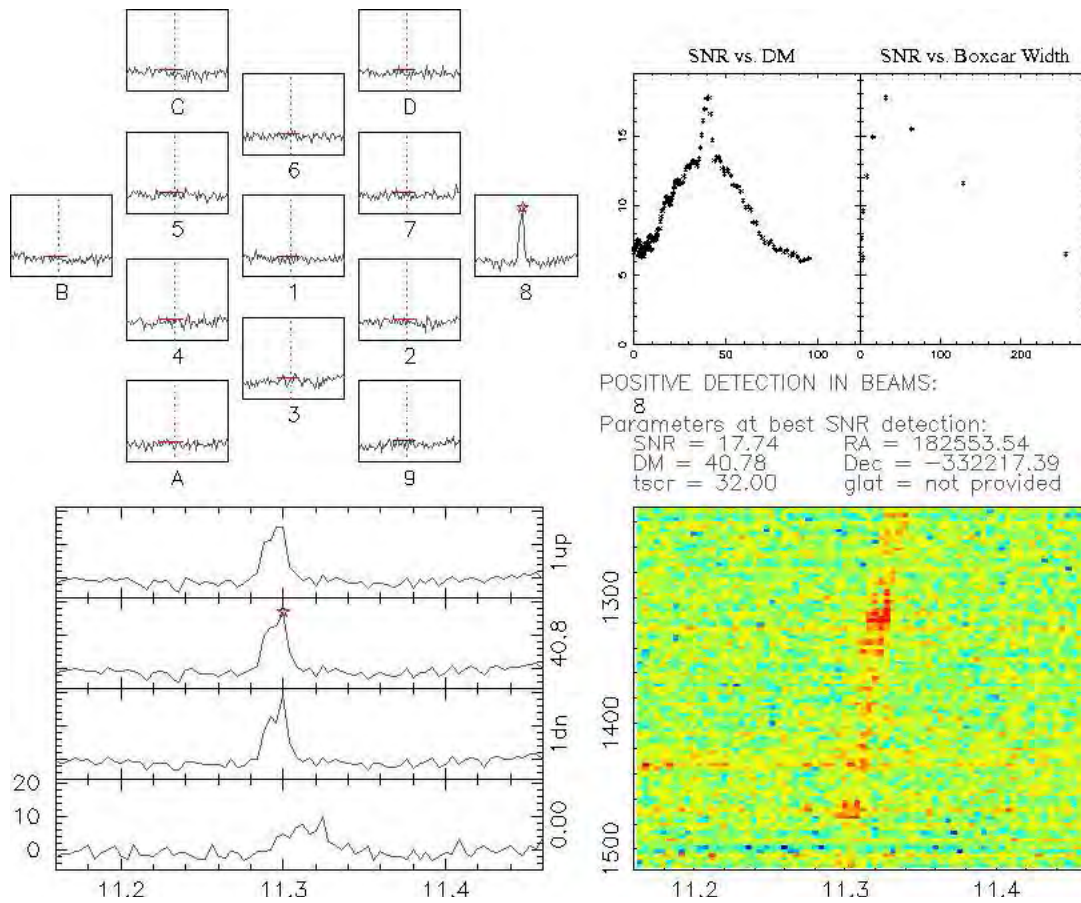


Figure 4.1 A detection plot for a burst from J1825–33. UPPER LEFT: Time series from each of the 13 beams dedispersed at the DM of brightest detection; each field plots the power versus time, normalised by the RMS of the time series. All fields plot the same abscissa and ordinate range, and the beam (and sample in the time series) of brightest detection is indicated by a red star. In the other beams, the sample of peak detection is marked by a vertical dotted line, and the detected width of the pulse is marked by a horizontal bar. LOWER LEFT: Time series for the maximum-SNR beam dedispersed at the DM of brightest detection, stacked with the time series from one DM trial higher (“1up”), one trial lower (“1dn”), and the DM = 0 time series. As in the upper left panel, the ordinate gives normalised power (SNR), while the abscissa gives time since the beginning of the file (in seconds). BOTTOM RIGHT: A false colour image of the received power as a function of frequency (in MHz) versus time since the beginning of the file (in seconds), revealing the frequency-dependent structure of the detected pulse in the beam of brightest detection. UPPER RIGHT: Signal-to-noise ratio as a function of DM trial and boxcar filter size, and best-fit information about the detection (DM, SNR, pointing position of the beam of brightest detection, and boxcar width “tscr”). Pulses with resolved complex structure can show multiple peaks and other structure in their SNR vs. DM curve, though genuinely dispersed pulses (and the curve above at the correct  $DM \pm 5$ ) generally obey the function given by Cordes & McLaughlin (2003).



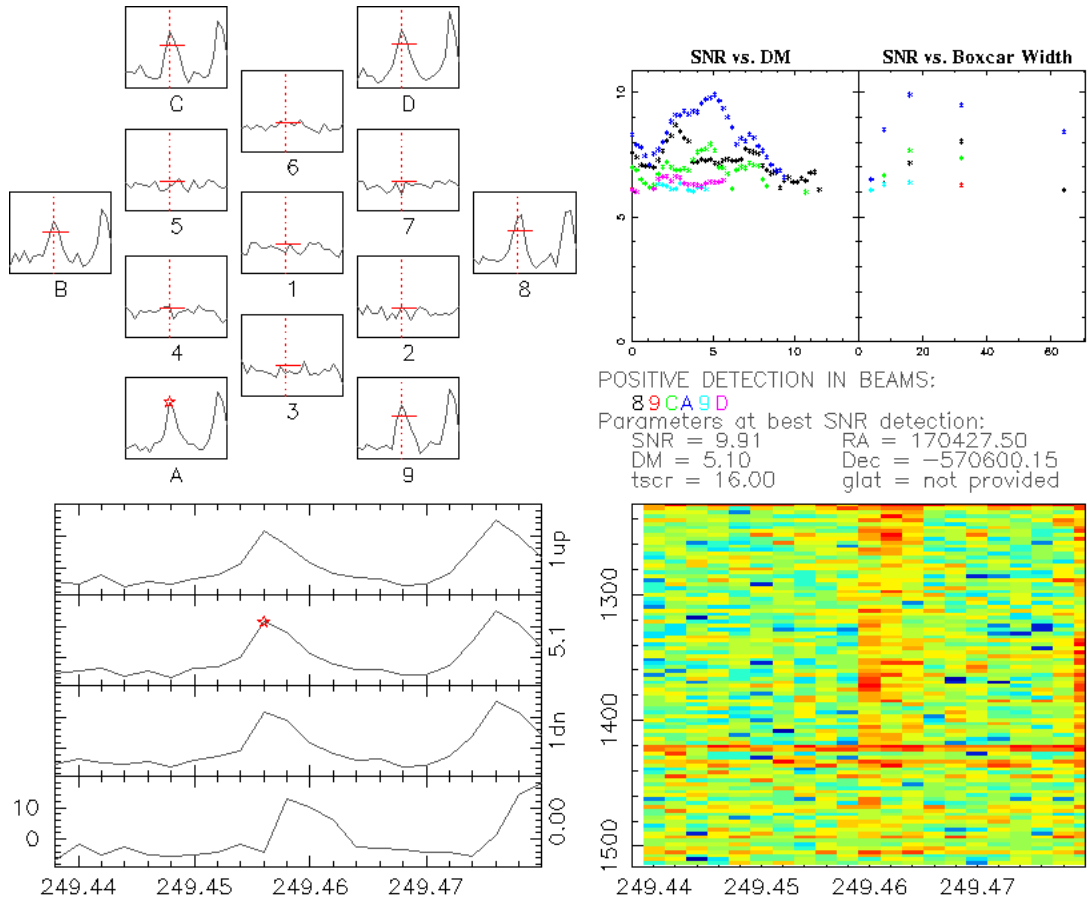


Figure 4.2 Here we show a detection plot for a pulse wrongly identified by the software as a candidate. The panel descriptions are as given for Figure 4.1. In this example, two sequential undispersed pulses with narrow-band structure generated power detected at higher DM than zero, despite a smaller peak also at  $DM = 0 \text{ pc cm}^{-3}$ . The narrow-band structure that generated the false identification is visible in the lower right panel. Note, however, due to its appearance in multiple beams, a multibeam filter less conservative than ours would have eliminated this candidate.

independently detected pulsars.

All follow-up data presented here were taken with the new 2-bit digital filterbank system currently installed at Parkes Radio Telescope that use CASPER tools and is known as BPSR. Data with this system were taken with 1024 channels across 400 MHz centred at 1381.8 MHz, and sampled at  $64 \mu\text{s}$ . Filters blocking emission from a geosynchronous satellite visible by the telescope render frequencies above 1520 MHz unusable.

### 4.3 Single Burst Search Process

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The most significant difficulty in single pulse searches is allaying the millions of spurious candidates which arise from local man-made and natural radio frequency interference, such as lightning. Our search employs various stages of automatic radio frequency interference (RFI) elimination before candidates are manually assessed. We generally followed the steps of Cordes & McLaughlin (2003), however with adjustments in the techniques used for RFI rejection, matched filtering, and visual inspection. The main discriminant used in single pulse searches is the fact that astrophysical transients exhibit a well-defined frequency-dependent delay caused by the propagation through multiple ionised plasma screens in the interstellar medium, visible as a time lag across the bandwidth of our instrument. The dispersion measure, DM, measures the integrated line-of-sight column density of free electrons in units of  $\text{pc cm}^{-3}$ . Locally generated signals generally do not appear dispersed ( $\text{DM} \sim 0$ ), while genuine bursts have a decrease in measured significance as the trial dispersion increases from the true dispersion of the source. Periodic sources will show multiple detections at the same dispersion measure. The radio interference “forest” local to any given astronomical observing site gives rise to the need for a set of thresholds that remove broad, zero-dispersion signals. We therefore have increased confidence in candidates at higher dispersion.

Our detection thresholds were estimated by manual inspection of the data and trial runs on a sub-sample of data to characterise the typical local RFI environment of the Parkes Telescope. These tests indicated that events separated by at least 3.75 ms (30 data bins at the native time resolution) could be considered independent, that signals peaking in signal-to-noise ratio (SNR) below  $\text{DM} = 5$  were most likely RFI or statistically insignificant, and that setting a search threshold at six times the RMS noise of the dedispersed time series was sufficient to filter out the majority of candidates which were due to statistical fluctuations or narrow band interference.

The search process followed several steps. At each trial DM, after dedispersion the frequency channels were summed and a search for  $\text{SNR} \geq 6$  pulses was performed of the

complete 4.4 minute observation. An increased sensitivity search for broader pulses was then performed, using a progressive box-car smoothing function ranging  $2^1, 2^2, \dots, 2^8$  time samples, corresponding to a maximum filter width of 32 ms. The 32 ms maximum width was chosen to significantly decrease the ratio of local to astrophysical candidates (as determined by tests on a data subset), and to preserve our sensitivity to impulses of low dispersion measure (the total delay in milliseconds across our band is roughly equivalent in value to the dispersion measure of an impulse in units of  $\text{pc cm}^{-3}$ ). We have decreased sensitivity to pulses of half-maximum width,  $w$ , outside the range  $0.125 < w < 32$  ms. Additionally, the one-bit nature of the data made it difficult to discover pulses with width less than a sample period, as we only had  $\leq 96$  functioning one-bit channels, and an RMS that meant it was difficult to have much confidence before summing samples. We searched in DM from  $0 < \text{DM} < 600 \text{ pc cm}^{-3}$ , which for the galactic latitudes of the survey is sufficient to probe out to at least 50 kpc except in the regions a few tenths of a degree from  $l = 0, |b| = 5$ .

For each beam, a first-pass RFI rejection was performed by doing temporal coincidence matching for all trial dispersions and matched filter steps; in this way we were able to reconstruct multi-plane information about singly-detected events. A further temporal coincidence search of all remaining events was done in the 13 beams, conservatively rejecting all candidates which had detections coincident in more than nine. After this step, we have a full event archive in which are encoded the widest duration statistics for detected beams, and information about the beam, DM, and smoothing filter of strongest detection. Event archives which contained less than three events, and those which had a peak in signal-to-noise at less than  $\text{DM} = 5$ , were rejected. This step significantly reduced the number of high dispersion candidates which were due purely to narrow-band RFI and small number statistics. The information in the remaining event archives were used to make the plots used in manual candidate assessment.

The manual candidate ranking involved the viewing of each candidate using the tool displayed in Figures 4.1 and 4.2. The panels contain information with which one can quickly discriminate a true burst (e. g. Fig. 4.1) from a false detection (e. g. Fig. 4.2). During candidate viewing, we simultaneously queried the ATNF pulsar catalogue for pulsars within two degrees of the brightest beam, such that we were able to easily determine DM and position incidence, and attribute detections to previously known pulsars. Non-RFI detections not associated with known pulsars were considered new transient candidates.

Assuming that detections which show repeated pulsations are part of the neutron star population, we fit a rotation period to each object which has emitted at least three

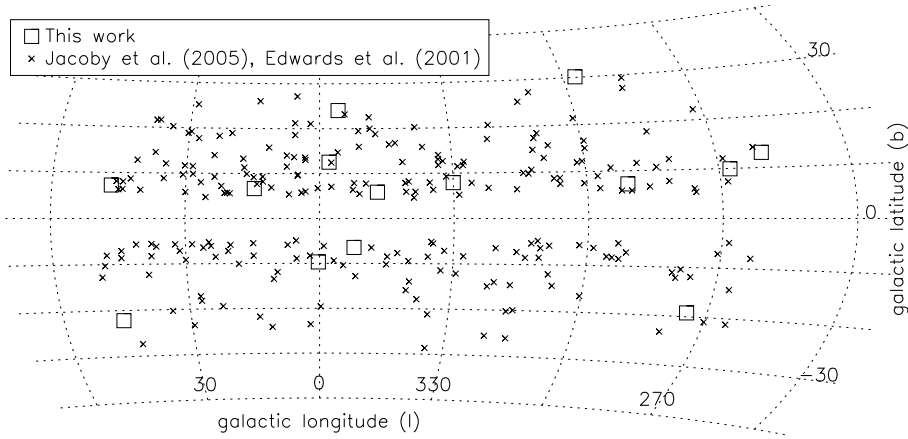


Figure 4.3 A galactic map of the pulsars originally detected in the data, plotted with the new detections presented in this work.

| J2000<br>Name          | <i>l</i><br>(deg) | <i>b</i><br>(deg) | DM<br>(pc cm <sup>-3</sup> ) | <i>d</i><br>(kpc) | $N_p/t_{\text{obs}}$<br>(hr <sup>-1</sup> ) | <i>P</i><br>(ms) | <i>w</i> <sub>i</sub><br>(ms) | <i>w</i> <sub>s</sub><br>(ms) | <i>S</i> <sub>max</sub><br>(mJy) |
|------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------------------|-------------------|---|------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| J0735-62 <sup>†</sup>  | 274.7             | -19.2             | 19.4±7.8                     | 0.93              | —   | 4862.940(2)      | 37.9                          | 14                            | 160                              |
| J0923-31 <sup>#</sup>  | 259.7             | 13.0              | 72±20                        | 0.55              | 1.7   | —                | 30(213)                       | 30(213)                       | 120                              |
| J0941-39 <sup>†*</sup> | 267.8             | 9.9               | 78.2±2.7                     | 0.56              | —   | 586.77841838(3)  | 105.6                         | 6                             | 580                              |
| J1129-53               | 290.8             | 7.4               | 77.0±2.5                     | 2.05              | 36.2  | 1062.880(5)      | 19.1                          | 14                            | 320                              |
| J1226-32               | 296.9             | 30.1              | 36.7±9.9                     | 1.42              | 40.9*                                       | 6193.1(5)        | 60.7                          | 26                            | 270                              |
| J1534-46 <sup>†</sup>  | 330.0             | 7.9               | 64.4±7.8                     | 1.75              | —   | 364.835(9)       | 25.5                          | 10                            | 140                              |
| J1610-17 <sup>#</sup>  | 355.6             | 24.1              | 52.5±3.0                     | 2.10              | 13.6*                                       | —                | 5                             | 5                             | 230                              |
| J1647-36               | 347.1             | 5.8               | 223.9±1.6                    | 5.23              | 436.4*                                      | 210.726(1)       | 9.9                           | 9                             | 250                              |
| J1654-23               | 357.9             | 12.6              | 74.5±2.5                     | 2.04              | 40.9*                                       | 3986.48(5)       | 0.52                          | 0.52                          | 710                              |
| J1753-38               | 352.3             | -6.5              | 168.4±1.3                    | 3.79              | 26.3  | 621.000(5)       | 4.8                           | 2.5                           | 440                              |
| J1753-12               | 14.6              | 6.7               | 73.2±5.2                     | 1.85              | 40.9*                                       | 405.454(1)       | 18.8                          | 14                            | 160                              |
| J1825-33               | 0.3               | -9.7              | 43.2±2.0                     | 1.17              | 14.4  | 1271.2(2)        | 16.5                          | 16                            | 360                              |
| J1850+15 <sup>†</sup>  | 46.7              | 7.3               | 24.7±8.7                     | 1.79              | —   | 1383.965(3)      | 31.8                          | 6                             | 200                              |
| J2033+00 <sup>†</sup>  | 46.0              | -22.2             | 45.2±5.9                     | 2.28              | —   | 5012.918(2)      | 95.2                          | 38                            | 140                              |

Table 4.1 Data for the 14 new sources detected by this search. Columns: (1) Name based on J2000 coordinates (<sup>#</sup> signifies only one burst detected, while <sup>†</sup> denotes an object that was Fourier-detectable in the original pointings or in follow-up data; \* see §4.4.1 for special remarks on J0941-39); (2,3) galactic longitude (*l*) and latitude (*b*); these coordinates have an error of approximately ±15 arcminutes due to the poor positional localization of the multibeam receiver; (4) best-fit dispersion measure and error; (5) distance to the object based on the DM and NE2001 galaxy electron density model (Cordes & Lazio 2002); (6) the pulsation rate based on all data taken on object position to date, where the pulsar was not detected above a SNR of 5 in the folded data. An asterisk indicates an object for which only the 4.4-minute detection pointings have been used to compute this number; (7) the best fit period to all detected pulses with error on the last digit in parentheses; (8) integrated pulse width measurement at 50% of maximum after the stacking of all detected single pulses. For PSR J0923-31, we quote the narrow component width and the total pulse width; (9) pulse width measurement at 50% of the peak of the brightest detected pulse. PSR J0923-31 specified as in column 8; (10) peak flux density of brightest detected single pulse.

detectable pulses. Pulse periods were derived by first fitting periodicities by eye to the detected pulses. The data were then broken into sub-integrations at the estimated period, and sub-integrations containing on-pulses were extracted and used to do an optimised automatic search in period and DM space using the PDMP program distributed with the freely-available PSRCHIVE software suite<sup>1</sup>. Where follow-up data was available and the observations were of higher SNR, those data were used to compute the fits.

## 4.4 Results

Our blind search yielded the detection of several thousand single pulses with which we could associate 91 pulsars, that were already previously detected through Fourier transform search techniques by Edwards et al. (2001) and Jacoby et al. (2009), indicating that roughly 40% of the pulsars detected in their periodicity searches have one or more detectable pulses per 4.4 minute pointing. The pulsars we detected do not appear to have any selective distribution in age or magnetic field strength, have periods ranging 0.089 to 8.5 seconds, and appear to have primarily populated the “island” of standard pulsars in the period-period derivative diagram with periods between  $\sim 0.1$  and 3 seconds.

The new objects detected in this search include two sources which emitted only one (albeit very convincing) pulse over the time we have observed them, and 12 sources from which multiple pulses were observed. All of these new sources are interpreted to be erratically emitting neutron stars. The best-fit parameterisations for each source are presented in Table 4.1, and a more detailed description for each is given below. The implications of the new detections are discussed in §4.5.

### 4.4.1 New Transient Sources

The properties of the pulsed sources presented here give no indication that they are associated with a non-neutron star origin. Below we describe the properties unique to each new object, and note the amount of follow-up time which has been dedicated to each. Where emission was detectable in a Fourier search, the intermittency ratio ( $r = \text{SNR}_{\text{Singlepulse}} / (\text{SNR})_{\text{Fourier}}$ , as given by D09) is provided. Note that after the determination of the DM from the brightest automatically-detected pulses, a manual inspection was done to identify weaker pulses (typically down to  $\sim 4$  times the timeseries noise). In cases where further pulses were detected, the weaker pulses were included in the determination of the objects’ periods and event rates.

<sup>1</sup>Available from the web on <http://psrchive.sourceforge.net/>

**PSR J0735–62**

This source emitted several pulses with  $\text{SNR} > 7$  and many pulses below a SNR of 6 in the discovery pointing, and after a period was determined from the brightest bursts, the source was visible when the data were folded at the manually measured period with a SNR of just below six. The source appears to experience severe scintillation of its signal due to its low dispersion measure, and it is likely that because of this the six-minute tracks on this source over 93 minutes of follow-up observations showed no detectable emission in single pulses, however showed a weakly visible signal when the data were folded at the nominal period and DM. Three-period averaged pulses from this pulsar are shown in Figure 4.4(a). Despite its steady emission, the long period and narrow duty cycle prevent it from being detected in standard Fourier searches of short duration (e.g. Deneva et al. 2009). The intermittency ratio of this object is  $r = 1.45$ .

**PSR J0923–31**

This source emitted only one pulse in the discovery observation, which appeared at nine times above the system noise and with complex profile structure with a bright, narrow main component. This pulse is shown in Figure 4.5(a), and appears to have a faint, time-resolved, double peak. Subsequent pointings, totalling 30.9 minutes, revealed no further emission from this location. Further pulse detections are required to rule out local interference as the source of the burst, particularly in light of the pulses presented in Chapter 6. However, the appearance in only one beam of the multibeam receiver, frequency sweep that closely follows the cold plasma dispersion relation, and dissimilarity to the Chap. 6 pulses indicate that the source is unlikely to be of the same origin, and is therefore most likely to be astrophysical. Based on a 10% duty cycle and a pulse width of 213 ms, if this object is a pulsar its estimated period should be  $> 2$  seconds.

**PSR J0941–39**

This pulsar was discovered after the detection of five single pulses to which there was no clear periodicity. Follow-up observations of the source (totalling more than 3 hours spread over approximately one-half year) later revealed extraordinary behaviour, sometimes appearing with sporadic RRAT-like emission at a rate of  $\sim 90$ -110 per hour, and at other times emitting as a bright pulsar with strong pulse-to-pulse modulation and quasi-periodic nulling (see Fig. 4.6). The pulsar has a triple-peaked profile and broad duty cycle, with complex sub-pulse drift, mode-changing, and longitude-dependent modulation when in an

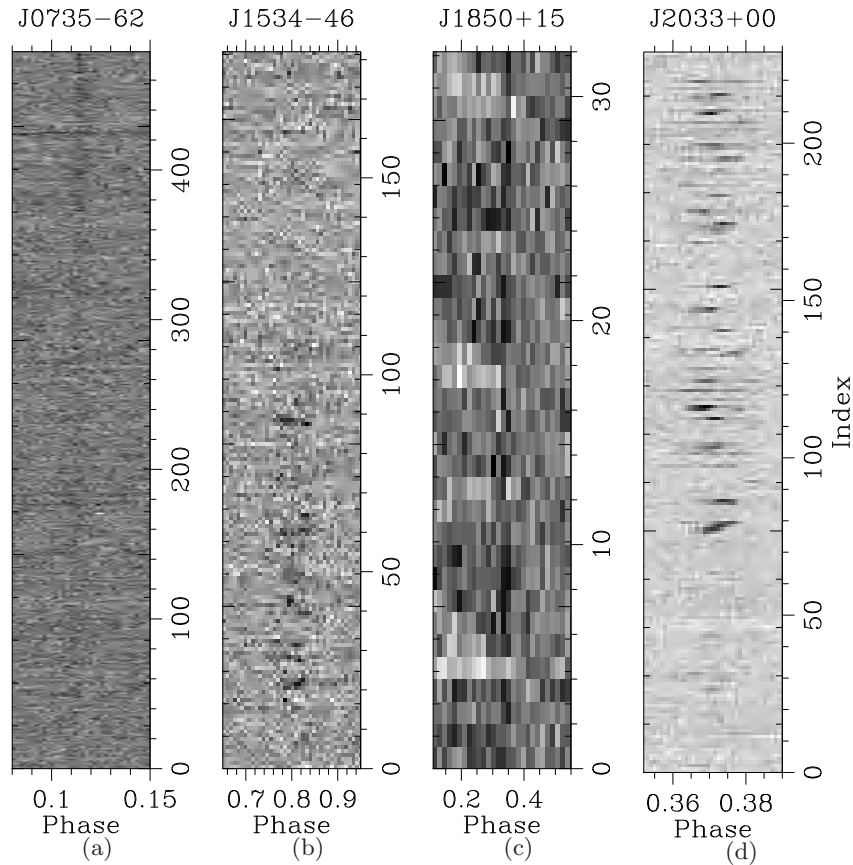


Figure 4.4 Greyscale representations of time (or pulse index, y-axis) versus de-dispersed pulse phase—“pulse stacks.” These four objects were alone in showing Fourier-detectable emission underlying their single bursts. PSR J0735-62 has been folded over three rotation periods, PSR J1850+15 over six periods, and the others show single pulses.

“on” state (it is these behaviours which made single-pulse periodicity fitting difficult). A timing program is underway on this pulsar at Parkes Telescope, and observations of the properties of this object will be presented in detail in a forthcoming paper.

### PSR J1129-53

This source was originally detected as two single bursts occurring at the same DM in independent pointings separated by 14 arcminutes. Follow-up observations totalling 15.5 minutes at a position half-way between the original two detection positions (it is this position listed in Table 4.1) revealed 10 further pulses which were extracted and used to fit a period and DM. The individual pulses from this object exhibit a variety of pulse shapes, with some pulses exhibiting evenly double-peaked emission.

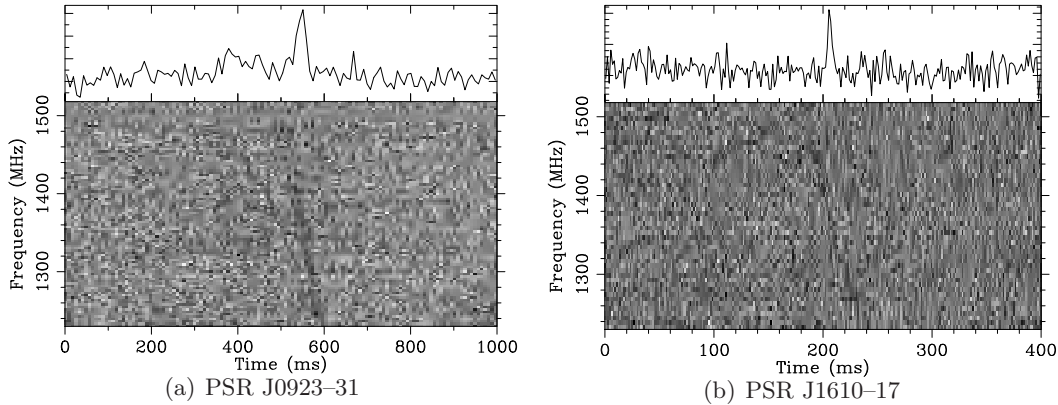


Figure 4.5 Greyscale spectra (bottom panel) and dedispersed, frequency-integrated time-series (top panel), showing the single pulses of the two objects from which no further emission has yet been detected.

### PSR J1226–32

Three pulses of  $\text{SNR} > 12$  were detected from this object during the discovery pointing, and a best-fit to these pulses gave us the period and dispersion measure quoted in Table 4.1. When folded at the fitted period, the rotations which did not contain pulses of  $\text{SNR} > 12$  showed no detectable emission. We have not yet had the benefit of follow-up observations for this object, however the three dispersed pulses emitted by the object show consistency in both dispersion sweep and frequency-dependent modulation, indicative of the bursts' propagation through the interstellar medium from a common origin.

### PSR J1534–46

This object appears to be intrinsically modulated (and nulling) with single pulses appearing at 12-14 times the rotation period. The modulation power spectrum shows a peak at  $\sim 4$  times the pulse period near the centre of the integrated pulse. The single-pulse emission from this pulsar is shown in Figure 4.4(b). The pulsar was detectable in a Fourier search, giving  $r = 0.66$ . We have not performed follow-up observations of this source.

### PSR J1610–17

Only one pulse was detected from this location, however there have been no follow-up observations on the object. The original detection had a  $\text{SNR}$  of 7.4, and no other detections above  $\text{SNR} = 4$  appeared in the 4.4 minute observation. The single detected pulse is shown in Figure 4.5(b), and like PSR J0923–31, shows a frequency sweep that agrees well with the expected frequency delay due to interstellar dispersion, and additionally does not



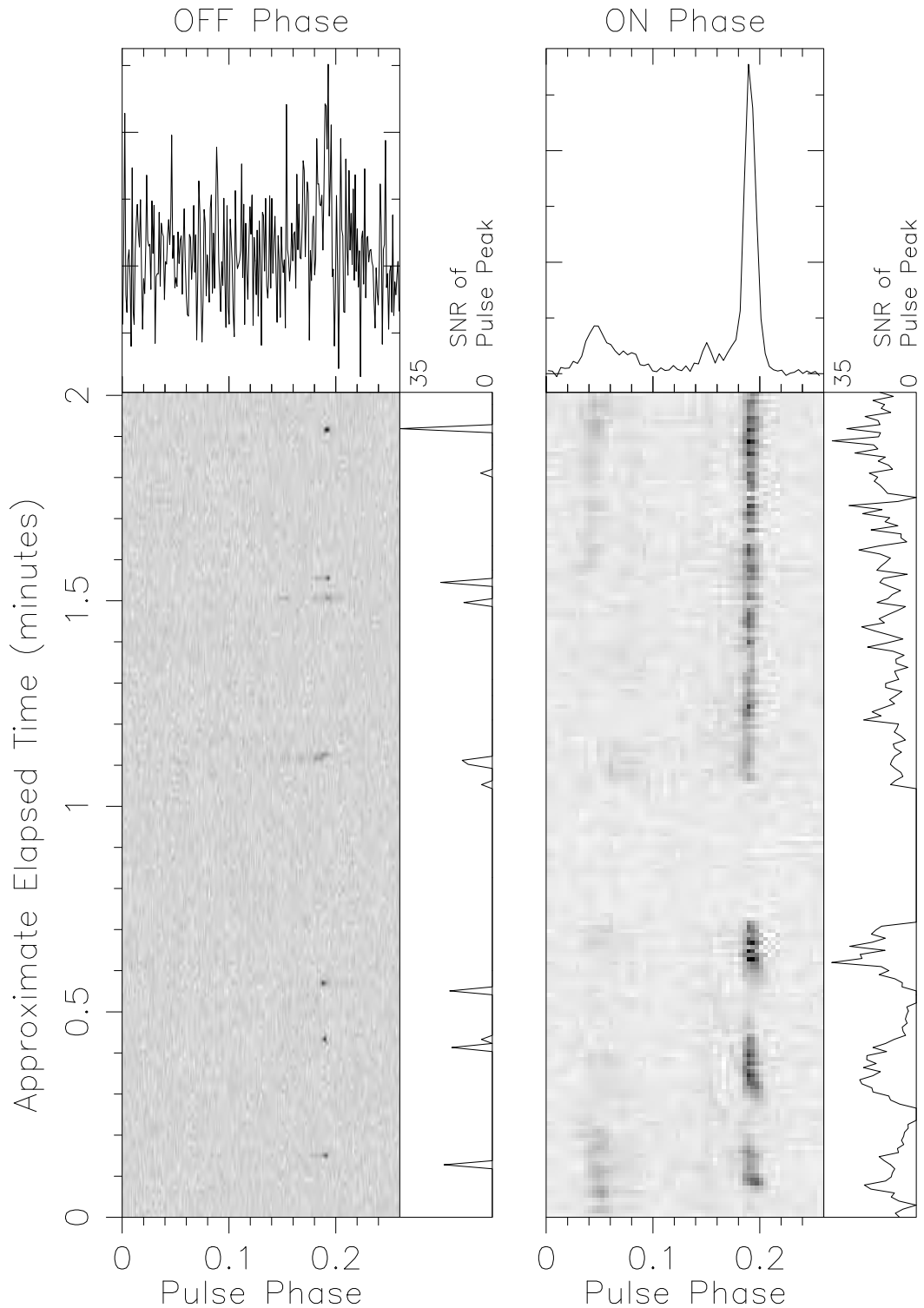


Figure 4.6 Two-minute (205 rotation) pulse stacks exhibiting PSR J0941-39’s “RRAT” (off) and “Pulsar” (on) phases (§4.4.1, 4.5.3). The integrated profile shape is shown in the panel the the right. Tracks of the signal-to-noise ratio of the peak of each pulse with  $\text{SNR} > 3$  are plotted below the pulse stacks. The brightest peaks of the on- and off-phases are comparable, indicating that the “off” state is not due to interstellar scintillation.

share the distinct properties of the Chapter 6 pulses. We suggest that although follow-up is warranted, this pulse is likely to be of astrophysical, galactic origin.

### **PSR J1647–36**

This pulsar appears to exhibit periodic nulling with bursts lasting on the order of 1-6 pulse periods spaced by nulls lasting  $\sim 27$  seconds (130 rotations). With each period of “on” activity, the bursts arrive at a phase offset by 5 – 10% from the previous burst episode; it is possible that the system is either strongly drifting or mode-changing, however follow-up observations of this source are necessary to assess these hypotheses.

### **PSR J1654–23**

The original detection showed 3 narrow (sub-0.5 ms), faint ( $\text{SNR} < 7$ ) bursts which allowed the fit reported in Table 4.1. The duty cycle is the smallest observed to date for a pulsar, however due to the narrow pulses and weak emission it is possible that some pulses were not visible above the noise. It is possible that the period reported for this pulsar could easily be an integer multiple of the true period, the effect of which would be to broaden the duty cycle by the same integer value. Follow-up observations of longer duration than the discovery pointing and at a faster sampling rate will reveal more completely the nature of this pulsar.

### **PSR J1753–38**

The period and DM for this object were derived by extracting and fitting just the three bright pulses detected in the original pointing. Follow-up pointings (totalling 21 minutes) revealed further pulses consistent with the flux, period, and DM of the original detections.

### **PSR J1753–12**

The discovery pointing containing this object was badly affected by interference. This and the fact that only one very strong impulse was present made genuine pulse extraction difficult, however three dispersed pulses from the object were identified and parameters estimated. We have not yet made follow-up observations of this source, however cleaner data may reveal more frequent low-level emission.

**PSR J1825–33**

In the discovery pointing, this pulsar emitted seven bright, sequential pulses near the beginning of the observation but was not visible thereafter, nor was any emission visible in 25 minutes of follow-up observations. The profile structure of this pulsar has a double peak (Figure 4.1 shows one pulse from this object).

**PSR J1850+15**

This pulsar’s discovery pointing contained strong periodic interference which probably prevented its detection in the original Fourier search ( $r = 1.04$ ; interference is visible atop the fainter pulses of the object in Fig. 4.4(c)). The emission appears to be steady, with no evidence for clear intermittent behaviour, although there is strong pulse-to-pulse amplitude modulation. We have not performed follow-up observations of this source.

**PSR J2033+00**

This source appears to be an intermittent pulsar with a high nulling fraction and is sometimes detectable in the Fourier domain. There is some evidence of sub-pulse drift; individual pulses rarely come from the same phase for more than a few rotations (see Figure 4.4(d)). The source was detectable in single pulses for the entirety of the 25 minute follow-up on the source, however became distinctly brighter (and weakly detectable in a Fourier search;  $r = 1.86$ ) in the final 14 minutes.

**4.5 Discussion**

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**4.5.1 Pulsar Transient Varieties and the Nature of RRAT Emission**

Regular pulsars are themselves intermittent radio sources, showing detectable emission only for the fraction of time that their beams sweep Earth. The individual pulses, however, are observed to show intrinsic pulse-to-pulse flux and shape differences, the origin of which is yet unknown (though various theories exist). The variations observed in pulsars can be broken down into two main types, being: *pulse-to-pulse modulation*, in which the object emits continuously, however at an intrinsically modulated amplitude, and *nulling*, during which the pulsar beam is somehow quenched, emitting no detectable radiation for a period of time. In many pulsars, nulling appears to be a real phenomenon (with no underlying emission when in null states), with nulls observed to occur from zero to 95% of a pulsar’s

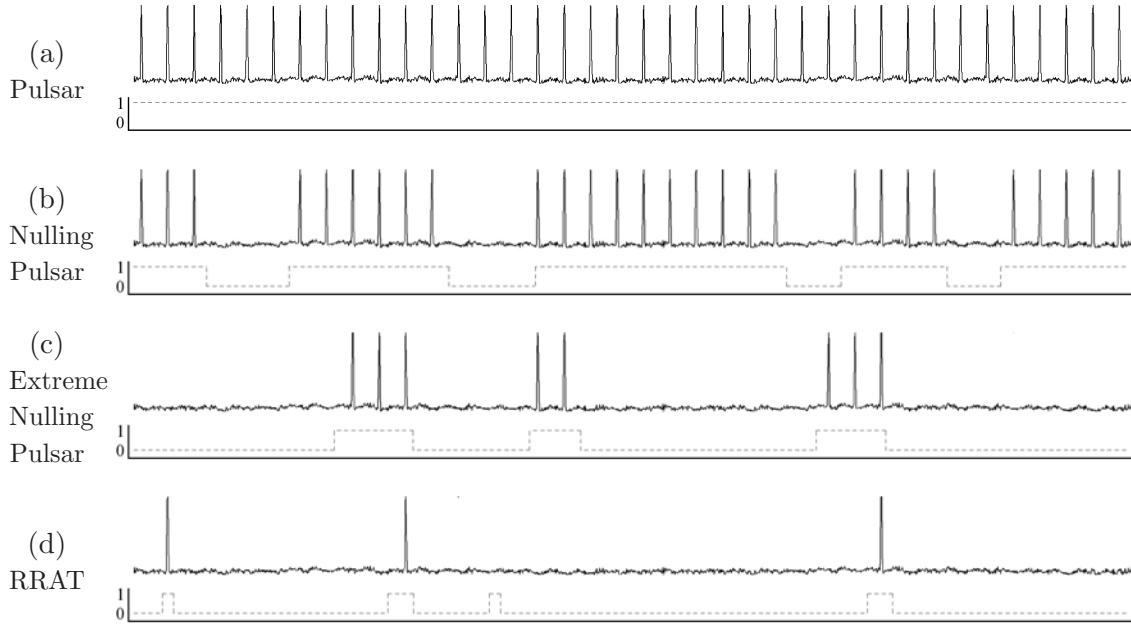


Figure 4.7 Windowing as a descriptor for the continuum of emission on/off cycles observed in pulsars, where the average timescale of the window function defines the behaviour observed: (a) shows a regular pulsar, (b) is an example of a nulling pulsar, (c) an example of what we term an “extreme nuller” (e.g. nulling fraction  $> 75\%$  of pulses are nulled and the *on*-window typically endures for a few times the rotation period), (d) an RRAT, in which the typical *on*-window has a duration of less than the pulsar period. Note that some “on” windows will not result in detected pulses if the pulsar’s beam is not directed towards Earth during the on-state.

observed rotations (Wang et al. 2007). Some pulsars appear to null for days-weeks, with a period derivative that is dependent upon the emission state (Kramer et al. 2006).

The range of nulling fractions observed in pulsars is easily described by a windowing function, in which the number of sequential pulses observed at a given time is defined by an on-window of some length. In this description, regularly emitting pulsars have an indefinite on-window, while pulsars with increasing percentages of nulling have on-windows of increasingly short timescale, with extreme nullers (nulling fraction  $\gtrsim 75\%$ ) becoming more likely to be detected in single pulse searches than periodicity searches. Various degrees of pulsar windowing are illustrated in Figure 4.7. It is clear that one could incorporate the RRATs into the general pulsar population in this way, by just extending the non-nulling window to a time of length  $t < P$ , causing only one pulse to be observed at a time. Implicitly, there should be a continuum in the distribution of nulling fractions leading from constantly-on pulsars through nulling pulsars to the high nulling fractions of RRATs. It is possible that within this model, pulsars start off as continuous

emitters, and gradually increase their nulling fraction until they become RRATs, which ultimately evolve further to emit no radio emission.

The alternative view of RRAT emission, related to pulse-to-pulse modulation, was suggested by Weltevrede et al. (2006b), who indicated that if PSR B0656+14 were observed at several times its distance from Earth, the highly variable single pulses (emitting at up to 420 times the average pulse flux) could emulate the single pulse behaviour observed by M06’s distant discoveries. The pulse-energy-distribution analysis of K09, however, makes an argument against this hypothesis (although the analysis was not done on “classic RRATs” as we define them below). It appears obvious that there will ultimately be some fraction of RRATs that belong to this class, but deep integrations would be expected to show underlying emission; the real issue, therefore, is in what fraction of RRATs belong to this class, and if some do not, what are the properties of those sources that do not?

Whether an effect of modulation or nulling, the current competing theories of RRAT emission can be broken into three possibilities, in which the RRATs represent:

- (1) a distinct class (intrinsic life-long single-pulsing)
- (2) faint pulsars with extreme pulse-to-pulse modulation
- (3) an evolutionary phase of pulsars, e.g. where the magnetic field degrades or the spin period increases, leading to increased nulling fractions

Scenarios (1) and (3) intertwine similarly with questions about pulsars observed to null (relating to whether nulling is an inherent phase of all pulsars or an effect of the local pulsar environment). The clarification of RRATs’ nature not only has innate value, but the three scenarios above have quite different implications for how the RRAT birthrate integrates into that of pulsars, and how they contribute to the imbalance of core-collapse supernova rates and neutron star birthrates noted by Keane & Kramer (2008). For instance, in scenario (1) the latent RRAT population may actually exceed the pulsar population. Scenarios (2) and (3), on the other hand, are in part solutions to the birthrate problem, in that the birthrates contributed by RRATs are effectively absorbed into those of pulsars. If RRATs are simply distant, highly modulated pulsars, the sources detected as RRATs are simply abnormalities among the distant, otherwise undetectable pulsars sitting below the average luminosity limit of periodicity surveys; these distant and low-luminosity pulsars are accounted for in pulsar birthrate analyses (e.g. Lorimer et al. 1993) with statistical estimates, using luminosity-dependent scaling factors.

Although the original RRATs of M06 have a number of apparent properties which set them apart from regular pulsars, as detailed in Sec. 4.5.3, we define the *classic RRAT*

as an object which emits only non-sequential single bursts with no otherwise detectable emission at the rotation period. When using the term *nulling pulsar*, we refer to an object which emits for some fraction of its rotations, however the emission coming in bursts of several sequential pulses. Finally, we refer to all objects which emit pulses for less than  $\sim 25\%$  of their rotations as *extreme pulsar transients*.

Below we discuss the properties of our new transients and compare them with the RRATs of M06 and with the properties of the general pulsar population.

### 4.5.2 A Breakdown of Our Discoveries

What is immediately striking about the 14 objects detected in this search is the variety of dormancy timescales, covering a broad range of the nulling and modulation phenomena related above. For some objects, such as PSR J1850+15, the lack of previous detection by Fourier search techniques can be explained by the presence in the data of intense periodic RFI, which lowers sensitivity to fainter periodic sources. The pulsars PSR J0735–62 and PSR J1850+15 appear to simply be regular pulsars which were likely missed in previous searches due to the modulation and long period of PSR J0735–62, and the presence of interference in the discovery pointing of PSR J1850+15.

The “classic RRATs” in our search include PSRs J1129–53, J1226–32, J1654–23, J1753–38, and J1753–12. We also place the objects from which only one pulse was observed in this category; although we have not detected further events from the sources, the pulse widths are typical of pulsars and the pulsation rates implied by our observations are consistent with the range of pulsation rates observed in the RRATs published by M06, which ranged from one per four minutes to one per three hours. We note that the bright single pulses emitted by PSRs J1226–32 and J1753–38 are too bright and have a pulsation rate too high to represent a long tail of a log-normal pulse energy distribution, immediately indicating that scenario (2) above (extreme modulation) is not the case for all RRATs. This is less clear in the case of PSR J1753–12, and we note that our sources may represent a mix of highly modulated low-luminosity pulsars, and true RRATs.

Apart from PSR J0941–39, the remaining objects appear to be nulling pulsars with high nulling fractions. Only two of these objects were in an “on” state for a sufficient fraction of observing time to be Fourier-detectable. Additionally, it is difficult to say whether the source PSR J1825–33 is truly a nulling pulsar, or whether this source had an event which briefly activated its outer gap, as we have since not detected any further emission from the object.

PSR J0941–39 does not fit cleanly into any currently identified pulsar category, some-

times acting like a single-pulse-emitting RRAT, and sometimes like a nulling (though not extreme-nulling!) pulsar. This object may play an important role in understanding RRAT emission.

### 4.5.3 Exploration of RRATs and the Properties of Our New Discoveries

This search represents an important step in understanding extreme pulsar intermittents in several ways. First, we have surveyed the largest area to date for such sources in a region off the galactic plane, and added the discovery of 12 highly intermittent pulsars to a small known population of such objects. Given that neutron stars are mainly born from massive stars in the plane of the galaxy, the high galactic latitudes predispose us to sample a population which has had a sufficiently high kick velocity and sufficient time to reach its current position. Also, the automatic RFI rejection and additional candidate visualisation techniques appear to have given us a higher sensitivity to low DM single pulses, as seen by the fact that M06 discovered no sources at  $DM < 88 \text{ pc cm}^{-3}$  while we have discovered sources at a broad range of DM, with twelve of the fourteen detections at less than  $88 \text{ pc cm}^{-3}$ , and with previously known pulsars positively identified down to  $DM = 3 \text{ pc cm}^{-3}$ . Additionally, the latitude ranges of past RRAT searches (K06, D09, K09) did not exceed 5 degrees. This increased DM sensitivity and high, complementary latitude range makes our discoveries salient objects for assessing the inherent properties of nearby, RRAT-like bursting sources and how neutron stars with extreme intermittence relate to the Galactic population of pulsars.

Throughout this discussion we analyse all of our sources which are sufficiently intermittent to not be detectable in a Fourier search—that is, the ten sources not plotted in Figure 4.4. Where appropriate, we distinguish the analysis of “classic RRATs” and that of “nulling pulsars.” For reference we also include the M06 RRATs and the four D09 objects which, as noted by their study, did not show detectable underlying regular emission. Additionally, we include the five objects which were not noted by K09 to exhibit Fourier-detectable emission or clear nulling behaviour.

The sparse emission and dissimilarity of magnetic field strength to pulsars which emit giant pulses on  $\mu\text{s}$  timescales (Cognard et al. 1996) are what most definitively led McLaughlin et al. to the conclusion that their sources were a new neutron star population, however several other of the observed properties of the original 11 sources also distinguish them from the general pulsar population. This includes their low duty cycles, high single-pulse luminosities, and their tendency to be distant ( $> 2 \text{ kpc}$ , which may have partially been due to a selection effect; this particular RRAT feature gives more weight to the claims of

Weltevrede et al. 2006b that RRATs may simply be distant, highly modulated pulsars). To further our understanding of the properties of RRATs, here we explore their various distinguishing features in comparison to the extreme intermittents detected in our search.

The galactic distribution of our new objects (of the classic RRATs and of our 14 discoveries in general) agree well with the distribution of pulsars, concentrated more highly towards the Galactic plane and the Galactic centre. Though not statistically rigorous with a sample of fourteen objects, the galactic  $z$ -height distribution ( $z = d \cdot \sin(b)$ ) of our discoveries above  $z = 200$  pc is well-fit with an exponential and a scale height of 300 pc, in good agreement with the galactic pulsar distribution. This agreement and the discovery of RRATs in the high latitude surveys indicate that the RRATs are not a young phenomenon confined to the galactic plane like anomalous X-ray pulsars (e.g. Durant 2006). The object of second largest  $z$ -height in our sample is the RRAT J1610–17 with a scale height of  $z = 0.86$  kpc. With a birth at  $z = 0$  pc and a proper motion outward from the galactic plane at  $100 \text{ km s}^{-1}$ , the implied age of this object is  $\gtrsim 10^7$  years.

Figure 4.8 plots the duty cycles of known pulsars and the objects analysed here. As expected, the single pulse widths,  $w_s$ , gleaned from our new objects lie primarily within the optimal sensitivity range set by the box-car matched filters in our search, as described in section 4.3.

The most notable feature of this diagram is that upon plotting our integrated pulse width measurements (filled circles) with the single pulse width measurements (open circles), it becomes apparent that when using duty cycles measured from individual pulses (as were used in the calculations of M06, D09, and K09), the values measured for our RRAT-like objects become systematically lower by a factor of  $\sim 3$ , and up to a factor of more than 10 for the extreme case of J0941–39. There may be several causes of this; for pulsars with nulling, pulse drifts and mode changes are often observed, which can work to broaden the integrated pulsar profile (illustrated well by PSR J2033+00’s pulses in Fig. 4.4(d) above). Multi-component integrated profiles, made up of a superposition of otherwise narrow pulses emitted from a range in latitudes, can also broaden an object’s duty cycle between single and integrated pulse measurements (as has occurred in the extreme case of PSR J0941–39 with its triple-peaked profile). It is clear that were an integrated pulse width measured for the sources of M06, D09, and K09, the duty cycle distribution of RRATs would more closely resemble that of the general pulsar population, instead of appearing to sit characteristically lower than pulsars (the composite profiles for two RRATs shown in McLaughlin et al. (2009) verify this suggestion). As the RRAT and pulsar duty cycle distributions are similar, it is probable that the beaming fraction of such objects will



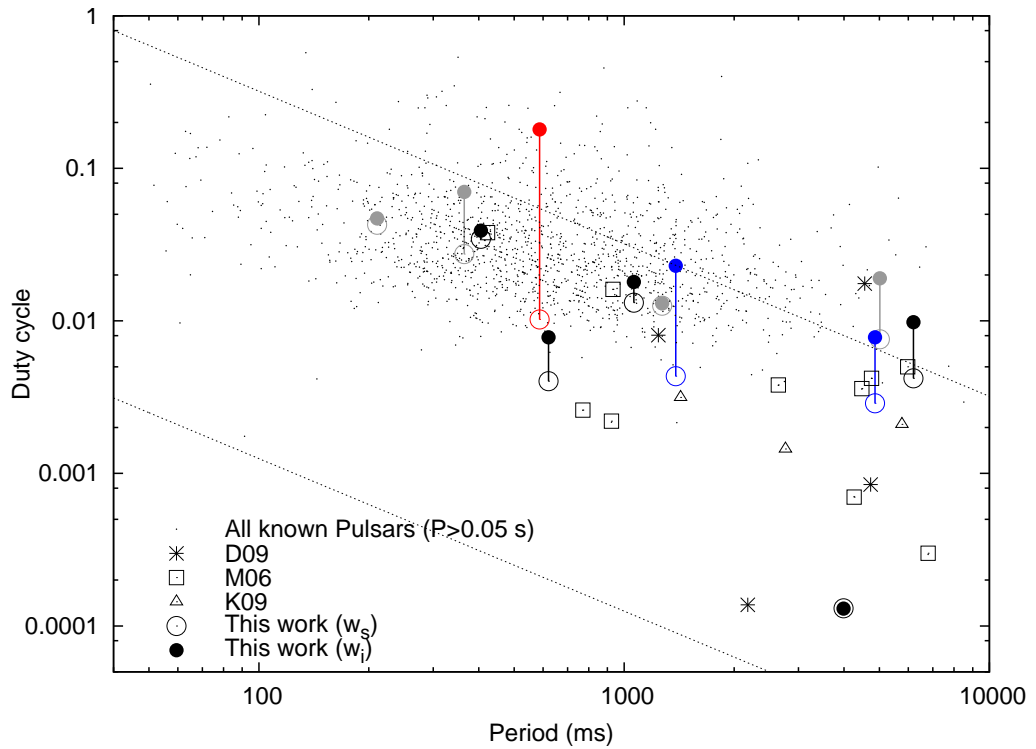


Figure 4.8 The duty cycle versus period for various detections (as detailed in §4.5.2). Among the sources presented in this paper, pulsars are highlighted in blue, RRATs in black, nulling pulsars in grey, and PSR J0941–39 is represented by the red symbols. The duty cycles of our detections are shown in two ways: using the integrated pulse width (measured after all available on-pulses were stacked at the pulsar period) and using the width of the brightest single pulse. M06, D09, and K09 reported only single-pulse widths. The dotted lines represent traces of  $w = 0.125$  ms and 32 ms, beyond which our search sensitivity to individual pulses drops significantly.

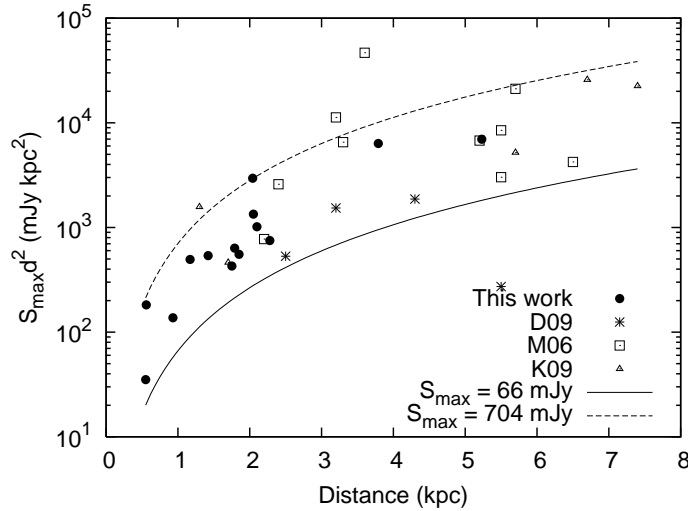


Figure 4.9 Dependence of luminosity on the distance of the sources. The lower curve represents our single pulse flux sensitivity limit for a pulse width of 32 ms, while the upper curve shows a representative limit above which a highly modulated pulsar would become detectable in a Fourier search, as detailed in §4.5.3

likewise be akin to that of pulsars.

Next we examine the distribution of the single-pulse luminosities, as shown in Figure 4.9. The points cover a broad range in both distance and luminosity, appearing to show a downturn with proximity to the observer. The lower single-pulse sensitivity limit of our search obeying  $L \propto d^2$  is plotted (at 66 mJy for our 32 ms filter). In light of the possibility that scenario (2) (modulation) is true, we consider the following: Fourier transform searches for  $\text{SNR} \geq 8$  pulses as done by Edwards et al. (2001) over the 4.4 minute survey pointings have a sensitivity limit to pulsars (given a typical duty cycle of 5%) with an average single-pulse peak flux of  $\langle S_{\text{peak}} \rangle \geq 3.3$  mJy. The prominence and statistics of extremely modulated pulsars (like PSR B0656+14) are not yet well characterised, however the study of Weltevrede et al. (2006a) of 187 pulsars at 1 GHz revealed that typical modulation rarely exceeds ten times the average pulse energy (with pulses exceeding this range typically lasting nanoseconds, and called “giant pulses”, Cairns e.g. 2004). Their follow-up study of PSR B0656+14, as previously noted, revealed infrequent single pulse emission peaking up to 420 times the average single pulse intensity. Here we consider that such extreme sources will be relatively uncommon, and take a population of hypothetical sources bursting at half the maximum  $S_{\text{max}}/\langle S_{\text{peak}} \rangle$  ratio of B0656+14, that is, a bursting population with typical  $S_{\text{max}} = 210\langle S_{\text{peak}} \rangle$ . If such a population is contained in our data, sources above the limit of  $\langle S_{\text{peak}} \rangle \geq 3.35$  mJy will have bursts at  $S_{\text{max}} \simeq 700$  mJy. Sources brighter than this limit will be detectable in Fourier searches and be tagged as

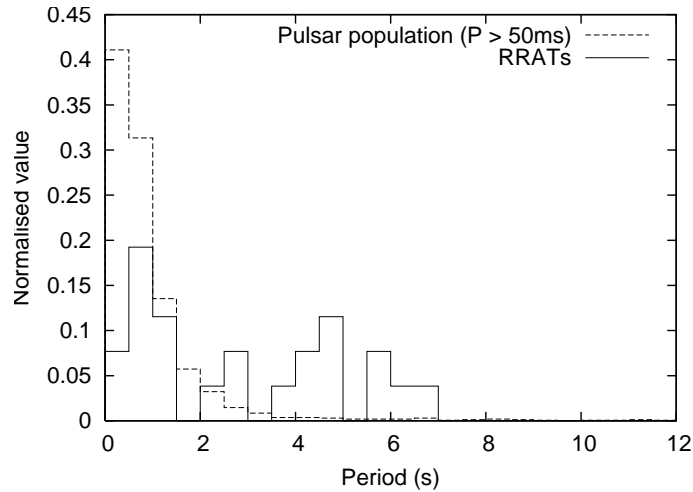


Figure 4.10 Normalised period distributions for pulsars and the single-burst emitting RRATs of M06, D09, K09, and this survey.

pulsars, however below this limit the periodic emission will have been missed, with only the brightest bursts detectable in single pulse searches. This limit is plotted in Fig. 4.9, and interestingly, appears to correspond to the upper envelope of the maximum source luminosities found by our single pulse search.

The natural interpretation of this is that the nearby, highest-luminosity sources exhibiting erratic emission had bright enough low-level emission that instead of being detected as nulling pulsars or RRATs, they were discovered in periodicity searches and taken into the population as pulsars (albeit modulated or nulling ones). When a similar test is done for the RRATs found by M06 (whose longer, 35.5 minute pointings have higher sensitivity to periodic signals and a higher likelihood of containing the rarer brightest outbursts of a highly modulated pulsar; a periodicity search of that survey is described in Manchester et al. 2001), two sources, PSRs J1317–5759 and J1819–1458, still lie significantly above the limit of the Fourier analysis. In the framework of our interpretation, these two sources are therefore either examples of extreme sources among modulated pulsars (however nearby equivalents among the known pulsar population, apart from B0656+14, have yet to be recognised), or alternatively they are simply examples of genuine RRATs, where the intrinsic pulsar emission is quite strong, however usually invisible because of a very high nulling fraction.

Among the four of our RRATs for which we could measure periods, although very statistically poor, the previously noted RRAT feature—that they have a tendency to longer periods than pulsars—is observed in our new objects, where 50% have periods longer than one second. Plotted in Figure 4.10 are the normalised distributions for our

and the published “classic RRAT” sources as compared with the known pulsar population for pulsars with  $P > 50$  ms (to restrict the analysis to non-recycled pulsars). When a Komolgorov-Smirnov test is run on the un-normalised distributions, it results in a high probability,  $P = 0.999985$  ( $> 4\sigma$ ), that the distributions are not drawn from the same parent population. Few pulsars have periods greater than  $P = 3$  s and because sources such as anomalous X-ray pulsars/magnetars/soft gamma-ray repeaters all have periods greater than a few seconds, it is tempting to draw an association between such sources and RRATs; the recent release of timing data on six RRATs by McLaughlin et al. (2009) show a further similarity of RRATs to these other neutron star types in their placement in the period-period derivative diagram, and a similar result in periodicity distribution differences. However, the broad distribution of source periods and the presence of 7 RRATs with periods below one second suggests that a more basic factor in the population, for instance age, which can create the observed tendency to longer periods. For the RRATs which have had timing analysis done, all appear to have ages of a few times  $10^{5-6}$  years. However, the statistical analysis of McLaughlin et al. (2009), which compared various derived RRAT and pulsar quantities, does not indicate a strong difference in the distribution of RRAT and pulsar ages, though does indicate a strong probability that the distribution of RRAT and pulsar magnetic field strengths are significantly different. There appears to be no relation between RRAT period and distance from the galactic plane (a proxy, albeit a loose one, for pulsar age).

The source PSR J0941–39 contributes a peculiar voice to this discussion, appearing for hours, to possibly weeks at a time like a classic RRAT—erratically emitting single, non-sequential pulses at a relatively constant rate—while at other times appearing as an intense ( $\sim 10$  mJy) pulsar with a  $< 10\%$  nulling fraction, sub-pulse drift that is strongly latitude dependent, as well as deep latitude-dependent modulation. The object appears superficially to tie a close link between nulling phenomena and RRATs, possibly signifying a pulsar which is in some way transitioning from a pulsar mode to an RRAT mode. If this is the case, the source provides a link both between RRATs and pulsars as well as a link to older, non-radio-emitting neutron stars—i.e. that the RRAT phase represents a degradation of the radio emission mechanism before advancing beyond the radio pulsar death line. As a timing solution is acquired for this pulsar, it will be interesting to note whether it is of an advanced age. It is rather surprising how luminous this pulsar is, and what a small nulling fraction it possesses when in its “pulsar” state. It is important to note that the site of the RRAT emission is coincident with the three peaks of the profile when the pulsar is on. Thus, the RRAT emission is from the same site as the normal

pulsar emission, again implying similar beaming fractions for the two states.

The properties of the new transients found in this search, and particularly of the five new RRATs, give various indicators that RRAT behaviour is well described by either or both of scenarios (2) or (3) above. The idea that observed RRAT behaviour may be an observed consequence of extreme ( $> 99\%$ ) nulling is supported by the high nulling fraction of the objects tagged as “nulling pulsars” above; while previously the “record” nulling fraction was held by PSR B1713–40 at 95% (Wang et al. 2007), PSRs J1825–33, J1647–36, and J1534–46 all have implied nulling fractions of more than 97%, telling us that these objects may imply a “bridging population” of high-nulling-fraction pulsars, while objects with higher nulling fractions (smaller and less frequent on-windows) exhibit RRAT behaviour. A full statistical nulling fraction analysis of the Edwards et al. (2001) and Jacoby et al. (2009) pulsars may indicate that the nulling fraction of the RRATs discovered in this search fall naturally in the tail of pulsars with significant nulling fractions shown to exist by Wang et al. (2007) in other surveys. This proposition, along with the lack of RRAT features that are physically distinct from pulsars (except their period distribution)—including their galactic and duty cycle distribution—point to a strong relationship to the “normal” radio pulsar population. The story is complicated and strengthened by the apparent mode-switching of PSR J0941–39, which lends significant support for scenario (3) in that it is clear that the object in its RRAT mode is not simply a modulated pulsar, and it is likewise clear that the object is both RRAT and pulsar in nature, signifying a transition between the two populations and more speculatively, implying that nulling pulsars may undergo stepped increases in their nulling fraction with age. The analyses of Wang et al. (2007) indicate no correlation between nulling fraction and characteristic pulsar age, however the number of pulsars exhibiting nulls appears to increase with proximity to the radio death line (see their Fig. 8). If all RRATs are relics of nulling pulsars, the broadening of integrated pulse measurements supports the fact that despite their sparse emission, the emitted pulses may still be exhibiting drifting or mode-changing phenomena.

## 4.6 Summary

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We have re-examined the intermediate galactic latitude surveys of Edwards et al. (2001) and Jacoby et al. (2009) for single pulses of radio emission of duration  $0.125 < w < 32$  milliseconds. This search revealed 14 intermittent sources which appear to be neutron stars. Periods ranging 0.2 to 6.2 s were measured for 12 of these sources. While only four of the objects could be detected retrospectively by Fourier search techniques, the remaining 10 exhibited intermittent emission behaviour akin to both extreme nulling pulsars and

the classic RRATs discovered by McLaughlin et al. (2006). The sensitivity of our search techniques to bursts of lower dispersion measure allowed us to find objects which were closer than those detected by previous searches.

The general properties of the new sources appear to paint details of the extreme intermittent and RRAT population that concur with having similar emission modes and galactic distribution to pulsars, despite being significantly less emissive than the general population. It was found that the duty cycle distribution of our detections mimics that of pulsars. These similarities, and the discovery in this search of pulsars with extremely high nulling fractions, lead us to suggest that RRATs may represent an extreme type of nulling pulsar whose window of on-activity is shorter than the rotation period of the object, and that the sources observed to exhibit RRAT behaviour are a natural extension of the tail of pulsars observed with high nulling fractions. Furthermore, PSR J0941–39 appears to oscillate between a clear “nulling pulsar” state and a more intermittent “RRAT” mode. This source may represent the first detection of an object in transition from a bright pulsar with an average nulling fraction to a single-bursting source, closely tying nulling pulsars to RRATs and indicating a possible evolutionary progression. Further studies and timing are warranted and upcoming on this object.

We conclude by noting that identifying RRATs is not a simple task, as they may represent a mixed population of intrinsically single-pulsing pulsars and highly modulated pulsars whose brightest single pulses singly exceed the system noise. Modulated pulsars appearing as RRATs are expected to be few, as among the local population of pulsars, PSR B0656+14 is currently the only pulsar known to be as modulated as the population required for RRAT emission. Nearby pulsars which are part of such a population may in the future be identified by pulse energy distribution studies of nearby highly modulated pulsars, using long observations which have a chance of detecting the rarer brightest outbursts from such objects. Statistical studies of these pulsars may help separate “true” RRATs from simply highly modulated pulsars.

To discern the nature of RRATs, other extreme pulsar intermittents, and highly modulated objects, it will be critical in coming years to both identify more such sources, and to continue timing analyses on the known sources to determine their relationship to other neutron star populations. Of additional interest are the statistics of intermittent phenomena in extreme nulling/modulated pulsars among the known pulsar population, the analysis of which may reveal further insight into the relationship between regular pulsars and the vast variety of intermittent behaviours observed in these equivocal neutron stars.

# 5

## Single Pulse Analysis in the The High Time Resolution Universe Pulsar and Fast-Transient Survey

*Omnia mutantur, nos et mutamur in illis!*

—M. Borbonius

In this chapter we describe the search for transient radio signals in the new High Time Resolution Universe (HTRU) Survey. We present here: 1) the HTRU Survey’s single-pulse search and follow-up strategy, and the software designed to perform the core single pulse search, 2) a determination of the HTRU Survey’s sensitivity to single pulses, and 3) the 13 new neutron star discoveries made thus far with the single pulse pipeline. We return to the “windowing” description of the previous chapter to explore RRATs and our new detections in terms of emissivity timescales, and demonstrate the intermittent populations that the HTRU Survey can explore, and note that the survey may discover more than 200 new sparsely emitting neutron stars by its completion.

### 5.1 Introduction

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The High Time Resolution Universe Pulsar and Fast Transients (HTRU) Survey is the first all-southern-sky survey for pulsars and fast transients using an all-digital backend, covering declinations  $\delta < 10^\circ$  (Keith et al. 2010; hereafter HTRU Paper 1). The survey employs a new digital backend, the “Berkeley-Parkes-Swinburne Recorder” (hereafter BPSR), that has been installed at Parkes Telescope for the 20 cm multibeam receiver (Staveley-Smith et al. 1996). BPSR allows improved digitisation levels, and frequency and time resolution over the previous analogue instrument. This affords the HTRU survey unprecedented

sensitivity to short-duration and highly dispersed single impulses of radio emission in the southern sky. This chapter describes the techniques used in the survey to search for single pulses. Because this survey required concurrent searches using periodicity and single-pulse techniques, it affords the opportunity to explore efficient modes of search operation, attempting to perform these techniques in parallel with a minimum of duplicated computing effort.

The targets of our search are similar to those described in Sections 1.4.3, 1.4.4, and 4.1, and include RRATs, giant pulses from pulsars, radio bursts of extragalactic origin, terrestrial impulses (e.g. Chap.6) and other unanticipated, yet undetected sources of celestial transient radio emission.

The HTRU intermediate (galactic longitudes  $-120^\circ < l < 30^\circ$ , latitudes  $|b| < 15^\circ$ ) and high (covering declinations  $\delta < +10^\circ$  not covered by intermediate pointings) latitude surveys share common areas of sky coverage to previous surveys which employed the analogue filterbank installed on the Parkes Multibeam receiver.<sup>1</sup> The “Parkes Multibeam Survey” (Manchester et al. 2001) covered  $|b| < 5^\circ$  with 35-minute pointings, and was searched for single pulses by McLaughlin et al. (2006) and Keane et al. (2010), revealing the bulk of the currently known RRAT population. Hereafter we refer to these searches collectively as the PKSMB searches. At higher galactic latitudes, a single pulse search was performed on the Jacoby et al. (2009) and Edwards et al. (2001) surveys, as presented in Chapter 4. We refer to that search throughout this chapter as BSB, in reference to the refereed publication in which the search was also described (Burke-Spolaor & Bailes 2010). Despite the common sky coverage and high success rate of the BSB and PKSMB searches, we nevertheless expect to discover any source of impulsive radio emission in these areas; some pulsing radio sources may not have been previously detected due to the source’s low event rate, insufficient sensitivity in previous surveys, or the improved dynamic range of the BPSR observing system over the previous analogue filterbank system installed on the Parkes multibeam receiver, whose dynamic range was hurt by  $\sqrt{N}$ -statistics (explored in more detail in §5.2.2 below).

In this chapter we present the search methods, sensitivity, and current status of the HTRU Survey single pulse search (§5.2), and report on initial discoveries for the intermediate- and high-latitude surveys (§5.3). In §5.4, we determine why our discoveries were not seen in the previous surveys of overlapping regions, present our new discoveries in terms of the windowing description of pulsar intermittence presented in Chap. 4, and make predictions for the sparsely-emitting radio neutron stars that the full HTRU survey

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<sup>1</sup>Note: although no processing has yet commenced for the HTRU low-latitude survey, that survey will cover areas  $|b| < 3.5^\circ$  and  $-80^\circ < l < 30^\circ$ , with 70 minutes per pointing.



will uncover.

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## 5.2 The HTRU Survey’s Single-pulse (SP) Search

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### 5.2.1 Data Analysis Pipeline

Thus far all processing and analysis has been carried out using the “Green Machine” supercomputer at the Swinburne Centre for Astrophysics and Supercomputing. This supercomputer is made up of  $\sim 150$  dual quad-core CPU nodes that accommodate large-scale parallel and distributed processing. The pipeline employs several standard search techniques (e.g. dedispersion and boxcar matched filtering), and several novel techniques (independent-event identification and inspection, multi-beam coincidence matching, distributed computing). The basic methodology of the SP search is based on that described in Chap. 4.

There are two main bottlenecks in the HTRU Survey’s single-pulse search. The first is the computational load demanded by the dedispersion of our data, and the second is the number of candidates which need to be manually assessed. The single-pulse data reduction pipeline design includes schema that aim to abate both of these. First, we minimise the net computational time of the periodicity and SP searches by integrating the SP search into the HTRUN processing pipeline introduced in HTRU Paper 1. By doing this, the interference excision and dedispersion described in HTRU Paper 1 is done only once, producing each data stream’s results simultaneously for use in the single-pulse search and the periodicity search. As described below, the time series search for single pulses is performed while each time series is still in the computer’s “random access memory”, and for each 9-minute data stream adds  $< 2.5$  minutes of processing time onto the total  $\sim 3$ -hour timescale for the HTRUN Fourier-based pipeline. We stress that the added computational load of including a single pulse search to a traditional Fourier search is negligible.

We address the issue of large candidate numbers by identifying independent events across multiple dispersion, boxcar filter trials, and beams, and by performing a simple threshold-based interference zapping. The simultaneous processing and viewing of data from multiple beams decreases the occurrence of candidates caused by low-level, local interference and greatly increases the speed at which the manual assessment of a candidate can be made. However, due to limited computational resources, we cannot store all 13 beams on one node, requiring the use of a monitor to track and collect beams from each pointing as they are processed.

The single-beam SP search and the multibeam data monitor are described below.

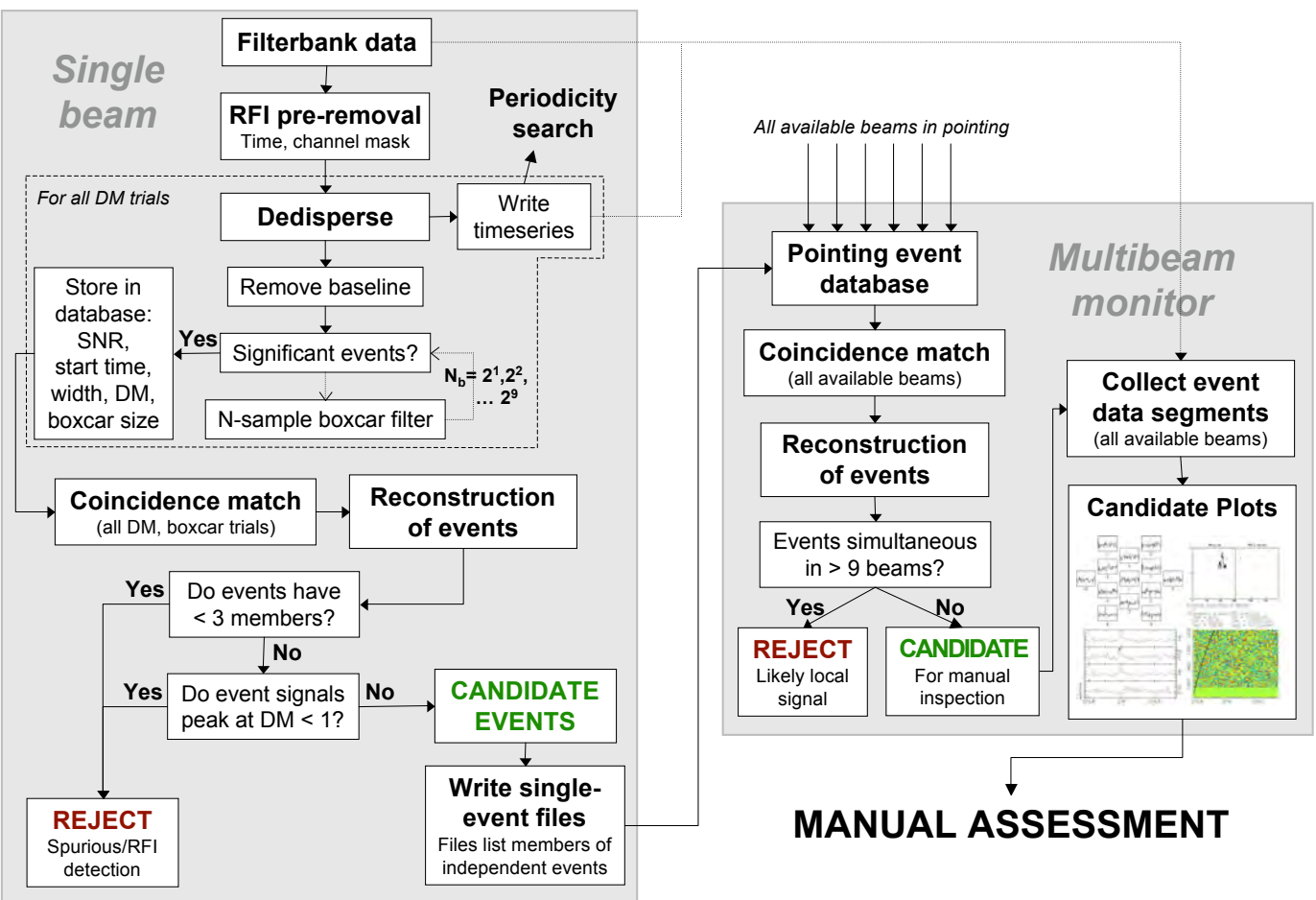


Figure 5.1 A diagrammatic representation of the HTRU Survey’s single-pulse pipeline. Each of up to 13 “single beam” processes associated with one multibeam pointing are run simultaneously, distributed onto several compute nodes and producing single-pulse and periodicity search results for that beam. The multibeam monitor tracks the status of the individual beams, collecting single-pulse search results, performing interference excision based on multiple-beam occurrence, and producing single-event diagnostic plots for each event in the pointing not tagged as interference.

| Parameter   | Latitude region       |                      |
|---|-----------------------|----------------------|
|   | Inter.                | High                 |
| Avg. pointing duration (s)                          | 540                   | 270                  |
| Total time processed                                | 3490 h                | 140 h                |
| Total area processed <sup>†</sup>                   | 7671 deg <sup>2</sup> | 591 deg <sup>2</sup> |
| Fraction of total survey                            | 23.5%                 | 0.39%                |
| Center frequency (MHz)                              | 1352                  |                      |
| Total bandwidth ( $\Delta f$ , MHz)                 | 340                   |                      |
| Typical usable $N_{\text{chan}}$                    | 870                   |                      |
| Sampling time ( $t_{\text{samp}}$ , $\mu\text{s}$ ) | 64                    |                      |

Table 5.1 HTRU Survey observing parameters and an indication of the processed portion of the survey. Full survey parameters are given in HTRU Paper 1. Notes: <sup>†</sup>The typical single-beam field of view is calculated within the average half-maximum beam width ( $\simeq 0.044 \text{ deg}^2$ ).

Figure 5.1 gives a schematic diagram for the pipeline, showing one beam and the multibeam monitor.

### Single-beam Processing

For each observation, a multibeam monitor is initiated and the available beams for that pointing are submitted in sequence for processing on the supercomputer, each processed independently using the HITRAN pipeline. For this pipeline we begin with 2-bit filterbank data with the sampling properties summarised in Table 5.1. Pre-analysis radio frequency interference excision is done first, as detailed in HTRU Paper 1. In brief, this excision creates and uses both a frequency and a time mask that flags periodic-interference-affected channels and time samples with a  $\text{DM} = 0 \text{ pc cm}^{-3}$  signal above a signal-to-noise ratio (SNR) of more than 5. Flagged time samples are replaced in the filterbank file with noise drawn from adjacent unflagged samples, while offending frequency channels are blanked. While the time-domain interference excision weakens the SNR of bright signals of  $\text{DM} < 0.12(w/64 \mu\text{s}) \text{ pc cm}^{-3}$ , where  $w$  is the pulse’s width, it allows us to produce and inspect candidates down to  $\text{DM} \sim 1 \text{ pc cm}^{-3}$  while maintaining a manageable false detection rate at the manual inspection stage.

We perform dedispersion at 1196 trial DMs over the range 0 to  $1000 \text{ pc cm}^{-3}$  using the DEDISPERSE\_ALL program.<sup>2,3</sup> This software is able to perform both dedispersion and

<sup>2</sup>This software and the C++ GTOOLS library, which is drawn from by DEDISPERSE\_ALL for single-pulse functionality and contains the SP search algorithms, candidate matching functions, and SP candidate type classes, are available from <http://www.github.com/swinlegion>

<sup>3</sup>Note that although the choice of  $1000 \text{ pc cm}^{-3}$  as a maximum was somewhat arbitrary, at most galactic positions it allows the search of a large extragalactic volume as well as galactic-origin emission.

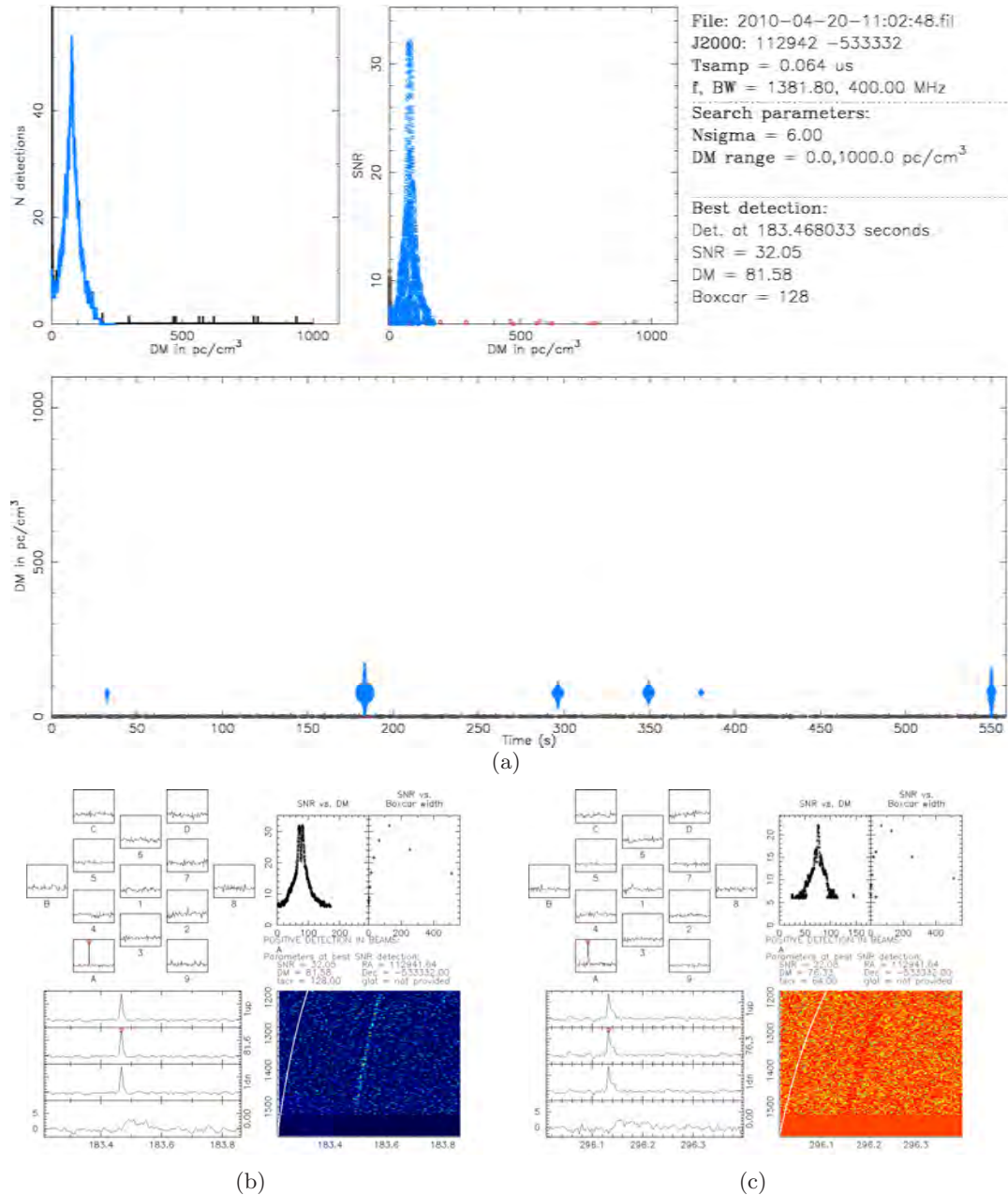


Figure 5.2 (a) A single-beam “summary” showing a beam near PSR J1129–53. 13 such plots are made for each pointing. Events are coloured by auto-identified event type, as determined by the process described in §5.2.1. Events flagged as zero-DM interference are black, those gaussian peaks are red, and candidate events are blue. The upper centre panel shows SNR against DM, and the left panel shows a histogram of the number of candidate (blue) and all (black) event members in the beam. The bottom panel shows the DM vs. time, with the SNR encoded by size of the plot point. Here, six candidate pulses have been correctly discriminated from noise and interference in the observation. (b,c) Single-event plots corresponding to the second and third pulses detected from PSR J1129–53 in panel a. Panels are as in Fig. 4.1. Deviations in the SNR vs. DM curves in (b) and (c) from the predicted Cordes & McLaughlin (2003) curves are the combined result of noise, and both time- and frequency-dependent pulse structure.

a complete single-beam search for single pulses across a range of dispersion measures (including all components of Fig. 5.1 within the “single beam” panel after the interference pre-removal step). The efficient dedispersion aspect of this code is described in detail by HTRU Paper 1. After reading the input filterbank data into computer memory, the program forms time series for each DM trial. As the time series data stream at each DM trial is produced, it is used to perform a single pulse search with parameters as in BSB. Our input search parameters differ only in that the boxcar filter used in our search ranges in size  $N_b = 1$  to 512 samples, and that events separated by more than 10 samples ( $640 \mu\text{s}$ ) were considered independent. All significant (as defined by our pre-set SNR threshold,  $m_t > 6$ , detailed below) events in each boxcar and DM trial are recorded and stored in a database. At the completion of dedispersion of all trial DMs, `DEDISPERSE_ALL` performs a temporal coincidence matching (similar to the “friends-of-friends” method developed by Huchra & Geller (1982) and used by Deneva et al. (2009) and BSB to identify time-coincident event clusters). Each event is defined by the parameters (DM, boxcar filter, width, time) at which the signal-to-noise is found to be the greatest, and consists of members at other DM and boxcar trials found to be coincident.

The presence of man-made interference (i. e. radar communications, satellite and aircraft transmissions, on-site hardware, and a number of other sources) during observations causes the noise in our time series data to follow a non-Gaussian distribution. These signals are typically either not dispersed, or dispersed to a level that is undetectable in our data, and therefore the zero-DM timeseries interference mitigation performed before processing removes the bulk of these signals. After interference pre-removal, however, some low-level interference signals remain, and we employ pre-set search thresholds to balance the false detection rate. For most data, the interference pre-removal allows time series at trials above  $\text{DM} = 1.5 \text{ pc cm}^{-3}$ , in the absence of our target astrophysical signals, to be roughly Gaussian-distributed. At lower dispersion trials, the false detection rate becomes unmanageable, and we therefore set a dispersion-based threshold to reject all events found with a peak SNR at  $\text{DM} < 1.5 \text{ pc cm}^{-3}$ . For each 9-minute intermediate latitude beam, we produce 1196 dedispersed time series of  $N_s \simeq 8450000$  samples. Our total number of searched data points for each file consists therefore of  $1196 \times \sum_{i=0}^9 (N_s/2^i) \simeq 2.02 \times 10^{10}$ . In Gaussian-distributed data, at our SNR threshold of  $m_t = 6$  we would expect approximately 50 independent random noise detections per file. We attempt to filter these events by automatically rejecting events which have less than three associated members. This is an effective method of Gaussian event rejection; noise peaks at a SNR of 12 or below are not likely to exhibit  $\text{SNR} > 6$  in more than two trials, assuming the peak’s signal between

DM steps and boxcar trials drops by at least  $\sqrt{2}$ . Furthermore, the number of statistically random events above  $\text{SNR} = 12$  is negligible, even when considering analysis of the full HTRU intermediate latitude survey. This strategy weakly impacts our sensitivity to events of  $w = N_b t_{\text{samp}}$  that have  $\text{SNR} \lesssim 12$ . However, in concert these event-match-based candidate rejection typically reduces the number of candidates by a further factor of  $\sim 100$ – $1000$ , and much more for data badly affected by interference. In Fig. 5.2, we show the two visual inspection plots used for manual candidate discrimination. For the observation displayed, the telescope was pointed at PSR J1129–53, a known RRAT (BSB). The six pulses emitted by the pulsar in this pointing were correctly discriminated by the software from zero-dispersion interference and from spurious peaks in the data.

All non-interference events are then written to disk by `DEDISPERSE_ALL`, producing one ASCII file per event, in which all members of that event are listed. At this stage, the single-pulse events for the beam are gathered by the multibeam data monitor associated with the beam’s pointing. The time series are written to disk, stored for use in the periodicity search and for later access by the multibeam data monitor.

### Multibeam Data Monitor

As single-pulse events are produced for all the beams associated with one pointing, the multibeam monitor for that pointing collects the events and performs a temporal coincidence match of identical form to that done by `DEDISPERSE_ALL`, however it is performed for events from different beams.

The Parkes 20cm multibeam receiving system was described in §4.2, but is reviewed in brief here. The system allows the simultaneous observation of 13 positions on the sky with approximately 30 arcminutes between beam positions, and each beam has a sensitivity fall-off on scales of  $<30$  arcminutes from its pointing centre (Staveley-Smith et al. 1996). Pointlike radio sources boresight to the telescope pointing direction will therefore typically be detected in a maximum of three beams of the receiver. Particularly luminous objects like the Vela Pulsar, which emits single pulses up to  $\sim 60$  Jy, may be detected in up to  $\sim 7$  beams when ideally positioned in the multibeam field. Typically, signals of sufficient brightness to appear in all beams at similar intensity, i. e. through a far sidelobe of the telescope, are generated by terrestrial or near-Earth sources (such as satellites or aircraft). Therefore, as in BSB, we do not inspect candidates which were detected in more than nine of the thirteen beams. This filter decreases our sensitivity to the type of impulses described in Chap. 6, however there is significant benefit gained through decrease in the false detection rate per pointing. A targeted search for the objects of Chapter 6

is planned for the near future. All events occurring in nine beams or less are imaged as described in BSB, collecting the relevant filterbank and time series data from the original on-disk location of the single beams. When both single-pulse and pulsar searches have been completed, the data is freed for removal from disk.

Finally, a pointing’s result plots (i.e. those for individual beams and events as in Fig. 5.2) are manually assessed to determine whether they contain a detection of interest. The “beam summary” plot has superior sensitivity to objects emitting multiple pulses with signals at or just exceeding the detection threshold, while the single-event plots allow a user swift discrimination between interesting candidates and falsely-identified interference or noise. During the manual inspection stage, results are also compared with the most up-to-date version of the Australia Telescope National Facility Pulsar Catalogue originally published by Manchester et al. (2005).

### 5.2.2 Search Sensitivity

The sky coverage of the HTRU survey affords improved sensitivity in overlapping regions for previous blind single-pulse searches of the southern sky. Particularly for the HTRU intermediate latitude survey, we have direct overlap with the areas searched by BSB and PKSMB. Here we calculate our sensitivity to transient events and make a comparison to these surveys.

Instrumental and interstellar pulse broadening serves to weaken the SNR of the pulse from its signal at the pulse’s intrinsic width,  $w_i$ . All instrumental broadening effects are in principle avoidable, therefore the back-end design of any observing system aims to reach the scatter-broadening limit, as this is the theoretical best that a pulsar/transients survey can achieve. As noted in HTRU Paper 1, for a large range in dispersion measures the improved time and frequency resolutions of the HTRU survey causes pulse broadening from interstellar propagation to dominate over intrachannel dispersion-measure broadening ( $t_{\text{ch}}$ ). Using the empirical DM-scatter broadening relation given by Bhat et al. (2004), we note that scatter broadening ( $t_{\text{scat}}$ ) typically dominates over hardware-induced smearing above a DM of  $\sim 230 \text{ pc cm}^{-3}$  for the HTRU survey. To calculate our sensitivity to single pulses, we take these pulse-scattering and broadening effects into account.

Following Deneva et al. (2009), the observed pulse width depends on  $w_i$  and various pulse-broadening effects by  $w = (w_i^2 + t_{\text{ch}}^2 + t_{\text{scat}}^2 + t_{\text{samp}}^2)^{0.5}$ . Note that our step size between DM trials is chosen such that the broadening due to an error in DM is small compared to other broadening effects. Our sensitivity limit for the intrinsic peak flux density of single

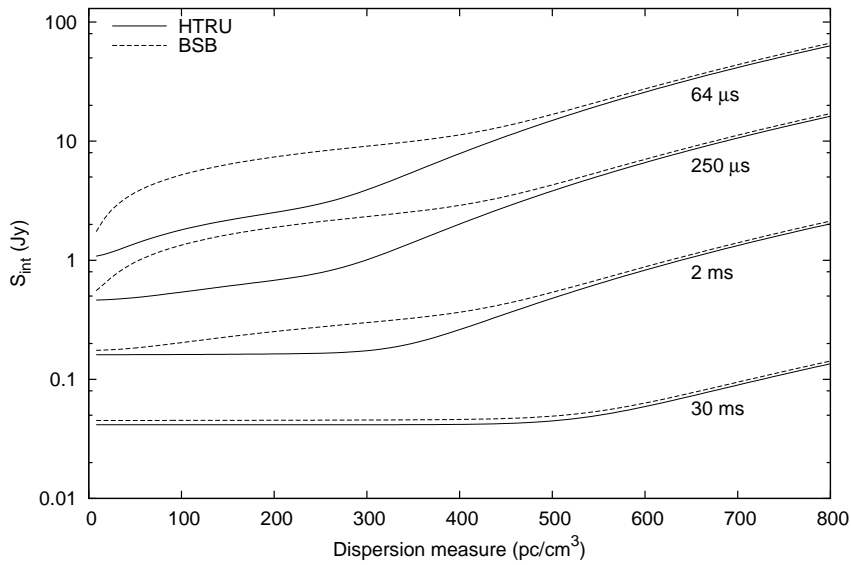


Figure 5.3 The HTRU Survey single pulse search sensitivity to pulses of various intrinsic width, compared to the performance of the Parkes 20cm analogue filterbank used by BSB (note: PKSMB had  $t_{\text{samp}} = 250 \mu\text{s}$  whereas BSB had  $t_{\text{samp}} = 125 \mu\text{s}$ ; thus the PKSMB curve lies slightly above BSB's). BPSR's higher frequency resolution most markedly improves our sensitivity to narrow pulses at low DMs; above  $\text{DM} \simeq 450 \text{ pc cm}^{-3}$ , the Bhat et al. (2004) model for interstellar scattering dominates the instrumental broadening for both surveys. Because of our limited search range in boxcar matched filter sizes, there is a sharp decrease in our sensitivity for pulses of duration  $> 32 \text{ ms}$ .



pulses with observed duration  $w = N_b \cdot t_{\text{samp}}$  is then

$$S_{\text{int}} \geq S_{\text{obs}} \cdot \frac{w}{w_i} \quad ; \quad S_{\text{obs}} = \frac{m_t T_{\text{sys}} \beta}{G \sqrt{N_p} w \Delta f} \quad (5.1)$$

(c.f. Lorimer & Kramer 2004), where  $T_{\text{sys}} \simeq 23$  K is the system temperature of the multi-beam system,  $G$  is the telescope gain (ranging 0.735–0.581 K Jy<sup>-1</sup> from the central to outer beams), and  $N_p = 2$  is the number of summed polarisations in the data.  $\beta$  is a factor of order  $\sim 1$  that is included to represent signal losses due to system imperfections. Fig. 5.3, we indicate our sensitivity to single pulses of various durations as a function of dispersion measure, and in comparison to the sensitivities of PKSMB and BSB.

The 2-bit digitisation levels of the BPSR instrument and large number of frequency channels result in the increased dynamic range capabilities over the previous Parkes analogue filterbank. In HTRU Survey data, each frequency channel is sampled at levels defined  $l = 0, 1, 2, 3$ . This produces dedispersed time series with integer values ranging 0 to 2610. When processed using the `DEDISPERSE_ALL` software, for efficient data size when written to disk, and to a lesser extent for efficient processing (see HTRU Paper 1), input data values get transformed as  $(lN_{\text{chan}}/16) - 128$ . In the absence of interference, the mean bit level should be 1.5. The mean of the time series produced by `DEDISPERSE_ALL` should therefore be  $\mu \simeq -46.5$ , with a data maximum value of 35 (when all channels have  $l = 3$ ). We made empirical measurements of the mean and standard deviation ( $\sigma$ ) of data judged by eye to not be strongly affected by interference. We found  $\mu = -48$  and  $\sigma = 2$  for interference-clean files, in reasonable agreement with the expected mean. With these values, we calculate the highest achievable SNR in the HTRU Survey data for pulses with  $w = t_{\text{samp}}$  to be  $(35 - \mu)/\sigma = 41.5$ . This is in good agreement with the SNR of saturated interference pulses observed in  $\text{DM} = 0$  pc cm<sup>-3</sup> time series. For the 1-bit, 96-channel analogue filterbank, the maximum SNR may be calculated analytically. In this system, data uninterrupted by interference has an equal probability of having bit level  $l = 0$  (“off”) or  $l = 1$  (“on”); that is,  $P_{\text{on}} = P_{\text{off}} = 0.5$ . The data values in this system are described by a binomial probability distribution, with the probability of being in a state with  $n_{\text{on}}$  on-channels and  $n_{\text{off}}$  off-channels ( $n_{\text{on}} + n_{\text{off}} = N_{\text{chan}} = 96$ ) given by:

$$P_{\text{state}} = \frac{N_{\text{chan}}!}{n_{\text{on}}!(N_{\text{chan}} - n_{\text{on}})!} (P_{\text{on}})^{n_{\text{on}}} (1 - P_{\text{on}})^{N_{\text{chan}} - n_{\text{on}}} \quad (5.2)$$

This function is a Gaussian with  $\mu = 48$  and  $\sigma = 5$ . The theoretical maximum SNR of this system at  $w = t_{\text{samp}}$  is then  $(96 - \mu)/\sigma = 9.6$ . Again, this agrees with saturated interference signals observed in data from this system. The differences in dynamic range

for these systems do not strictly impact the flux sensitivity of a single-pulse search, however the HTRU Survey's increase in dynamic range will affect the manual inspection stage by allowing detections of potentially very bright, narrow pulses to be more clearly discernible from noise or non-Gaussian statistics in the observation. This effect is more acute for pulses of width close to the sampling time of each analogue filterbank survey.

The improved resolution of the HTRU Survey is clearly beneficial for the detection of RRATs, which are known to have narrow pulse widths (e. g. McLaughlin et al. 2006), and other pulsars or extragalactic impulse emitters with durations  $w \lesssim 10$  ms and dispersion measures of  $DM \lesssim 360 \text{ pc cm}^{-3}$ . For  $DM > 360 \text{ pc cm}^{-3}$ , we do not expect to see a large number of new RRATs for several reasons; first, we do not have a considerable increase in sensitivity over the previous surveys for these DMs, and the number RRATs above this DM represents only  $\sim 10\%$  of the known RRAT population. Additionally, for  $|b| < 5$ , the 35-minute pointing duration of PKSMB searches afford a greater probability of detection of low-pulsation rate events over our 8.5-minute observations of these areas, and we offer minimal improvements for the capability of detection of these objects. At higher latitudes, for the bulk of pointing positions in the HTRU Survey the number density of electrons in the Galaxy is insufficient to produce dispersion measures much greater than  $360 \text{ pc cm}^{-3}$  (Cordes & Lazio 2002). For these reasons, we expect most new rotating radio transient and deep nulling pulsar discoveries to be at dispersion measures  $DM < 360 \text{ pc cm}^{-3}$ . As detailed in §5.4.1, this seems to hold true for the initial discoveries.

### 5.2.3 Current Processing Status

The current status of the HTRU Survey processing is summarised in the upper panel of Table 5.1. The processing reported in this paper includes only pointings from the HTRU intermediate and high latitude surveys. The survey coverage to date is not contiguous over all galactic regions. For later interpretation of the galactic distribution of our discoveries, we indicate the total observation time of the processed pointings as a function of sky position in Figure 5.4. In total, 22,273 and 1,718 beams have been processed out of the 95,056 and 443,287 total beams of the intermediate and high latitude surveys, respectively. Approximately 160 incomplete survey pointings of shorter duration have also been processed. Nevertheless, the bulk of observing time reported in this paper has been spent at galactic latitudes  $|b| < 15$ .

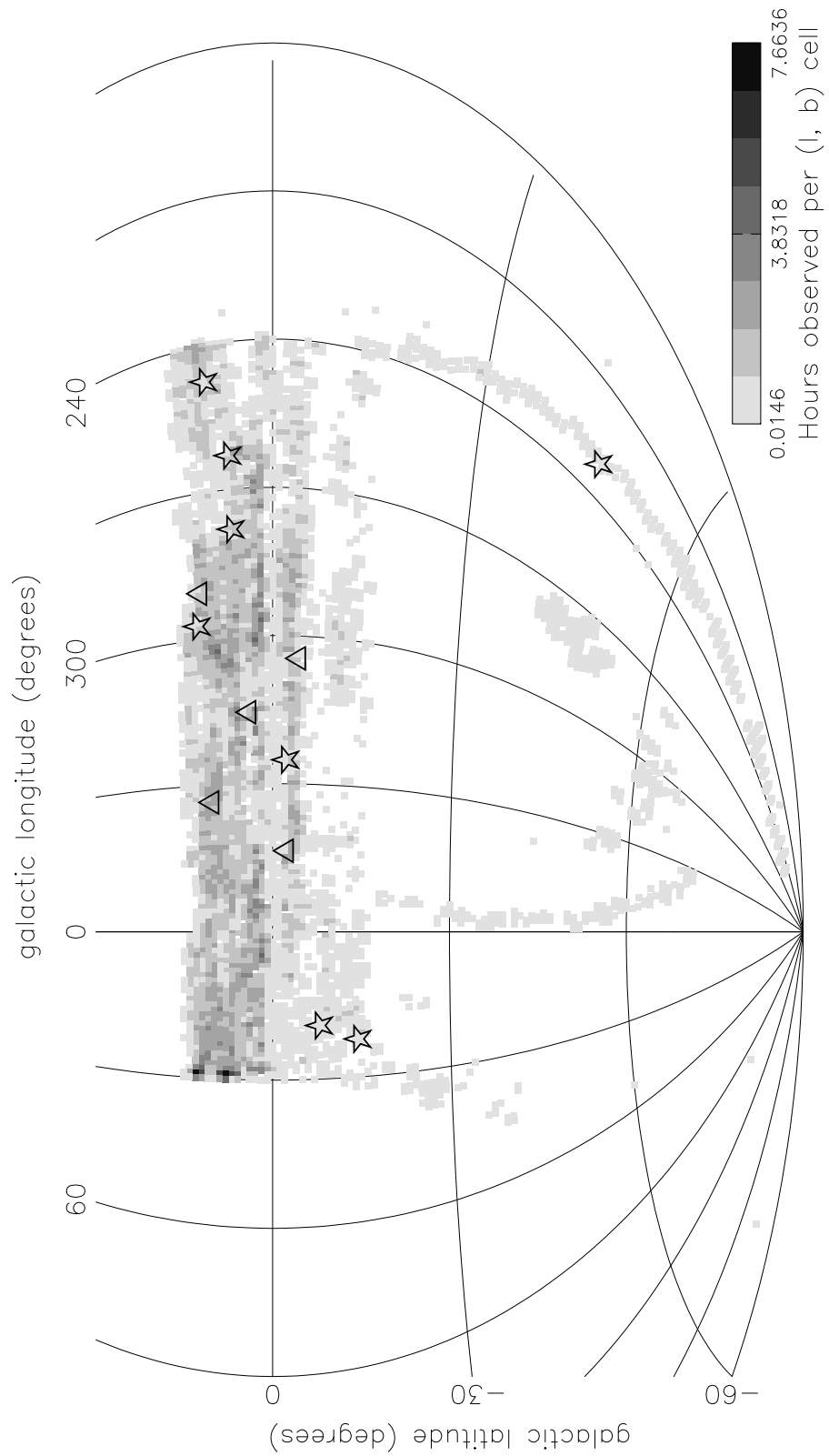


Figure 5.4 A galactic map showing new HTRU Survey single pulse discoveries, and observing time spent per  $l, b$  cell. The stars indicate detections from which multiple pulses have been detected, and triangles indicate sources which have only yet exhibited one strong pulse.

### 5.2.4 Candidate Ranking and Follow-up Strategy

Because telescope time is a valuable resource, the infrequent emission from RRATs and extreme nullers make it scientifically inefficient to perform extensive follow-up for all of the candidate pulses discovered in our search, many of which will not be genuine celestial objects. We employ a follow-up prioritisation scheme to provide efficient scientific return with available observing time. Based on the strength of the candidate in various panels of the manual inspection plots and the number of detections at a similar DM in a pointing (recall Fig. 4.1 and Fig. 5.2), candidates are ranked *multi-pulse* (two or more strong pulses detected at similar DM), *strong* ( $\geq 2$  weak pulses, or one convincing pulse detected, that is with a SNR  $> 7$  and exhibiting a characteristic signature in the SNR vs. DM plot, e.g. as explored by Cordes & McLaughlin 2003), or *weak* (candidate's time series shows a detection at non-zero DM but is poorly supported by data in other inspection panels and/or has SNR  $< 7$ ). *Weak* candidates outnumber those ranked *strong* and *multi-pulse* by a factor of more than two. In scheduling follow-up time, all candidates are observed for a duration equal to that of the discovery pointing. *Strong* and *multi-pulse* candidates are of higher priority. If *weak* detections are not seen in the initial follow-up pointing, they are not tracked in further follow-up observations. We do not include these detections in this report due to their highly uncertain nature, however we preserve them in a database for posterity, taking into consideration that further weak detections in future pulsar surveys of the same sky area could cross-correlate their findings with our weak, unconfirmed detections (e.g. as will be possible with the HTRU Survey's low-latitude survey, and potentially with future Australian Square Kilometre Array Pathfinder/Square Kilometre Array surveys). *Multi-pulse* and *strong* candidates not seen in initial follow-up are observed again for a duration of three times the discovery pointing. We note that the inactivity states in nulling pulsars has a broad range of timescales; on one extreme, RRATs have been observed to emit single pulses separated by up to 3.25 hours (McLaughlin et al. 2006), and on another extreme, emission from some pulsars has been observed to turn off for up to 5 days. Our ranking levels are set such that these categories are highly unlikely to contain detections of spurious noise. We include all *strong* and *multi-pulse* candidates in this report whether or not they are detected in follow-up pointings, with the strong caveat that these objects essentially remain unconfirmed, and care must be taken in including these objects in statistical or categorical transients studies. Objects not detected in follow-up observations are distinguished in Table 5.2 by a limit instead of a measurement of  $\dot{\chi}$ ; this reflects that non-detections of these discoveries are used only to place limits on  $\dot{\chi}$  for the object. Only one *multi-pulse* object has yet not been detected in

| PSRJ  | RAJ      | DECJ      | P (s)      | $\dot{\chi}$ | DM        | $w_{\text{eff}}$ | $S_{\text{max}}$ |
|---|----------|-----------|------------|--------------|-----------|------------------|------------------|
| <i>Sources with multiple-pulse detections</i> |          |           |            |              |           |                  |                  |
| J0410–3107                                    | 04:10:39 | –31:07:29 | 1.8785(2)  | 107          | 9.2(3)    | 18               | 470              |
| J0837–2447                                    | 08:37:44 | –24:47:48 | –          | 5            | 142.8(5)  | 1                | 420              |
| J0912–3848                                    | 09:12:27 | –38:48:34 | 1.5262(1)  | 32           | 73.3(5)   | 6                | 190              |
| J1014–4849                                    | 10:14:18 | –48:49:42 | 1.5088(2)  | 16           | 87(7)     | 21               | 140              |
| J1216–5027                                    | 12:16:20 | –50:27:01 | 6.355(9)   | 13           | 110(20)   | 9                | 130              |
| J1307–6703                                    | 13:07:41 | –67:03:27 | 3.65120(8) | 11           | 47(15)    | 32               | 70               |
| J1549–5721                                    | 15:49:05 | –57:21:37 | 0.7375(3)  | 73           | 17.7(3.5) | 4                | 210              |
| J1855–1558                                    | 18:55:24 | –15:58:57 | 3.4532(1)  | 25           | 160(25)   | 65               | 50               |
| J1925–1601                                    | 19:25:06 | –16:01:00 | 3.8858(2)  | $\leq 6.5$   | 88(20)    | 10               | 160              |
| <i>Sources with only one pulse detected</i>   |          |           |            |              |           |                  |                  |
| J1135–4925                                    | 11:35:56 | –49:25:31 | –          | $\leq 1.3$   | 114(20)   | 9                | 120              |
| J1424–5640                                    | 14:24:23 | –56:40:47 | –          | $\leq 7$     | 27(5)     | 22               | 110              |
| J1541–4218                                    | 15:41:55 | –42:18:50 | –          | $\leq 7$     | 60(10)    | 4                | 150              |
| J1709–4354                                    | 17:09:47 | –43:54:43 | –          | $\leq 7$     | 228(20)   | 3                | 240              |

Table 5.2 Properties of the new sources detected by this search. Columns: (1) Name based on J2000 coordinates (Note, candidates from which only one clear pulse detection has yet been made are listed separately. Such objects must be interpreted with care; see notes on these and the objects with limits only on  $\dot{\chi}$  in §5.2.4); (2,3) J2000 right ascension and declination; (4) the best-fit period, where measurable, with the error on the last digit in parentheses; (5) pulsation rate  $\dot{\chi} = N_p \text{ h}^{-1}$ ; (6) best-fit dispersion measure and error in  $\text{pc cm}^{-3}$ ; (7) observed pulse width at half-maximum of the brightest pulse in milliseconds; (8) peak flux density in units of mJy of the brightest detected pulse (calculated using  $S_{\text{obs}}$  in Eq. 5.1).

follow-up observations. However, the *strong* candidates have a higher non-detection rate. The yet-unconfirmed “strong” objects have names listed separately (in the lower panel) in Table 5.2. In Section 5.4.2, we briefly addresses whether our discoveries are statistically consistent with the expectation that we are more sensitive to objects with “off-timescales” less than our observation length.

For objects of pulsation rate  $\dot{\chi} \geq 40 \text{ h}^{-1}$ , we plan to maintain dedicated observations to achieve phase-coherent timing solutions for these objects.

## 5.3 Early Discoveries & Detections

### 5.3.1 New Discoveries

Table 5.2 lists basic parameters of the 13 new objects discovered thus far using the HTRU Survey single pulse pipeline. There are several objects worthy of specific note.

PSR J0410–3107, at galactic latitude  $b = -56^\circ$ , this is the only confirmed single-pulse

discovery arising thus far from the high latitude survey. Estimating distance to the new discoveries using their dispersion measures and the Cordes & Lazio (2002) electron density model for the galaxy (hereafter NE2001), we find that this is also the most nearby object discovered in our search ( $d = 0.51$  kpc). Accordingly the DM of this pulsar is exceedingly low, with  $DM = 9.2 \text{ pc cm}^{-3}$ , lower than 98.9% of known radio pulsars.

PSR J0912–3848 was also detected in the HTRU Survey Fourier-domain search. Bright single pulses were only detectable above the noise for  $\lesssim 30$  seconds in both the discovery and follow-up observations. When the data are folded over pulses not detected by the single event search, the pulsar remains detectable with a signal-to-noise ratio of  $>5$ ; this behaviour is not consistent with scintillation based on the scintillation timescale and bandwidth in the NE2001 model. The abrupt change in flux density and the occurrence of these short-duration flares in both observations lead us to suggest they are intrinsic to the star.

The pulses of PSR J1014–4849 were only detected in one cluster spread over 16 rotations of the neutron star. Like PSR J1825–33 of the previous chapter, no outbursts have yet been detected in follow-up observations.

Broad-bandwidth amplitude modulation features are seen in the frequency-dependent structure of the single pulses of PSR J1549–5721 (see Fig. 5.5), the bandwidth of which are inconsistent with the predicted scintillation bandwidth of NE2001; the observed bandwidth is larger by approximately four orders of magnitude. The origin of this feature is unknown. However, despite the significant disagreement with the NE2001 prediction, it is likely that if the detected emission is produced by a neutron star, the observed modulation is the result of an unmodelled local clump or void of material in the interstellar medium that is inducing scintillation to the observed degree. However, it would be negligent not to note that such a signal could originate from extraterrestrial intelligence; it is dispersed, periodic, relatively narrow-band signals like these that are often targetted in ET intelligence searches. Future confirmations of the spectral characteristics, and particularly timing of this object can easily conclude its origins as neutron star or otherwise.

The predicted scatter broadening of PSR J1709–4354 (130 ms at 1.375 GHz for the NE2001 model) is much greater than the half-maximum pulse width detected here. The single pulse from this object had a signal to noise ratio of 10, a visible dispersion curve, a signal versus DM curve well-fit to the model of Cordes & McLaughlin (2003) for a genuinely dispersed pulse, and exists in a relatively interference-free observation. These conflicting properties indicate that either the impulse’s origin is not celestial (e. g. of the type presented in Chapter 6), or that the NE2001 scattering model for this galactic position

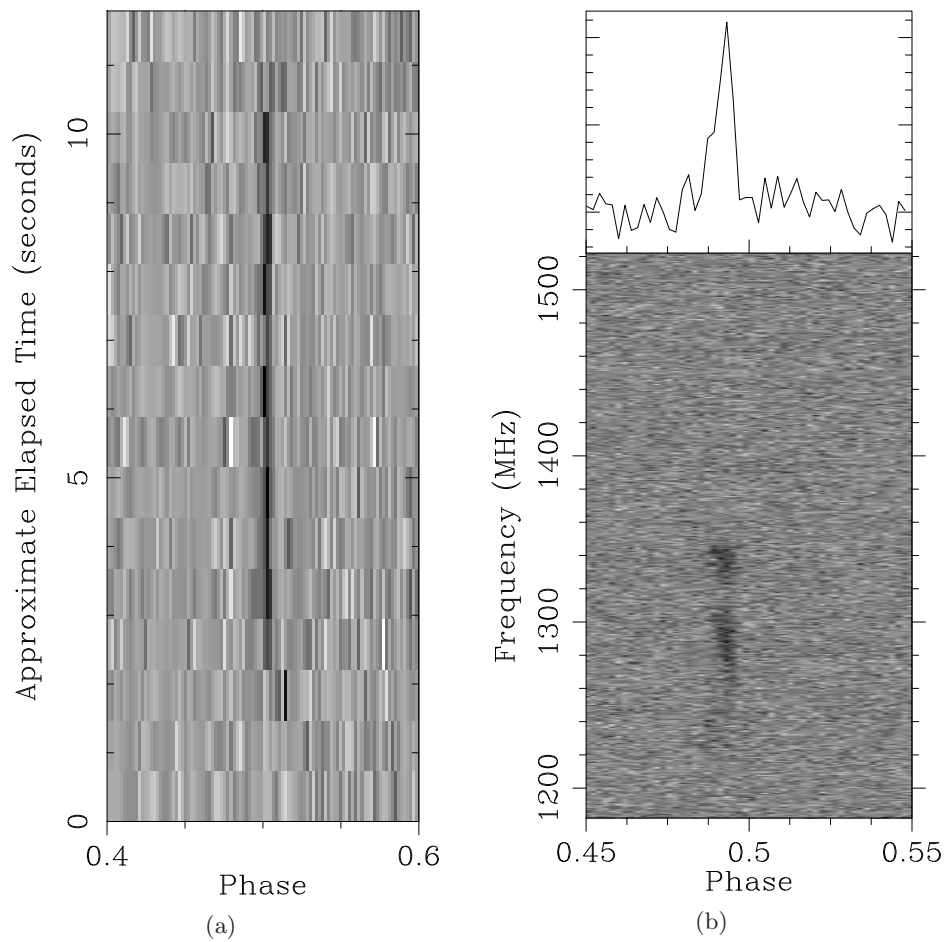


Figure 5.5 PSR J1549–5721: (a) A pulse stack of 16 single pulses. (b) The data after folding over the 16 stellar rotations shown in (a): a waterfall image (lower panel) with dedispersed and band-integrated pulse profile (upper panel).

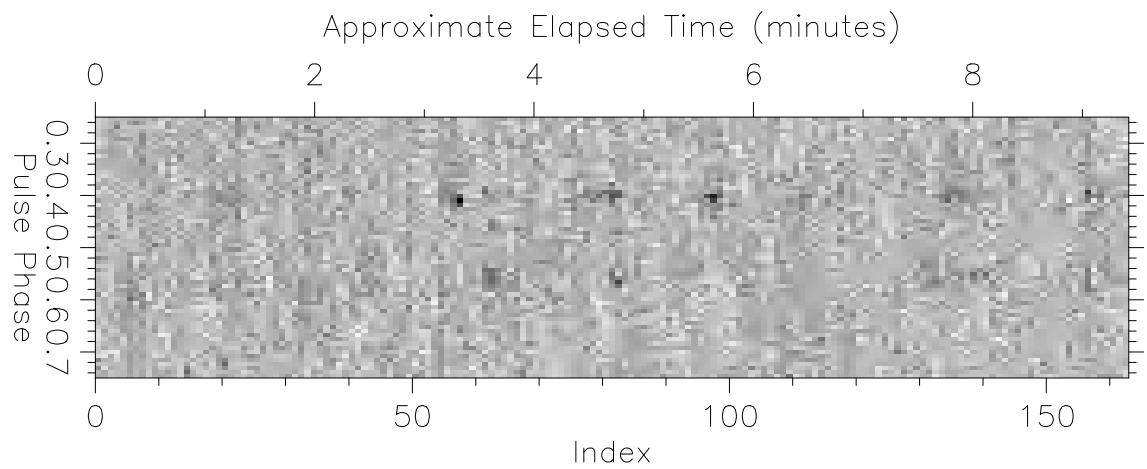


Figure 5.6 A pulse stack showing single pulses of the periodically nulling pulsar J1855–1558.

is incorrect. A redetection of this candidate would clarify the nature of this candidate, however follow-up has not yet been performed.

PSR J1855–1558 appears to be exhibiting periodic nulling, drifting, and mode-changing behaviours (Fig. 5.6). Despite a high nulling fraction, this object’s relatively frequent emission renders it detectable in a Fourier search with a signal to noise ratio of  $\sim 17$  in the 8.5-minute survey and follow-up pointings.

### 5.3.2 Redetections of Known Pulsars and RRATs

The single pulse pipeline has detected approximately 55% of the known pulsars that could be detected through Fourier searches of the HTRU Survey data. This offers a slight improvement in single-pulse detection rate over the search presented in the previous chapter, perhaps a testament to the increased sensitivity to faint and narrow single pulses that this survey’s hardware affords. The single-pulse properties of these objects will be analysed in future work, so we will not detail them here.

We have processed 24 observations with pointing positions within 6 arcminutes (our approximate half-power beam width) of published RRAT positions (i. e. from McLaughlin et al. 2006, Keane et al. 2010, McLaughlin et al. 2009, Burke-Spolaor & Bailes 2010). Of these 24, 13 RRATs were redetected. For 22 of 24 observations, the number of pulses seen from each object were consistent with the expected number based on previously published pulsation rates in the discovery observations of these objects (again, as drawn from the BSB and PKSMB publications) and the observation length in our data. The two notably different detection rates were of RRATs J1753–38 (BSB; 4 expected and  $> 15$  seen) and J1819–1458 (McLaughlin et al. 2006; 3 expected and 10 seen). PSR J1819–1458 has been recently noted to exhibit small variations in pulsation rate (and larger ones associated with glitches Lyne et al. 2009), and the detection rate observed here is consistent with the range in  $\dot{\chi}$  reported by (Lyne et al. 2009). For PSR J1753–38, the higher detection rate, detectability in a Fourier search with a signal-to-noise ratio of  $\sim 13$  (whereas it was undetectable in a Fourier search of its original discovery data), and the slight increase in  $S_{\max}$  exhibited in our observations indicate that: 1) this pulsar’s emission appears to simply be highly modulated, and does not have genuine deep nulls, and 2) our observing position of the source is improved from that reported by BSB. Our positional offset was 0.1 degrees, suggesting an improved position of right ascension and declination 17:53:09, –38:52:13 (J2000).



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## 5.4 Discussion

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### 5.4.1 Our Discoveries in Archival Pulsar Surveys

As noted in §5.2.2, for the regions overlapping with previous surveys, we expected to discover new objects mainly at  $DM \lesssim 360 \text{ pc cm}^{-3}$ . This appears to have been met, however several of our detections appear to be of sufficient brightness that one would have expected a detection in archival data. All of our discoveries except for PSR J0410–3107 and PSR J0837–2447 lie in regions previously covered by the surveys of Jacoby et al. (2009), Edwards et al. (2001) and Manchester et al. (2001). The presence of pulses in archival data—note that these surveys were performed 8-12 years ago—can add valuable information about pulse rate changes over time, and potentially add data points to their timing if a phase-coherent timing solution is obtained. We inspected pointings in these surveys within one half-power beam width of our objects’ positions to determine the detectability of our discoveries in the archival data. PSR J1307–6703 is the only one of our discoveries which exhibits clear single pulse detections when the archival data are dedispersed at the appropriate DM. We detect seven pulses of  $SNR > 5$  in the 35-minute archival observation for this object (giving a  $\dot{\chi}$  consistent within a factor of two of that derived from the solitary detection in the HTRU Survey discovery pointing). It is from the archival data that the period quoted in Table 5.2 was determined. While PSR J1855–1558 is not detectable in a Fourier search, it is marginally detectable when the archival data are folded over the period given in Table 5.2.

We can investigate the reason for the non-detection of the remaining objects by first estimating the signal loss due to the use of the analogue multibeam filterbank system used by BSB and PKSMB, calculating the SNR that a pulse of equivalent width, DM, and  $\cdot S_{\text{peak}}$  (as listed in Table 5.2) would have shown in the archival data. This analysis suggests that even the brightest detected pulses in our data would result in only a marginal ( $SNR \lesssim 6$ ) detection in the analogue filterbank data for PSRs J1135–4925, J1541–4218, and J1709–4354. For two out of four of the remaining objects at  $|b| > 5^\circ$ , for which the observation length of the archival data was 4.4 minutes, the non-detections could be accounted for by the low probability that a pulse would occur during the time span of the observation for objects with  $\dot{\chi} \lesssim 13.5 \text{ h}^{-1}$ . The remaining  $|b| > 5^\circ$  objects, PSR J0912–3848 and PSR J1014–4849, had clusters of sequential pulses rather than a smooth distribution of single pulses. Although the per-hour pulsation rate is high for these objects, the average duration of on-activity is short, the spacing between sequential pulse outbursts is  $\gtrsim 8$  minutes. This indicates that the non-detection of pulses in the archival data is consistent with a decreased

probability of the occurrence of a pulse outburst during the archival observations (if there were they should have resulted in detections of SNR  $\sim 8$  and 11 for PSRs J0912–3848 and J1014–4849, respectively). The effect of on- and off-timescales for object detectability will be discussed further in Sec. 5.4.2.

The only remaining undetected objects are PSR J1549–5721 and PSR J1424–5640. We have not yet performed follow-up observations on these objects, and so the archival data, in which we would have expected to see detections of SNR  $> 7$ , serves only to place limits on the pulsation rate and duration of off-activity in these objects. For PSR J1549–5721, the non-detection in two archival pointings places a strong limit (zero pulses in  $\geq 70$  m) on these values.

### 5.4.2 Activity Timescales in Sparsely-emitting Neutron Stars

As reviewed in §4.5.1, the nature of RRATs, in particular their relationship to average radio pulsars, is still somewhat a matter of debate. As explored briefly by SBS and Keane et al. (2010), and in detail by Miller et al. (submitted), most objects discovered in single pulse searches do appear to be genuinely “turned off” when they are not detected, rather than being distant pulsars with atypically long-tailed pulse energy distributions; one can discern these classifications by single-pulse energy statistics and the identification of whether RRATs’ detectable pulses show a distinct log-normal distribution (Miller et al. submitted).

For the objects exhibiting genuine nulls, the possibility of a clearly distinguished “RRAT” class of neutron stars is beginning to break down, based on mounting evidence that RRATs simply represent an extended tail of deeply-nulling objects in the nulling population of pulsars. This is supported indirectly by the lack of distinction of RRAT and pulsar Galactic and pulse width distributions (SBS) and further by the pulse energy distributions of RRATs, which as noted above tend to obey similar log-normal distributions to average (nulling and non-nulling) pulsars. Furthermore, Keane (2010) note that the “classic” definition of the RRAT class implied by the original McLaughlin et al. (2006) publication is a neutron star for which  $r = m_{\text{SP}}/m_{\text{FFT}} > 1$ , where  $m_{\text{SP}}$  is the SNR of the brightest single pulse detected in an observation, and  $m_{\text{FFT}}$  is the SNR of a Fast Fourier Transform analysis for the pulsar in the same observation. This leads directly to the inference that in fact whether a source is defined “RRAT” or “pulsar” is arbitrary, and highly dependent on survey pointing length and pulsar period (McLaughlin & Cordes 2003, Keane 2010), further obscuring RRAT intermittence as an exclusive physical phenomenon. For selected objects, However, we do note that observed post-glitch behaviour of RRAT

J1819–1458 (which showed a net decrease in spin-down luminosity post-glitch, rather than the increase usually observed in pulsars Lyne et al. 2009) does set this particular object apart from the pulsar population and drive the “exhausted magnetar” hypothesis put forward by Lyne et al.

Nevertheless, given these facts we seek to more accurately incorporate our discoveries and RRAT populations in general into the range of nulling and emissivity timescales exhibited by radio pulsars. We explore a relevant “intermittence parameter space” here, and review in Sec. 5.4.3 what effect survey parameters have on the selection of various populations in this space.

As with the objects discovered in the search in Chap. 4, approximately 1/3 of our single pulse pipeline discoveries exhibit distinct periods of on-activity, marked by bright sequential pulses that are separated by longer intervals of either genuine nulls, or a decrease in intensity level sufficiently large that the object is undetectable through single pulse or periodicity search techniques. The pulsation rate,  $\dot{\chi}$ , that is typically quoted for single pulse discoveries poorly represents the emissivity of such objects and provides insufficient information to assess the probability of detecting them during reobservation. We return now to the “windowing” description of pulsar and RRAT emissivity that was introduced in the previous chapter (recall Fig. 4.7), noting that the on and off states of nulling pulsars often show characteristic timescales (Herfindal & Rankin 2007, Redman & Rankin 2009, Wang et al. 2007) given by  $t_{\text{on}}$  and  $t_{\text{off}}$ , respectively. Quantifying intermittence timescales in this way is more physically representative for pulsars of various nulling fractions, better reflects the timescales associated with possible windowing phenomena, and allows a more accurate exploration of selection effects for surveys of various length (see §5.4.3). Here we use a definition of  $t_{\text{off}}$  that is similar to the “null length” of Wang et al. (2007). We define  $t_{\text{off}}$  as the average time between the first pulse whose signal drops below a set threshold (we use  $\text{SNR} > 5$ ) and the next above that threshold. We define  $t_{\text{on}}$  as the average number of pulses ( $N_{\text{on}}$ ) above the same threshold, times the rotational period of the object. Obviously, such an analysis is only valid for genuine nulling pulsars, and uninterrupted data spans of  $T \gg t_{\text{on}} + t_{\text{off}}$  containing single pulse detections of high significance would provide more accurate measurements of these quantities; for our discoveries, most observations provide robust single pulse detections, although we are insensitive to timescales  $\gg 9$  minutes. We nevertheless make estimates of (or place limits on, in observations where no timescales are measureable because they appear greater than our data span) the average  $t_{\text{on}}, t_{\text{off}}$  for our discoveries based on all available data.

The nulling fraction of a pulsar is only valid in this analysis when measured over a

timescale far exceeding one *activity cycle* of the object, which is given by a length  $t_{\text{on}} + t_{\text{off}}$ . Below we generically represent the nulling fraction measured over “infinite time” as  $f_{\infty}$ , where accordingly, the pulsar’s on fraction measured over a time  $T \gg t_{\text{on}} + t_{\text{off}}$  is given by  $\xi = 1 - f_{\infty}$ . As an illustrative example, the pulsar PSR B1931+24 exhibits periods of activity lasting  $\sim 5$ -7 days, separated by nulls of  $\sim 30$  days (Kramer et al. 2006). While the nulling fraction measured over short observational timescales is therefore typically either 0% or 100%, we find that  $f_{\infty} \simeq 85\%$ .

In Figure 5.7, we plot  $\xi$  as a function of  $t_{\text{off}}$  for the single-pulse discoveries from HTRU, PKSMB, BSB, and Deneva et al. (2009). We also plot all nulling pulsars analysed by Wang et al. (2007) that have a non-zero nulling fraction. The Wang et al. sample was selected from the periodicity-discovered pulsars of the same survey as the PKSMB searches, and has poor sensitivity to nulls of  $\ll 30$  s due to the averaging performed over 10-30 s timescales. The dashed grey lines in this figure show contours of constant  $t_{\text{on}}$ . For a pulsar of period  $P$ , it is not straight-forward to identify on- or off-activity timescales of duration  $t < P$ ; the shaded region below  $t_{\text{on}} = 100$  ms indicates the area for which  $t_{\text{on}}$  is shorter than the period range of single-pulse search discoveries that emit at  $N_{\text{on}} = 1$  (the shortest such period, to the author’s knowledge, is the  $P \simeq 400$  ms pulsar J1753–12 presented in Chap. 4).

The critical point illustrated by this plot is the continuous transition between the Wang et al. (2007) nulling pulsars and the population discovered by single pulse searches. McLaughlin & Cordes (2003) derive that neutron stars of period  $P$  will be more readily discovered in a single-pulse search (i. e. having SNR ratio  $r = m_{\text{SP}}/m_{\text{FFT}} > 1$ , as with the RRAT as defined by Keane 2010), when  $\xi < 2\sqrt{P/T}$ . For the HTRU intermediate latitude survey pointings, pulsars with periods  $P < 6$  s should therefore be discovered more readily in the Fourier pipeline at  $\xi > 0.2$ , and thus it is not surprising that no HTRU intermediate latitude survey points lie above this line in Fig. 5.7. For the  $T = 35$  min pointings of the Parkes Multibeam survey (Manchester et al. 2001),  $r > 1$  when  $\xi < 0.02$  to 0.11, considering a period range 200 ms to 6 s. Appropriately, this appears to be the region in Fig. 5.7 where the nulling pulsars give way to the single-pulse discoveries. It is clear here that the on and off timescales, and the nulling fractions of the radio pulsars discovered in single pulse searches exhibit a smooth distribution over many orders of magnitude with no obvious distinction of the “RRAT” population represented by the single pulse discoveries. We do not have sufficient information to evaluate here whether the probability density function of nulling fractions for single-pulse detections are consistent with an extrapolation of Fig. 7 of Wang et al. (2007). However, a rigorous nulling fraction analysis for bright

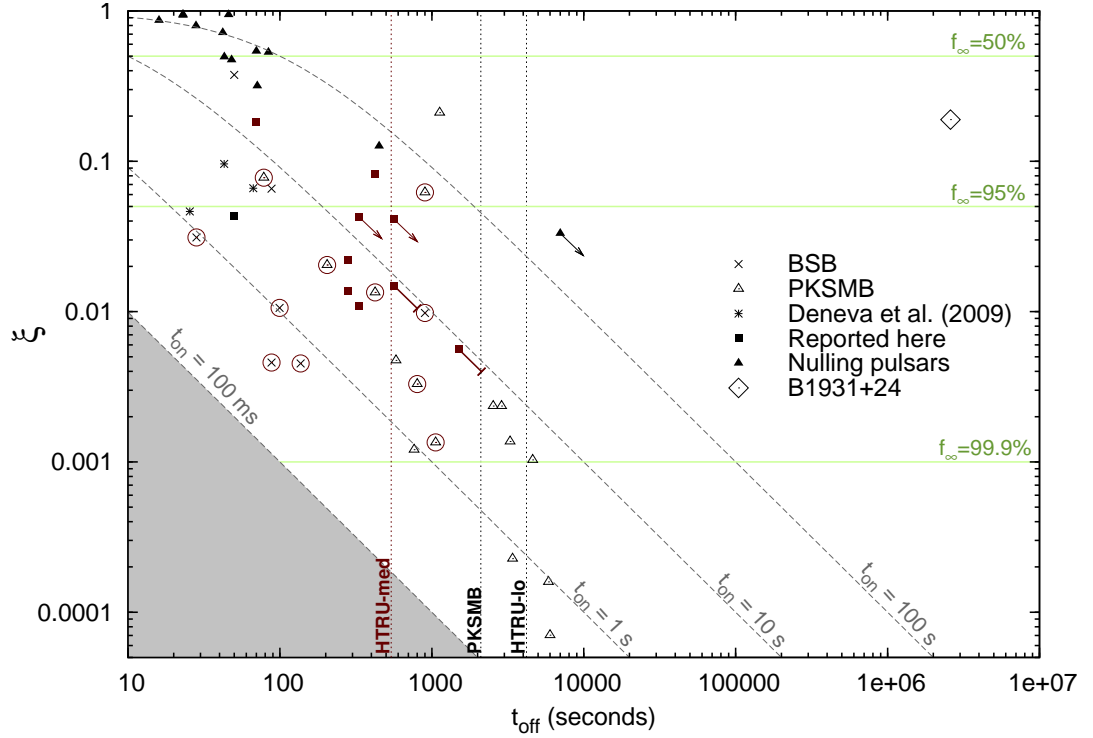


Figure 5.7 Here we show the on fraction,  $\xi$ , against the mean null length for single-pulse search discoveries and the pulsars of Wang et al. (2007). All elements highlighted in maroon indicate relevance to the HTRU intermediate latitude survey; the squares show single pulse pipeline discoveries, while maroon circles indicate previously-known objects which were redetected in the HTRU intermediate latitude survey data (§5.3.2). Points with arrows designate an object for which  $t_{\text{on}}$  has been measured but only a lower limit on the null timescale is known, and points with flat-headed arrows represent objects for which only one pulse has been detected (we have assumed  $P = 8.5 \text{ s}$  for these objects, therefore the plotted point is an upper limit to  $\xi$  and a lower limit to  $t_{\text{off}}$ ). The solid green lines indicate lines of constant nulling fraction as measured over infinite time ( $f_{\infty}$ , see §5.4.2), and the dashed gray lines show constant contours of  $t_{\text{on}}$ . The vertical dotted lines show the single-pointing observation length for the survey of PKSMB, and for the HTRU high (hi), intermediate (med), and low (lo) latitude surveys (see §5.4.3). The shaded region below  $t_{\text{on}} = 100 \text{ ms}$  indicates the area for which  $t_{\text{on}}$  is shorter than the period range of single-pulse search discoveries, and is therefore ill-defined. B1931+24 is the “intermittent pulsar” published by (Kramer et al. 2006), and discussed in Sec. 5.4.3.

pulsars in the HTRU intermediate latitude survey could address this, and is planned for the near future.

### 5.4.3 Detectability of Intermittent Neutron Star Populations

The distribution of objects in Figure 5.7 is influenced by a number of selection effects, which we explore here both to investigate the underlying distribution of activity cycles in neutron stars, and to determine the population to which the three HTRU Survey components will be sensitive.

Considering the general detectability of pulsars in this phase space, the probability that at least one pulse will be emitted by a bright pulsar during an observation of length  $T$  is given by:

$$P_{\text{em}} = \begin{cases} 0 & \text{for } f_{\infty} = 1 \\ 1 & \text{for } T > t_{\text{off}} \\ (T - \xi T + \xi t_{\text{off}})/t_{\text{off}} & \text{for } T \leq t_{\text{off}} \end{cases} \quad (5.3)$$

(note, however, that this probability is generally representative but will not always be strictly true, as the distribution of  $t_{\text{on}}$  and  $t_{\text{off}}$  for a single object is not a delta function). The vertical lines in Fig. 5.7 therefore mark the null length below which a sufficiently bright emitter has a probability of unity that it will be detected in the Parkes Multibeam survey, the HTRU intermediate latitude survey, and the (recently commenced) low-latitude survey, respectively. At null lengths greater than the observing time for these surveys, the probability of detection quickly decreases. Accordingly, given a population of pulsars with a flat underlying distribution in  $\log(t_{\text{off}})$ , we would expect to have a higher discovery/detection rate of objects with  $t_{\text{off}} < T$ . Focussing on the objects detected by the HTRU intermediate latitude survey (highlighted in maroon in Fig. 5.7), this appears to be true, with a ratio of 7:13 for objects with  $t_{\text{off}} \geq 9$  min to objects with  $t_{\text{off}} < 9$  min. We point out that the object of the highest  $t_{\text{off}}$  discovered in each of the PKSMB, BSB, and HTRU intermediate latitude surveys is roughly a factor of three greater than the corresponding survey's length. This corresponds to  $P_{\text{em}} \gtrsim 0.33$  at all nulling fractions.

Equation 5.3 indicates that for  $t_{\text{off}} < T$ , the probability a source would be detected is one, and for  $t_{\text{off}} > T$ , it is directly proportional to  $\xi$ . As such, if the underlying neutron star population has a flat distribution in both  $t_{\text{on}}$  and  $t_{\text{off}}$ , there appears to be a deficit of Parkes Multibeam detections in the region  $100 \text{ s} < t_{\text{off}} < 35 \text{ min}$ ,  $t_{\text{on}} > 100 \text{ s}$ . For objects with  $\xi \gtrsim 0.1$  (that is, those theoretically detectable in a Fourier-search), there is no explicitly stated reason that Wang et al. (2007) should have selected against this range of timescales.

The paucity of objects occupying this region could be the combined result of a number of possible effects. Nulling behaviour may have not yet been either observed or recognised, however we would expect this to only be the case for objects with  $t_{\text{on}} \gtrsim 35$  min, which encompasses only a small fraction of the region in question. It is possible that some low or intermediate nulling-fraction objects with  $t_{\text{off}} \simeq 35$  were outright rejected from the survey due to a non-appearance in follow-up observations. We consider this an unlikely cause, however, as the 6-minute grid pointings and subsequent 35-minute follow-up pointings (in case of a non-detection in the grid observation, Manchester et al. 2001) would have provided a sufficiently high redetection probability, particularly for objects with  $t_{\text{off}} \ll T$ . We note that for objects with  $t_{\text{off}}$  close to 35 minutes, the survey’s follow-up observations might contain only a few pulses from the objects, which are detectable in single pulses, rather than in the Fourier search used to assess the follow-up pointings in the survey. However, this effect still does not account for the notable deficit in the region in question.

It is furthermore possible that the lack of objects in this region reflects an actual drop in the neutron star population for objects with  $t_{\text{on}} \gtrsim 300$  s. This supposition is questioned, however, supported by the existence of the “intermittent pulsar” B1931+24 reported by Kramer et al. (2006). This object is distinctly isolated in this space, although unpublished detections of further objects occupying a similar region of Fig. 5.7 have been noted (Keith 2007). The existence of these objects suggests that either there is a bridging distribution of neutron stars which we have not yet identified due to an unrecognised effect of selection, or that in fact the intermittence of these objects is produced by a physically distinct mechanism. Immense observing timescales are required for a survey to have a high probability of detecting a population between the  $t_{\text{on}} \lesssim 300$  s objects and PSR B1931+24-like pulsars. Because data storage and analysis becomes a problematic for pulsar surveys of longer timescale, we suggest that the brightest pulsars in this population may be more readily uncovered by the “transient-imaging” surveys that are being performed and planned on arrays; these surveys can sample timescales down to the correlator averaging time (typically  $\gtrsim 10$  s) and up to several hours to days. However, for pulsars with  $t_{\text{on}}$  less than these timescales, pulsar surveys remain the most robust probes of intermittent populations.

#### 5.4.4 Discovery Forecast for the Full HTRU Survey

The rate of new HTRU Survey single pulse discoveries, particularly those in overlapping regions of previous surveys, hint at the potential for the full HTRU Survey to uncover many new examples of sparsely-emitting neutron stars. For the intermediate latitude survey, we have detected a total of 26 new and known single-pulse emitters, suggesting detection

rates on the order of  $3 \times 10^{-3} \text{ deg}^{-2}$  at these latitudes. We have processed roughly 23.5% of the intermediate latitude survey to date, and if our discovery rate continues, the full HTRU intermediate latitude survey data should contribute an additional estimated  $\sim 50$  new discoveries of transient neutron stars. We note that the sky distribution of neutron stars should have a higher density at lower galactic latitudes, and as seen in Figure 5.4 we have not yet processed most of the pointings at latitudes closest to  $b = 0$ . At higher latitudes we have only processed a small fraction of the survey, and while tempting to take an extrapolated value as an upper limit (implying the HTRU high latitude survey may return up to 250 new transient emitters), we note that our single discovery in only 0.39% of the high latitude survey implies a sky density of  $\sim 2 \times 10^{-3} \text{ deg}^{-2}$ , higher than expected when compared to the detection rate at lower latitudes. Therefore, the detection rate is expected to be much less. Regardless of the discovery rate, however, the high latitude survey will play an important role in characterising the galactic distribution of deep nulling pulsars.

While we have not yet processed any data to determine the discovery rate of the low-latitude survey, the explorations of Sections 5.4.2 and 5.4.3 accent the timescales of neutron star intermittence that this survey, with its 70-minute pointing length, will explore. This survey will mark a significant increase in detection rate for objects with  $35 < t_{\text{off}} < 70$  min, and may be realistically expected to discover objects with null lengths up to  $t_{\text{off}} = 3.5$  h, if such objects exist (as deduced from the point in §5.4.3 which noted that transient surveys have all been able to detect objects with  $t_{\text{off}}$  values of up to 3 times the survey pointing length). This survey will also provide data that may be used to investigate the deficit of low-nulling-fraction objects with  $t_{\text{on}} > 300$  s. Care must be taken during both the single-pulse and periodicity searches, analysis, and follow-up, such that if these objects do exist, they are not selected against. This will involve, for one, careful analysis (with both Fourier and single-pulse searches) for follow-up pointings.

## 5.5 Summary and Conclusions

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We have presented the methods of and initial discoveries for the single-pulse analysis of the High Time Resolution Universe Survey. We outlined the design of the HTRU Survey’s single-pulse pipeline, which functions efficiently in concert with the Fourier-analysis pipeline; the single-pulse analysis furthermore employs a “friend of friends” single-event recognition algorithms and performs automated interference rejection based on the dispersive and multi-beam signature of single events. The new digital backend used to collect HTRU Survey data has afforded a factor of up to  $\sim 5$  times improvement in sensitivi-



tiy over previous surveys in overlapping galactic regions, and offers the most significant improvements for short (sub-ms duration) pulses at low ( $DM < 360 \text{ pc cm}^{-3}$ ) dispersion measures.

Analysis of 23.5% and 0.39% of HTRU intermediate and high galactic latitude survey data, respectively, has resulted in the discovery of 12 and 1 new neutron stars, respectively. Much of the survey pointings covered galactic regions that were previously surveyed and searched for single pulses (McLaughlin et al. 2006, Keane et al. 2010, Burke-Spolaor & Bailes 2010); 11 of our new discoveries lie within these regions, and for the nine of these that were not visible in the archival data, their non-detection was consistent with either the signal degradation due to the use of the previous wider-channel analogue backend, or with the improbability of a pulse being emitted in the archival survey due to a long null cycle.

Finally, we investigated the distribution of nulling and emissivity timescales for the new HTRU Survey single-pulse neutron star discoveries and redetections, and for the RRAT/nulling population in general. We found that low/intermediate nulling-fraction pulsars and single-pulse search discoveries exhibit a continuous distribution across null/activity timescales and nulling fractions, building on evidence that RRATs represent a tail of extreme-nulling pulsars. We found that there is a deficit in objects with emissivity cycles longer than  $\sim 300$  seconds at intermediate and low nulling fractions which is not readily explained by selection effects, and note that the HTRU deep low-latitude survey will be capable of exploring whether this deficit is natural or an effect of selection. Lastly, we estimated that the full HTRU Survey is capable of more than (at least) doubling the known deep-nulling pulsar population, and will explore the neutron star population with nulling fractions exceeding 99.99%, and null lengths lasting up to 3-4 hours.



# 6

## Terrestrial Impulses that Mimic Frequency-dependence of Cold Plasma Dispersion

*I would rather learn from one bird how to sing  
than teach 10000 stars how not to dance.*

—e. e. cummings

In this chapter, we report on the serendipitous discovery of “Perytons” in the archival data search reported in Chapter 4. These surprising discoveries are transient bursts which show several confounding properties: their frequency sweep mimicks the cold plasma dispersion relation typically taken as a sure indication of a celestial origin, but other properties of the bursts provide solid evidence that their origin is terrestrial. The bursts furthermore have best-fit dispersion measures which cluster around the DM of the Lorimer Burst (§1.4.4; Lorimer et al. 2007). This discovery has significant implications for transient search methods and the suitability of single-dish detectors to make definitive detections of single impulses. We perform a detailed investigation into the properties and origin of these signals, and discuss whether the Lorimer Burst and the Perytons have a genesis in the same phenomenon. While it is not yet clear what is causing the bursts, we propose a scenario in which the swept-frequency emission could be produced by a lightning-related plasma phenomenon in Earth’s atmosphere.

### 6.1 Introduction

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As described in §1.4.4, three years ago the “Lorimer Burst” (LB hereafter) was thought to be the first discovery of a rare, impulsive event of unknown extragalactic origin (Lorimer et al. 2007). The extragalactic interpretation was based on the swept-frequency nature of the event, which followed the dispersive delay expected from an extragalactic pulse.

Since its discovery, some doubt has emerged over the extragalactic origin of the LB. The high intensity of the LB ( $\sim 100$  times the detection threshold) implies that searches of similar sensitivity should detect fainter events, if such bursts are isotropically distributed throughout the Universe and/or have an underlying intensity distribution that is typical of astrophysical phenomena. The failure of searches to find similar events indicates that either this is not true, that the astrophysical process that caused the Lorimer Burst is extremely rare ( $< 2.8 \times 10^{-5} \text{hr}^{-1} \text{deg}^{-2}$  for fluxes  $S > 300 \text{ mJy}$ , based on the data from LB, Deneva et al. 2009, Keane et al. 2010, and Chap. 4), or the burst's properties were misinterpreted.

In this chapter, we report on the detection of 16 pulses that exhibit a dispersion-like, frequency-swept signal with similar sweep rate to the Lorimer Burst. However, these new events are clearly of terrestrial origin with properties unlike any known sources of broadband radio emission. We detail the properties of the new detections and scrutinize them in comparison to the LB. We explore atmospheric and man-made origins for such events, and propose a model in which a lightning-related Langmuir mode-conversion process can reproduce the properties of the detected impulses and the LB. We then discuss methods that can be used to distinguish an astrophysical or terrestrial origin for future detections of frequency-swept pulses, and provide both definitive origins for these events, and a solid statement on the extragalactic nature of future detections.

## 6.2 Data Set and Search

This search and data sets used to find 15/16 of these discoveries was described in §4.2, however our search here was augmented by slight differences in interference mitigation filters; we inspected a candidate if it either a) was detected at a signal-to-noise ratio of  $> 6$  in less than 9/13 of the receivers, b) had a signal-to-noise ratio of  $\geq 20$ , or c) showed a DM of higher than  $250 \text{ pc cm}^{-3}$ . The final candidate was discovered in the search of two surveys (Crawford et al. 2006, Roberts et al. 2002; their observing parameters are detailed in their Sec. 2 and Table 1, respectively), and provided via private communication by F. Crawford. The search methods used for that data are described in (Crawford et al. 2007, 2009); the searches applied no interference excision based on multiple-beam detections. These were generally surveys of lower galactic latitude, therefore DMs up to 1000 (Crawford et al. 2006), 2000 (for target AX J1826.11300 of the Roberts et al. survey) and  $2500 \text{ pc cm}^{-3}$  (for the other targets of Roberts et al.) were searched. Candidates from these surveys were inspected one beam at a time by eye to identify dispersed pulses.

In total, the data spanned over the years 1998 to 2003, all taken with the 20cm multi-

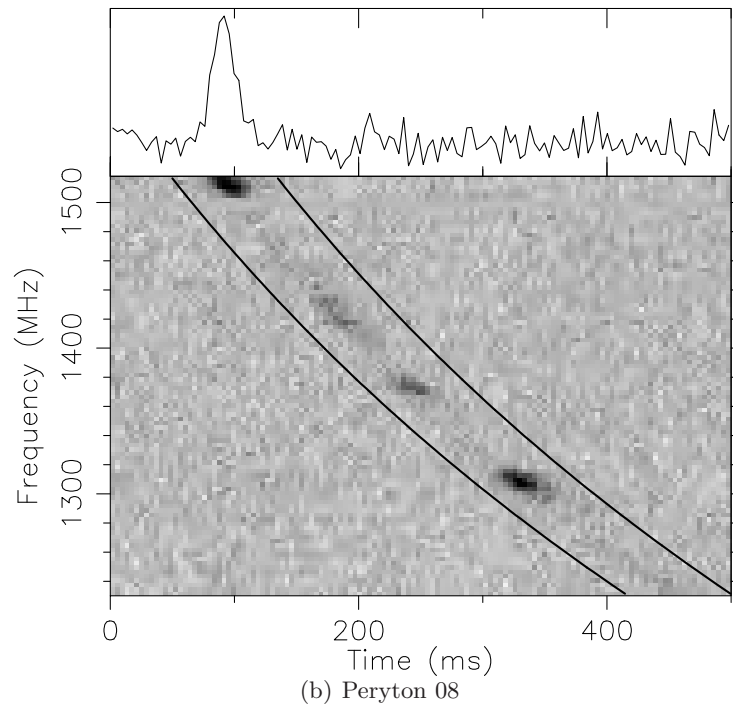
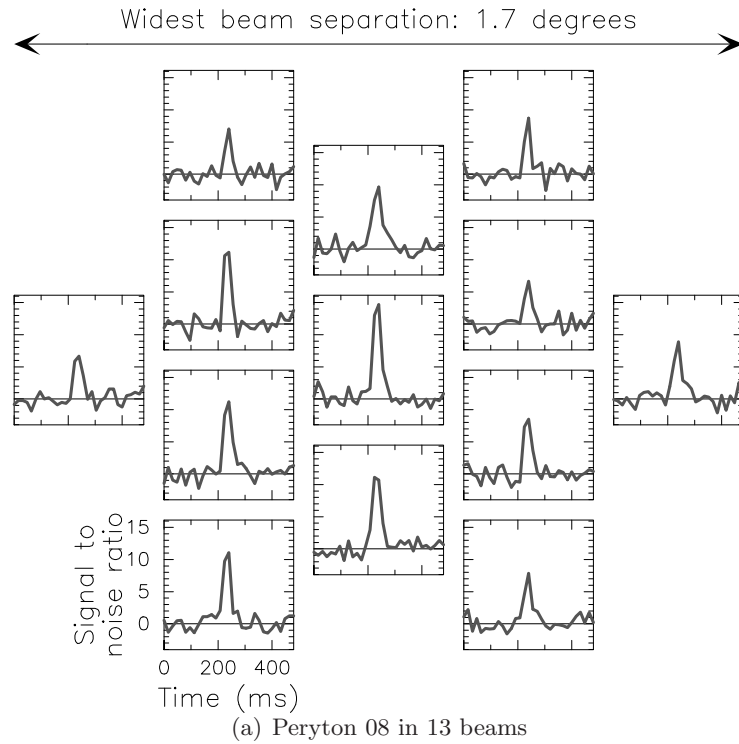


Figure 6.1 Spectrograms and time series for Peryton 08. **(a)** Dedispersed time series showing Peryton 08 in the 13-beam multibeam receiver as the beams are distributed on the sky. **(b)** Dedispersed time series and spectrogram. The black lines trace the best-fit dispersive delay for this detection. Data from the 13 beams have been summed to enhance the signal. Frequency channels with known interference have been blanked.

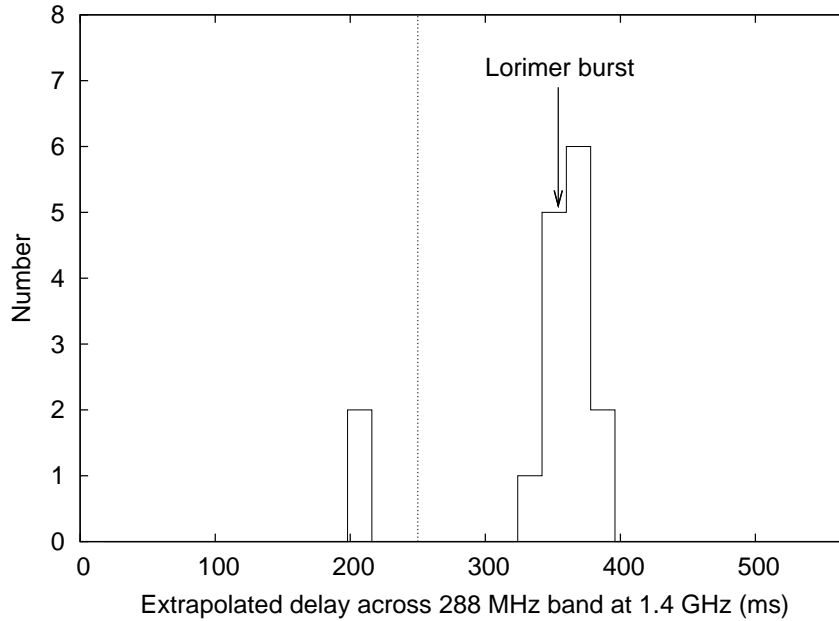


Figure 6.2 Distribution of fitted dispersive delays. The x-axis shows the total time to cross the observing band, calculated from each pulse as a best-fit dispersive sweep. An arrow indicates the delay of the Lorimer Burst. The dotted line indicates the delay below which we had uneven search criteria (see §6.2).

beam receiver installed at Parkes Telescope.

## 6.3 New Discoveries and Their Properties

### 6.3.1 Flux and Spectral Properties

Our search revealed 16 pulses with two striking features that distinguish them from all others in the data: an apparent  $\delta t \propto \nu^{-2}$  delay of a magnitude implying an extragalactic origin in the telescope's pointing direction, and a simultaneous occurrence in all 13 telescope receivers at relative intensities of less than a factor of four (Fig. 6.1). When a dispersive delay is fit to each detection, the values cluster about a net band delay  $\Delta t = 360$  ms, indicating a close connection with the LB at  $\Delta t = 355$  ms (Fig. 6.2). The LB's reported sky position was below the horizon for several detections, therefore the pulses could not have come from the same extragalactic source. Below, we give evidence that the 16 signals have a terrestrial origin.

The  $29'$  separation between each receiver's beam position and  $> 20$  dB attenuation beyond  $30'$  from each beam center render it impossible for an on-axis, pointlike signal to appear in more than 3 beams at similar intensity (Staveley-Smith et al. 1996, Hunt

& Wright 1992). We consider it unlikely that the source is on-axis and extended, based on the lack of delay between the beams (requiring a distance  $\ll 1000$  km from the dish and a large emission source) and the matching spectral characteristics in all beams. It is most likely therefore that our detections were made through a sidelobe of the Parkes antenna, and based on the consistency of signals in the beams, in each case the emitter was positioned  $\gg 5$  degrees from the telescope’s pointing direction. Consequently: 1) we have an minimum-sensitivity field of view of  $\sim 20000$  deg<sup>2</sup>, a detection rate  $2.3 \times 10^{-7}$  deg<sup>-2</sup> hr<sup>-1</sup> (0.1 day<sup>-1</sup> with our observing system), and poor accuracy for emitter localisation, 2) the pulses are subject to frequency-dependent dropouts and scattering from multi-path propagation—visible in Figures 6.1(b) and 6.5 and explored below—and 3) the source(s)’ intrinsic flux density, had we pointed directly at it, is a factor of 2500-850000 greater than the detected value ( $0.8 < S_{intrinsic} < 272$  kJy for the brightest detection,  $0.1 < S_{intrinsic} < 34$  kJy for the faintest; see Table 6.1).

### 6.3.2 Evidence for a Terrestrial Origin

We conclude a terrestrial origin for these bursts based on their extreme brightness and two other features. First, some exhibit deviations from a model dispersive delay: e.g. the sharp kink at 1465 MHz in detection 06 (Fig. 6.5), and subtler deviations in other detections (see the  $\chi^2$  listing in Table 6.1). Despite a trend mimicking that expected from dispersion, such deviations decisively distinguish the pulses’ frequency-dependence from a delay induced by interstellar propagation. Hereafter we distinguish these detections with the name “Perytons,” representing the non-dispersive, highly swept, terrestrial signals exhibited by the pulses<sup>1</sup> (Fig. 6.3).

Second, the temporal distributions of the signals strongly imply a terrestrial origin (Table 6.1). All detections occurred during daylight, primarily mid-morning. Eleven appeared in one 4.4-minute observation followed by another 0.5 hours later (we regard these as non-independent), while the remaining events occurred in isolation. Four of the five independent detections appeared in a 3-week period in late June/early July spread across the years 1998 to 2003, coinciding with the peak of Australian mid-winter. Their time distribution appears to follow a non-random both annual and daily cycle; we tested the probability that 4/5 events would occur in June/July given an underlying random distribution by running a Monte-Carlo simulation based on the monthly hours observed. This test resulted in a confidence of  $P = 0.997231$  of a non-random annual distribution.

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<sup>1</sup>The name is chosen from mythology to be unassociated with an exact physical phenomenon, due to the ambiguous origin of the detections; Perytons are winged elk that cast the shadow of a man.

| <b>Peryton</b> | <b>UT</b>            | $\theta_z$ | $\theta_a$ | $\Delta t$ | $\chi^2$         | $w$  | $S_{\text{det}}$ |
|----------------|----------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------------|------|------------------|
| <b>ID #</b>    | Y-M-D-h:m:s          | (deg)      | (deg)      | (ms)       |                  | (ms) | (mJy)            |
| 01             | 98-06-23-02:03:44.91 | 33.341     | 136.657    | 381.9      | 7.0              | 35.2 | 90               |
| 02             | 98-06-23-02:04:06.75 | 33.288     | 136.692    | 352.6      | 2.5              | 46.9 | 90               |
| 03             | 98-06-23-02:04:28.84 | 33.235     | 136.728    | 362.0      | 2.1              | 31.2 | 90               |
| 04             | 98-06-23-02:04:36.84 | 33.216     | 136.740    | 356.4      | 2.8              | 35.2 | 100              |
| 05             | 98-06-23-02:05:17.77 | 33.118     | 136.807    | 354.4      | 1.5              | 35.2 | 70               |
| 06             | 98-06-23-02:05:39.50 | 33.066     | 136.843    | 343.1      | 8.0              | 31.2 | 70               |
| 07             | 98-06-23-02:06:01.81 | 33.013     | 136.879    | 363.0      | 2.4              | 39.1 | 80               |
| 07a            | 98-06-23-02:06:24.13 | 32.960     | 136.916    | 363.9      | —                | 32.1 | 40               |
| 08             | 98-06-23-02:06:31.89 | 32.941     | 136.930    | 369.6      | 4.6              | 39.1 | 100              |
| 09             | 98-06-23-02:07:27.70 | 32.808     | 137.023    | 328.9      | —                | 43.0 | 60               |
| 10             | 98-06-23-02:07:49.78 | 32.755     | 137.061    | 349.7      | 4.7 <sup>a</sup> | 31.2 | 60               |
| 11             | 98-06-23-02:34:53.63 | 29.738     | 136.640    | 360.1      | 1.9 <sup>a</sup> | 46.9 | 320              |
| 12             | 98-06-25-05:26:49.13 | 25.445     | 141.515    | 363.9      | 0.8              | 39.1 | 110              |
| 13             | 02-03-01-01:25:38.88 | 34.519     | 320.875    | 207.0      | 1.3              | 31.3 | 110              |
| 14             | 02-06-30-02:10:29.38 | 28.465     | 189.173    | 203.2      | 2.4              | 39.1 | 240              |
| 15             | 03-07-02-00:09:23.96 | 44.092     | 000.631    | 378.1      | 4.9              | 39.1 | 220              |
| LB             | 01-07-24-19:50:01.63 | 42.419     | 183.315    | 354.5      | 1.6              | 15.6 | 30000            |

Table 6.1 Columns: (1) Chronological ID; 07a was discovered after summing the 13-beam data, thus has a non-standard index. The Lorimer Burst is given for reference; (2) Arrival time at 1516.5 MHz; (3,4) Telescope zenith and azimuth angle, respectively, at the time of detection; (5) Extrapolated best-fit DM delay across the band; (6) Reduced- $\chi^2$  for a  $\delta t \propto \nu^2$  fit, based on the event's time of arrival in 48 MHz sub-bands (if  $S/N_{\text{band}} > 5$ ), timed against an analytic model of the event's dedispersed profile at the best-fit DM. Events 07a and 09 had no sub-bands of  $S/N_{\text{band}} > 5$ ; (7) Event width at half maximum after dedispersing at the best-fit quadratic delay; (8) Detected single-beam peak flux (Eq. 1.14). The Perytons' intrinsic flux is much greater than reported here (see main text).

<sup>a</sup>This value would decrease without the presence of strong interference in the observation.





Figure 6.3 An artist's depiction of the beast that lends our bursts their name. Image provided by Katherine N. Capach.

A similar test based on the time of day distribution of observations and detections gave a probability of  $P = 0.999046$  that 4/5 events would occur in the UT range 0–3. These cycles are strongly suggestive of either a climate/weather-related effect, or a man-made origin for the emission.

## 6.4 Discussion

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### 6.4.1 Signal Origins

It is unprecedented for non-astrophysical emission to exhibit such drastic frequency-dependent delays in the 1 GHz band. Given the daytime occurrence of the Perytons, we first explored the possibility of the signals as man-made. The continuous emission across the legally protected 1400-1427 MHz band suggest that the signal is not intentionally transmitted (although do not rule out the possibility); additionally, the combination of a lack of regular periodicity, the broad pulse widths (30-50 ms), and broad-band emission preclude a radar origin. Man-made emission that is unintentionally transmitted arises often from on-site electronic hardware failure. This does not appear to be the source of this emission, however, based primarily on the amplitude modulation seen in all the detections. These amplitude-modulated temporal or frequency structures show conformity across the spectrum in all 13 beams for each burst. Assuming the modulation is attributable to multi-path propagation effects (that these detections will necessarily show, as noted in §6.3 above), the incoming wavefront must not decorrelate over the physical size of the telescope’s feed horns (1 meter), to allow the similarity of the modulation structures in all 13 beams. The diffractive scale ( $s_0$ ), therefore, must likewise be  $\geq 1$  m. Taking the characteristic bandwidth of the modulation structure in all pulses to be  $\Delta f \sim 10$  MHz), and based on the center frequency  $f = 1374$  MHz, we place a lower limit on the distance to the object(s) and scatterer(s) of  $2\pi(s_0 f)^2/c\Delta f > 4$  km. This suggests that we have detected emission from the horizon—well off-site from the telescope grounds—and provides the strongest argument against on-site hardware failure as the source. The quasi-annual cycle and the spectral complexity with a 6-year persistence of the signal also argue against local hardware failures as the emission’s origin.

While we cannot rule out an unknown satellite-based origin for the signals, it is pertinent to consider the possibility that the Perytons were caused by a natural terrestrial source. Given the inconsistencies of the signals with man-made origins, we did explore this possibility, considering processes that can produce non-dispersive, swept emission with sweep rates of  $\sim 1$  GHz/s. The emission requires a process of finite-bandwidth

( $\Delta f < 25$  MHz) signal to progressively change in its center frequency, for instance cyclotron emission in a time-varying magnetic field or the progressive incitement of plasma oscillations in regions of differing plasma density.

The latter of these processes occurs in type III solar bursts (e.g. Loughhead et al. 1957b), in which we find a well-suited explanation for our bursts in a Langmuir wave mode-conversion mechanism, in which a flare propagates through a plasma of changing density, inducing electromagnetic waves at the plasma frequency (or its second harmonic) and resulting in a flare swept with attributes characterised by the velocity of the flare and the shape of the density gradient along the flare propagation path. Such emission, for instance, arises from the type III solar bursts at sub-GHz frequencies (Loughhead et al. 1957b) noted in §1.4.3. Emission via this mechanism in our observing band requires electron number densities of order  $10^{16} \text{ m}^{-3}$ . Such densities are transiently reached by ionised channels that accompany electrical storm phenomena, ranging  $>10^{10} \text{ m}^{-3}$  for upper-atmospheric "red sprites" (Dowden et al. 2001), up to  $10^{23} \text{ m}^{-3}$  for cloud-to-ground lightning (Rakov & Uman 2003). A super-ionisation event of this magnitude would be required for terrestrial, swept plasma-oscillation emission in our band.

### 6.4.2 Investigation of Atmospheric Plasma Emission Origins

We investigated the suitability of an atmospheric Langmuir wave emission model to explain our impulses by considering the simple case of propagation vertical, lightning-induced plasma channel at 100% atmospheric ionisation.

An atmospheric plasma emitting at a radio frequency  $f$  (i.e. an electron plasma frequency  $\omega_p = 2\pi f$ ), must have a sufficiently high level of ionization to have a free electron density,  $n_e$ , obeying  $f = \sqrt{n_e e^2 / m_e \epsilon_0} / 2\pi$ . Emission swept through our observing band, from  $f_1 = 1516.5$  MHz to  $f_2 = 1228.5$  MHz, requires  $n_{e1} = 2.853 \times 10^{16} / \text{m}^3$  for  $f_1$ , and  $n_{e2} = 1.872 \times 10^{16} / \text{m}^3$  for  $f_2$ , or one fourth of these values if the detected emission is a second emission harmonic ( $2\omega_p$ ). The electron density cannot exceed the electrons available in the ambient atmosphere, therefore the height of the emission is limited to approximately the height below which the atmospheric atomic number density,  $n_{\text{atm}}$ , is equal to  $n_{e1}$ . Using the altitude-dependent atmospheric density from the "US Standard Atmosphere 1976" (USSA) atmospheric model<sup>2</sup>, in a complete breakdown of the atmosphere we estimate the maximum available electron density at altitude  $h$  to be  $n_e(h) \simeq n_{\text{atm}}(h) = \rho(h) N_A / M(h)$ , where  $N_A$  is the Avogadro constant, and  $M(h)$  and  $\rho(h)$  are the mean atomic weight and

<sup>2</sup>The U. S. Standard Atmosphere. NASA, Washington, D. C. (1976), available from [http://modelweb.gsfc.nasa.gov/atmos/us\\_standard.html](http://modelweb.gsfc.nasa.gov/atmos/us_standard.html)

density of the atmosphere at altitude  $h$ .

We estimate the frequency-dependent delay traced by a flare propagating vertically with velocity  $v$  by fitting the USSA atomic density profile with

$$n_{\text{atm}}(h) = \begin{cases} [\rho(0)N_A/M(0)] \cdot \exp(h/7 \text{ km}) & \text{for } h \leq 120 \text{ km} \\ 4.7 \times 10^{29} \text{ m}^3 (h/\text{km})^{-6} & \text{for } h > 120 \text{ km} \end{cases} \quad (6.1)$$

The piecewise function accounts for the abrupt change in atmospheric makeup near the base of the ionosphere. Based on our highest observing frequency and assuming we detected a second emission harmonic, we put an upper limit of 200 km as the limiting altitude for such emission. For a detection of the first emission harmonic, the limit is more stringent ( $< 163$  km).

Given a flare propagating along a transient plasma channel in which  $n_e = k n_{\text{atm}}$ , where  $k$  is the fractional ionization of the atmosphere, the frequency sweep exhibited by Langmuir-wave emission will depend on the velocity of the flare. Defining an upwards normal vector, a flare emitting at  $f_1$  at an altitude  $h_1$  will later move to emit at  $f_2$  from altitude  $h_2$ , causing an observed altitude-dependent  $\delta t = t_2 - t_1 = (h_2 - h_1)/v$ . Determining  $h(f)$  based on Eq. 1 and  $f(n_e)$ , we obtain the frequency-dependent delay of a flare of velocity  $v$ :

$$\delta t = \begin{cases} 14 \cdot \ln[(k_2 f_1)/(k_1 f_2)]/v & \text{for } h \leq 120 \text{ km} \\ (g/b)^{1/6} (\sqrt{k_2}/f_2)^{1/3} - (\sqrt{k_1}/f_1)^{-1/3}/v & \text{for } h > 120 \text{ km} \end{cases} \quad (6.2)$$

where  $g = 4.7 \times 10^{29} \text{ m}^3$ ,  $b = 4m_e \epsilon_0 \pi^2 / e^2$ , and  $k_1, k_2$  correspond to the fractional atmospheric ionization at  $h_1$  and  $h_2$ , respectively. A fit of this equation to the frequency-dependent arrival times of Peryton 14 is shown in Fig. 6.4. This fit demonstrates that the frequency-dependent sweep expected from a flare travelling *upward* through this channel gives a high-to-low frequency sweep in rough agreement with the data, while deviations from a smooth frequency/altitude-dependence might be explained by local density variations. Based on the observed total delays across the observing band, we find velocities from 7 to 15  $\text{km s}^{-1}$  if the atmosphere is completely ionized ( $k_1 = k_2 = 1$ ). The clustering of band delays as shown in Fig. 6.2 indicate a characteristic velocity corresponding to the peak of the histogram. The velocity value estimates will change if one or both of the following applies to our simplified model: a)  $k$  is altitude-dependent, leading to steeper  $n_e$  gradients, or b) The channels of ionization (and thus progression of emission) are non-vertical.

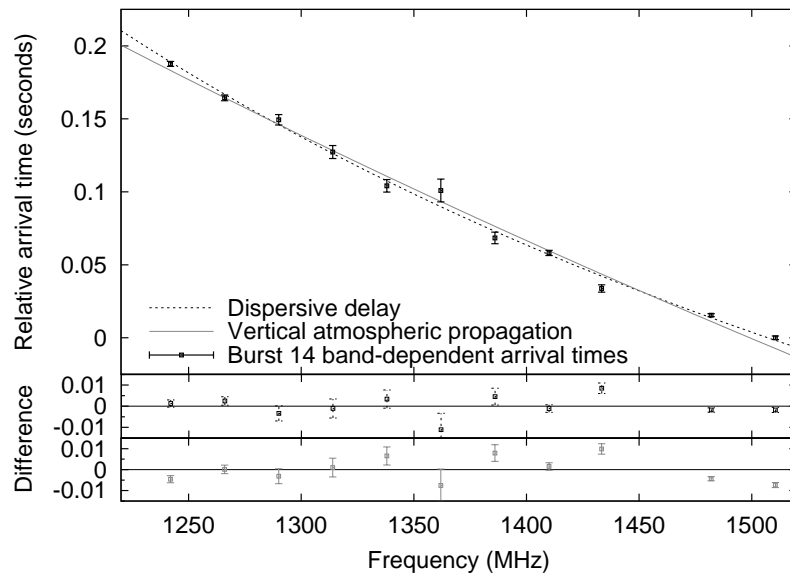


Figure 6.4 Frequency-dependent arrival time of Peryton 14 and models. The upper panel shows the arrival time (points and errors) in 24-MHz-averaged bands relative to the 1512 MHz arrival. The best-fit dispersive delay is plotted in black and the Langmuir-emission delay expected from a simple atmospheric model is plotted in gray. The lower panels show the residual arrivals after subtraction of the models. To avoid preselection towards a dispersion sweep, this timing analysis used sub-bands that were not dedispersed before averaging, and employed the brightest sub-band as a timing template.

If this mechanism is indeed the cause of the Perytons, the upward propagation, high plasma density, and  $>350$  ms ion persistence time necessary to produce our signal suggest an association with upper-atmospheric storm phenomena such as the aforementioned red sprites, or gigantic jets (Sentman et al. 1995, Wescott et al. 1995, Su et al. 2003).

### 6.4.3 Weather-related Effects: Ducting, Annual Cycles, and Storm Activity

While Australian storm rates do not peak in June/July, this period coincides with Australian mid-winter. On the days of four independent detections for which data was available, the online Parkes weather archives<sup>3</sup> indicate moderate rainfall on three, despite a generally dry climate. This evidence leads us to suggest that such weather conditions and the atmospheric state at mid-morning in winter provide an elevated likelihood for high-frequency tropospheric ducting modes to form (Hall 1979, Union 1996), allowing the detection of distant emission not usually detectable by the telescope. Elevated detections during mid-winter mornings of transmitters known to be beyond the Parkes horizon provide strong support for this hypothesis (provided via private communication by J. Reynolds). Australian lightning activity was not elevated to a statistically significant level for the days of detection<sup>4</sup>, however we do find cloud-to-ground lightning strikes indicating electrically active oceanic storms occurring within 6 minutes of each event, at distances less than 2000 km from the telescope. These coastal storms represent possible origins for Langmuir emission in the presence of a tropospheric duct.

## 6.5 A Closer Look at the Lorimer Burst

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Returning now to the event that motivated this work, we would like to expand on the relationship of the LB to the Perytons. Whether the LB has the same origin as our detections remains a somewhat open question, these signals add serious doubt its extragalactic interpretation. Several qualitative differences between the LB and the Perytons warrant examination. The LB was clearly detected in only 3 of the 13 beams (6, 7, and D). It is marginally detectable in other beams, most prominently in beams 5 and C, and apparent in a stacked time series of the remaining beams. Based on observations of the inner side-lobe pattern of the multibeam by L. Staveley-Smith (private communication), we find a position of the LB (consistent with both the relative detected flux levels in beams 6, 7, C,

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<sup>3</sup>“Parkes Observatory Weather Statistics” (accessed 2009):

<http://www.parkes.atnf.csiro.au/cgi-bin/monitoring/wstats.cgi>

<sup>4</sup>Queried in 2009 through the “Lightning Incident Archive Search”: <http://www.gpats.com.au>

D, and the non-detections in the other beams) at R.A.  $19.44 \pm 0.08$ , decl.  $-75.17 \pm 0.08$ . That is, the relative signal levels of the LB conform to those expected from a boresight signal, in agreement with the same conclusion of Lorimer et al. (2007). Therefore, if the LB is a Peryton, it appears to be the only detection for which the telescope was pointed directly at the emitter. Consequently, although the LB did not exhibit the same deep spectral signal modulation as the Perytons, these differences are well accounted for by the multi-path effects which we interpreted to arise from the horizon-based sidelobe detections of the Perytons (§6.4.1).

Note that because the beam and sidelobe shapes of the multibeam scale with frequency, the offset of the burst from the center of beam 6 will induce a spectral steepening of the source, causing the intrinsic spectrum to be flatter than that originally reported by Lorimer et al. (2007) by  $\alpha_{\text{intrinsic}} = \alpha_{\text{observed}} - \alpha_{\text{induced}}$  (where  $S \propto \nu^\alpha$ ). The Staveley-Smith measurements were made at two frequencies, allowing quantification of this effect. Within the error of our positional measurements, the induced spectral index is  $\alpha_{\text{induced}} = -1_{-2.0}^{+0.9}$ . Therefore, at our estimate of position, the intrinsic spectral index is  $\alpha_{\text{intrinsic}} = -2.5 - 0.6$ , where we have measured the observed spectrum in beam 6 to follow  $\alpha_{\text{obs}} = -2.6$ .

If the LB was caused by a sky-based object (e. g. an aircraft, satellite, or the Langmuir wave emission proposed above), we might expect to detect some movement of the LB across the field of the multibeam. We can limit the movement by noting that because the signal saturated beam 6 for the entirety of its sweep, it is clear that the emitter did not travel sufficiently far to cross a null in the sidelobes of beam 6. Therefore, we limit any movement of the emitter to  $< 35$  arcminutes, corresponding to a distance of  $d = 0.015 h / \sin(\theta)$ , where  $h$  is the emitter's altitude and  $\theta$  is the angle between the telescope's line of sight and the LB's velocity vector. At 12 km (a typical aircraft/cloud height), this corresponds to a distance and velocity of 180 m and 500 m/s, respectively, if the LB is moving perpendicularly to the line of sight. This does not put rigorous limits on aircraft movement, however does place bounds on the quantitative model in 6.4.2, requiring either non-vertical movement of the emitter, or the condition  $k_2 < k_1$ , for the model to hold for the LB. If an accurate measurement of the inner sidelobes of the multibeam receiver and their frequency-dependence were available, it may be possible to place a more stringent limit on (or provide a measurement of) movements of the LB.

One major point of discrepancy remains between the LB and the Perytons: that their widths disagree by a factor of  $\sim 2$  (which cannot be accounted for by multi-path scatter broadening), and we do not observe a frequency-dependent pulse width evolution in the Perytons. However, we are hindered in measuring frequency-dependent evolution

in the Perytons because of their modulated signal. While the difference in pulse width lends weak remaining support for a divide between the LB and the Perytons, with our current measurements it cannot be ruled out that there may be an underlying pulse width distribution, and/or a dependence on width with an event's intrinsic flux; likewise we cannot state whether frequency dependence of pulse width is intrinsic to the phenomenon causing all the events.

## 6.6 Conclusions: Implications for Current and Future Transient Experiments

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Regardless of the physical origin of the Perytons or the LB, the results of this study illustrate the limitations of single-dish radio burst detection experiments to provide conclusive evidence for the origins of one-off bursts; dispersive delays can provide the only evidence for an astrophysical nature on single-detector detections, while multi-detector (i. e. array) experiments can provide wavefront measurement and localization for localized pulses, or can assure non-correlation of local signals between widely-spaced array elements. Array experiments are necessary to provide a conclusive origin for further detections of the class of pulses presented here, as well as for any future experiments that aim to detect and use extragalactic pulses in scientific studies. Two such experiments are currently underway at the Giant Metre Wave and Very Long Baseline Array telescopes, and will be possible with the Square Kilometre Array and its pathfinder experiments. Single-dish measurements can improve our understanding of these events by providing polarisation measurements, and further detections for world, temporal, and delay-distribution statistics.

If our detections do originate from a natural terrestrial process with intrinsic flux  $\gg 100$  Jy, detections are expected at other observatories with similar capabilities to Parkes and ongoing pulsar and transient observations (e.g. Arecibo Observatory, Green Bank and Effelsberg Telescopes). It is an undeniable curiosity that no Perytons have yet been identified at radio observatories where such searches have been performed (e. g. Amy et al. 1989, Nice 1999, Deneva et al. 2009). However, it is possible that they have not occurred during observations (one should occur per  $\sim 215$  h of data on a telescope with similar system temperature and sidelobe suppression levels to Parkes, if the event rate is the same at other sites), that interference rejection algorithms based on the appearance of signals in multiple beams have removed the signals, that the searches were at frequencies where Perytons are not emitted, and/or that the experiments were not sensitive to pulses of 30-50 ms width. As multi-detector coincidence filters will strongly preclude the detection of Perytons, the



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strength of such rejection filters to limit local interference of any form is clear; however it is likewise clear that the filters would need to be relaxed to maximize an observatory's capability to detect and identify the origin of these remarkable signals. Additionally, we believe that it was the human inspection of the spectrogram data and multi-beam time series for each candidate (described in §6.2) that were the main contributors to the first recognition of the peculiar nature of the Perytons—the simultaneous occurrence of clear, seemingly dispersed emission and multiple-beam detection—and that encouraged us to scrutinize these events more closely instead of disregarding them as spurious detections.

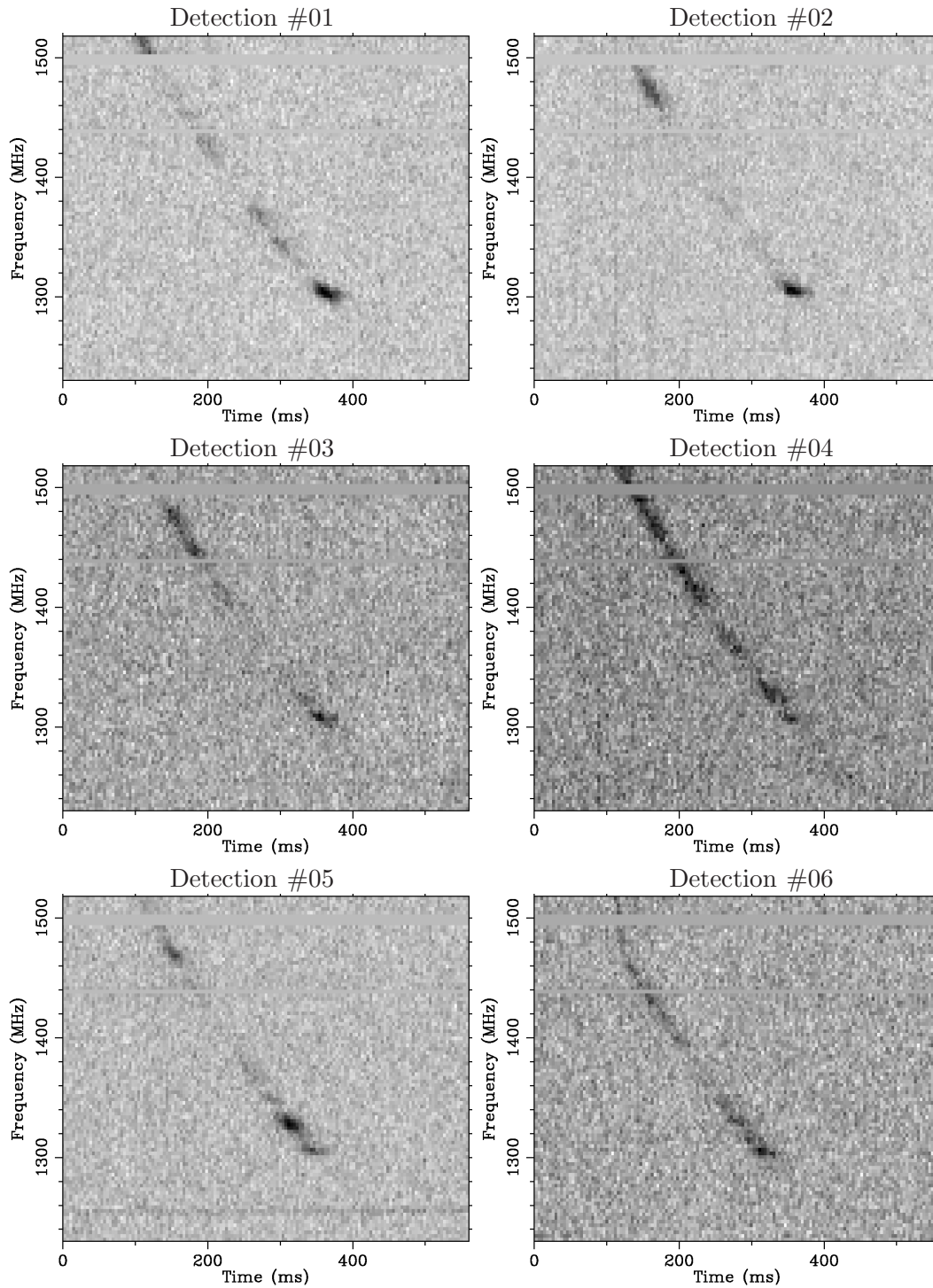
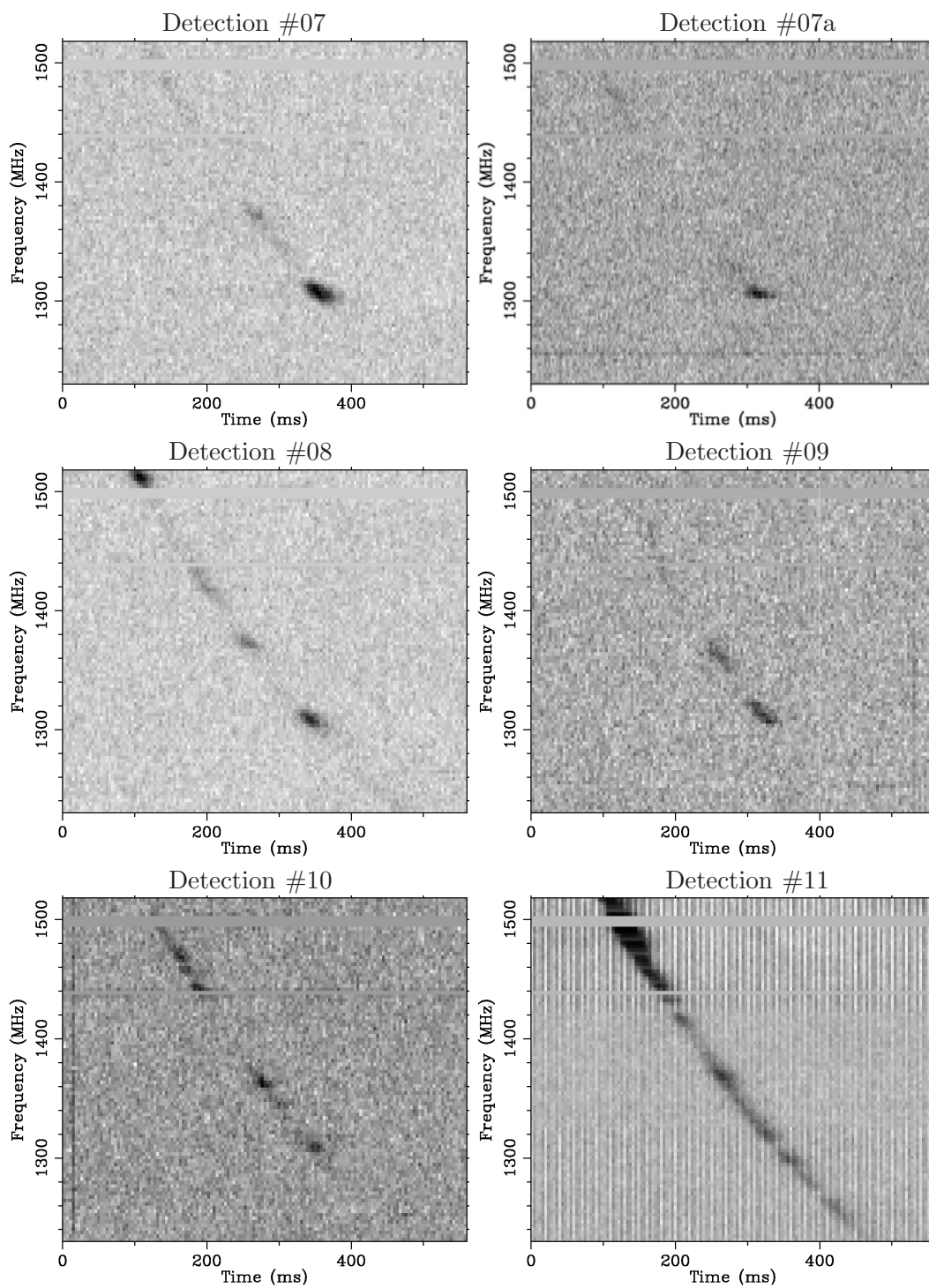
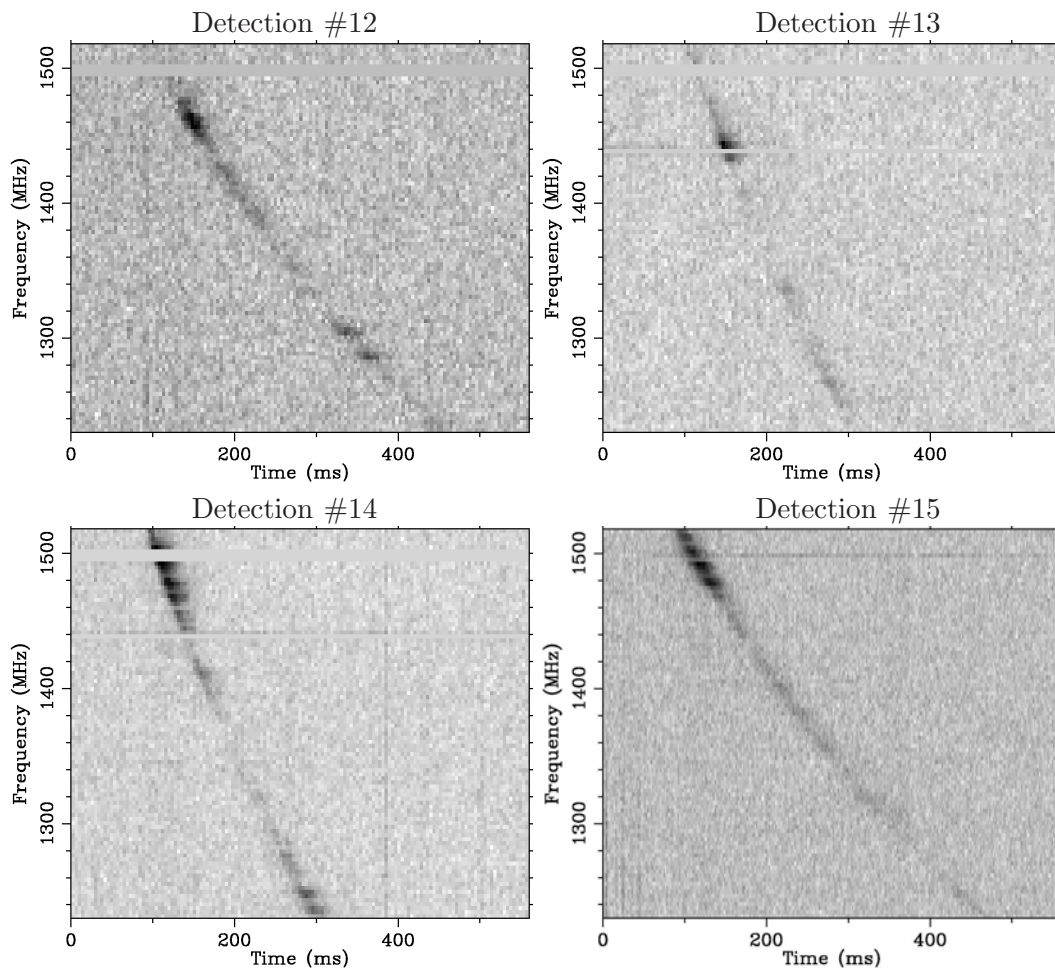


Figure 6.5 Spectrograms of all detections, as in Fig. 6.1(b).

Figure 6.5 *continued*.

Figure 6.5 *continued*.

# 7

## Conclusions and Future Directions

### 7.1 Conclusions and Major Findings of this Thesis

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Motivated by the broad-reaching scientific endeavours encompassed by “pulsar astronomy,” this research has advanced the knowledge of various astronomical and physical topics. In particular:

**Gravitational Wave Astronomy:** In Chapter 2, we examined the possibility of detecting supermassive black hole binary systems through both gravitational wave and electromagnetic signatures. We concluded that two electromagnetic tracers of black holes—high resolution radio spectral mapping and emission lines from the gas surrounding an active galactic nucleus—have significant overlap in the masses, orbital periods, and distances of systems to which pulsar timing is theoretically sensitive to their gravitational radiation. Blind searches for electromagnetic signatures of binary supermassive black holes will be limited by the number of electromagnetically-emitting cores in the Universe, but discoveries should be possible given a rigorous search of a large sample. The identification of binary systems emitting gravitational waves in the pulsar timing band will raise the sensitivity of pulsar timing arrays manyfold and may enable the first direct detection of gravitational wave emission as pulsar timing improves its sensitivity to gravitational waves from these objects.

**Galaxy merger dynamics:** Exploiting one of the search methods of Chap. 2, we embarked on a search for supermassive binary systems in archival radio data. The possibility that supermassive binaries might “stall” at small orbital separations has been an ongoing issue in post-merger dynamical theory that—if more than theoretical fancy—would have detrimental implications for detecting gravitational radiation with pulsar timing arrays. Our search resulted in the first observational evidence against this possibility. The data indicate an efficient inspiral evolution to within the purported stalling radius, however

with a timescale of sufficient length that it may produce a non-negligible effect in predictive models for the amplitude of the gravitational wave background in the pulsar timing band.

**Radio transient searches and search methods:** We have developed a new inspection and anti-coincidence search methodology that uses the methods outlined by Cordes & McLaughlin (2003), and expands on them by employing several novel techniques: 1) identification of discrete events and reconstruction of their observed properties, 2) automated dispersion measure- and multi-detector-based interference excision, and 3) candidate inspection of data for single events. These techniques have enabled improved discrimination between interference and low-dispersion (i. e. very nearby, or high galactic latitude) impulses, as evidenced by the low dispersion measure of many of our discoveries (19 below  $DM = 88 \text{ pc cm}^{-3}$ , with the lowest having a dispersion measure of  $DM = 9.2 \text{ pc cm}^{-3}$ ) as compared to the original search that discovered “rotating radio transients” (RRATs McLaughlin et al. 2006; all above  $DM > 88 \text{ pc cm}^{-3}$ ). The software to perform these searches is highly portable and has been made available to the public domain for use at other radio telescope facilities.

**Neutron star discoveries:** Utilising the search methods and software developed in this thesis, we have contributed the discovery of 27 neutron stars to the known pulsar population. Approximately 90% of the new discoveries represent a significant contribution to extreme nulling pulsars, of which previously  $\lesssim 50$  were known. Of particular interest are several objects. PSR J0941–39 appears part-time as a low-fraction nulling pulsar and otherwise appears as a sparsely-emitting “rotating radio transient,” and likely represents an evolutionary transition between two states of emission. PSR J0410–3107 holds several “records” for extreme nulling pulsars/RRATs, being the closest known RRAT to Earth, that of the highest galactic latitude, and lowest dispersion measure ( $9.2 \text{ pc cm}^{-3}$ ; this DM is also lower than 98.9% of known radio pulsars).

**Insights into sparsely emitting neutron stars:** The new discoveries of sparsely-emitting neutron stars have revealed further insight into the nature of the pulsar-related phenomenon “rotating radio transients.” We have concluded that some of the objects classified as RRATs do appear to be genuinely intermittent (rather than faint/distant pulsars with long-tailed pulse energy distributions). Furthermore, the RRAT population appears to have both a galactic distribution and a duty cycle distribution very similar to average pulsars. These insights, as well as the pulsar J0941–39’s bimodal emission states, support the suggestion that RRATs are more likely to be extreme examples of nulling pulsars, where the length of their “on” emission is less than one rotational period. The

analysis of emission and null timescales for transient emitters suggests that rather than RRATs, the “intermittent pulsars” like PSR B1931+24 (Kramer et al. 2006) appear to represent a distinct class of transient neutron star phenomena.

**The dynamic radio sky:** We have made several new neutron star discoveries in the High Time Resolution Universe Survey in regions of overlap with previous pulsar and transients surveys. These new discoveries are a testimony to the dynamic nature of the transient radio sky, and the analysis in Chapter 5 has indicated that surveys of long pointing duration, e. g. the HTRU low-latitude survey, will be capable of both discovering pulsars with nulling fractions greater than 99.99% (that is, pulsing only once per 3-4 hours), and will explore what appears to be a deficit of neutron stars which are active for timescales above 300 s but have nulling lengths greater than  $\sim 100$  s.

**Terrestrial and extragalactic radio transient phenomena:** We discovered 16 impulses (“Perytons”) of  $\lesssim 50$  ms duration whose swept-frequency signal closely mimics, however is not caused by, cold plasma dispersion. The pulses are caused by an unknown phenomenon of terrestrial or Earth-local origin. Their existence has several consequences: 1) They draw significant doubt on the origin of the only reported detection of an extragalactic radio impulse (Lorimer et al. 2007); 2) Their similarity to cold plasma dispersion severely limits the use of many pulsar surveys to characterise extragalactic pulse populations. Specifically, the single-detector experiments in current common use for pulsar searches have insufficient capability to definitively distinguish one-off terrestrial pulses from those of celestial origin; 3) There is an unidentified terrestrial phenomenon which exhibits strongly frequency-swept emission. We have explored a possible atmospheric plasma origin with a model that can reproduce most of the properties of the pulses. If this is the source, it may imply possible ties to the upper-atmospheric Transient Luminous Event phenomena (e. g. Su et al. 2003) that on occasion accompany electrical storm activity. However, further exploration and further detections are undoubtedly required to determine the actual pulse origins.

## 7.2 Future directions

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Pulsar astronomy remains an ambitious and far-reaching scientific field. This thesis has contributed to two areas, radio transient and gravitational wave astronomy, as their own rising and highly dynamic fields of research. The work in this thesis has opened a base of new questions that may be answered using both current radio telescopes and the upcoming generation of telescopes such as the Square Kilometre Array and its pathfinders. Here we

provide the directions for possible future work that are motivated or strengthened by our results.

1. *The discovery of significant numbers of supermassive black hole binaries.* We have shown the power of SMBH binary searches to limit pair evolution dynamics, and indicated that electromagnetic signatures of gravitationally-emitting SMBH binaries should exist. There is yet one system with solid evidence for a binary nature, and further discoveries will enable a deeper understanding of post-merger galaxy dynamics and the expected gravitational signatures for pulsar timing. We have shown that radio-detectable binary systems are uncommon (in our sample, they represented only 0.03% of the radio AGN we searched). However, our discovery rate was limited not only by the paucity of binary systems, but also by our low mean observing frequency (resulting in a coarse resolution limit) and the shallow flux sensitivity of our data. Using radio search techniques, numerous discoveries should result from employing a sample of targets with a-priori knowledge of a probable recent merger, and/or observations that reach spatial resolutions down to  $\lesssim$ a few pc for all targets at a flux sensitivity deep enough to raise the probability of detecting two radio-emitting black holes in a system to one (i. e. if both black holes in a common environment are equally radio luminous, observe deep enough that both objects are detectable regardless of their jet angle). The Square Kilometre Array will represent an advancement in its capability to quickly survey large numbers of radio galactic nuclei to high sensitivity. Offset emission-line identifiers have revealed a large number of binary candidates, but a definitive origin of the peculiar spectra has yet be determined. Radio imaging may contribute to the resolution of this debate in the future.
2. *Are RRATs special?* The large number of detectors currently capable of short-duration pulse detection (e. g. on Green Bank Telescope, Arecibo Telescope, and the continuing HTRU survey at Parkes) will contribute to a large increase in known sparsely-emitting neutron stars. The discovery of new objects, and the determination of the single-pulsing population's properties are two essential elements in determining, for instance, if many other sources exhibit the same bimodal emission of our discovery PSR J0941–39. Currently  $\sim$ 50 objects strong, the known RRATs are beginning to form a strong statistical sample for comparison of properties against other neutron star populations, e. g. pulse energy distributions and luminosity functions. Determining timing solutions of these objects will allow more fundamental properties, such as magnetic field strength and the age, to be used in deriving correlations between such properties and the objects' emissivity. An interesting alternative



to phase-connected timing solutions may be warranted, however, given the time involved in acquiring a timing solution. If an interferometric system had the capability of detecting and imaging single pulses, the positions of RRATs could be accurately determined. This would provide several benefits; first, accurate positions can be used to pinpoint RRAT emission at high-energy (X- and  $\gamma$ -ray), and second, an accurate position would break the timing degeneracy between position and period derivative, allowing the estimation of an RRAT's magnetic field strength, age, etc. based only on the interferometric observation and a few timing sessions spaced at large time intervals. Such a system would need to be in place to make efficient use of telescope resources when determining the properties of large quantities of RRATs.

3. *Nulling and modulation in radio pulsars* Our new discoveries have supported the possibility that the sources observed as RRATs may be a mix of both high nulling fraction pulsars and highly modulated pulsars with long pulse energy distribution tails. Thus far, modulation studies have typically focussed on a small number of pulsars, and no statistical nulling studies have yet incorporated the radio pulsars with nulling fraction  $\gg 95\%$  that have been discovered only since the return of single-pulse searches. Our conclusions on RRAT and nulling phenomena may be supported or negated with rigorous studies of the single pulse energy distributions of bright radio pulsars over a range of characteristic age, magnetic field strength, spin-down luminosity, and nulling fraction.
4. *What is the origin of Perytons?* One of the major discoveries made in this thesis was of the terrestrial radio impulses that mimic the frequency sweep of cold plasma dispersion in the interstellar medium. While we have presented the possibility of an atmospheric origin for these pulses, evidence for a conclusive origin is yet to be collected. Transient detection experiments on localised multi-detector instruments, e.g. those currently operational on the Giant Metre-wave Radio Telescope and the Allen Telescope Array, and that are planned for the Australian Square Kilometre Array Pathfinder will need to consider our findings. These instruments are expected to detect many examples of Perytons. The use of multiple detectors to measure the wavefront of incident events will enable a precise localisation of future terrestrial burst detections, hopefully revealing a clear picture of the man-made or natural character of the pulses.
5. *The timescales of radio pulsar activity cycles* The large field of view and high sensitivity of the upcoming Square Kilometre Array and its pathfinders provide the op-

portunity to perform dedicated and/or piggybacked fast-transient imaging surveys over a large sky area. These surveys have the potential to discover neutron stars undergoing activity cycles that last from 5 seconds to several hours, to several days. However, there will be significant challenges in identifying the underlying nature of transients discovered by these surveys, and non-pulsed observational markers for pulsars (e. g. polarisation) will need to be identified to understand which transient phenomena may be attributed to intermittent neutron stars.

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# A

## Appendix A: Useful constants and conversions

For reference and convenience, here we list the constants and common conversions used throughout this thesis.

|                            |               |   |  |
|----------------------------|---------------|---|--|
| Avogadro's constant        | $N_A$         | = | $6.02214 \times 10^{23} \text{ mol}^{-1}$  |
| Boltzmann constant         | $k_B$         | = | $1.38065 \times 10^{-23} \text{ m}^2 \text{ kg s}^{-2} \text{ K}^{-1}$           |
| Dispersion constant        | $\mathcal{D}$ | = | $4.14881 \times 10^3 \text{ MHz}^2 \text{ pc}^{-1} \text{ cm}^3 \text{ s}$       |
| Elementary charge          | $e$           | = | $1.60218 \times 10^{-19} \text{ C}$  |
| Gravitational constant     | $G$           | = | $6.67300 \times 10^{-11} \text{ m}^3 \text{ kg}^{-1} \text{ s}^{-2}$             |
| Hubble constant            | $H_0$         | = | $100 h_0 \text{ km/s/Mpc} = 2.3334 \times 10^{-18} \text{ Hz}$                   |
| Hubble parameter           | $h_0$         | = | 0.72 (unless otherwise stated)   |
| Hubble time                | $t_H$         | = | $13.58 \times 10^9 \text{ years} = 4.286 \times 10^{17} \text{ s}$               |
| Mass of electron           | $m_e$         | = | $9.10938 \times 10^{-31} \text{ kg}$   |
| Permittivity of free space | $\epsilon_0$  | = | $8.85419 \times 10^{-12} \text{ m}^{-3} \text{ kg}^{-1} \text{ s}^4 \text{ A}^2$ |
| Pi                         | $\pi$         | = | 3.14159265358979   |
| Speed of light             | $c$           | = | $2.99792 \times 10^8 \text{ ms}^{-1}$  |
| Solar mass                 | $M_\odot$     | = | $1.98892 \times 10^{30} \text{ kg}$  |

|          |   |   |
|----------|---|---|
| 1 pc     | = | $3.08568 \times 10^{16} \text{ m}$          |
| 1 year   | = | $3.15569 \times 10^7 \text{ seconds}$       |
| 1 Jansky | = | $10^{-26} \text{ W m}^{-2} \text{ Hz}^{-1}$ |