Comparing radio-signal searches on Breakthrough Listen data

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Summary

I compared a narrowband radio-signal search of my own (SignalSearchYoke) with two published pipelines, turboSETI and BLISS, on recorded Breakthrough Listen observations from the Green Bank Telescope, by planting 13,310 synthetic signals in the data and counting how many each pipeline found, and how many false candidates each raised, on the same blocks.

On a 2017 session (KIC8462852), at the cut where each pipeline's measured false-candidate rate is at most 0.1 a block (a point estimate; each 95% interval reaches above it, and the cuts were chosen on the blocks they were judged on), this search found 4,520 of the 13,310 signals in all three ON looks, turboSETI 442. BLISS as published never reached that false-candidate rate at any cut tested. BLISS's own hits put through this search's ON/OFF test did reach it, and found 4,048.

On a second session, fixed in advance (HIP17147, 2016), this search again found far more than turboSETI (4,337 against 417), but both pipelines **failed** the false-candidate limit set beforehand: 39.1 and 1.27 a block against 0.1, almost all of this search's in known satellite bands. That failure is part of the result.

On a third session, chosen by a rule from the archive's metadata and fixed in advance (NGC6946, a galaxy, at C band in 2019), every criterion fixed beforehand was met at its point estimate: this search found 2,404 of 7,040 signals against turboSETI's 247, and neither raised a false candidate. That band was quiet (3 of 64 blocks crowded), and 64 blocks leave the rates' intervals reaching 0.12, above the limit.

These are three sessions from one telescope. They do not show better sensitivity in general.

The question

Searches for narrowband technosignatures look for a tone drifting steadily in frequency that appears when the telescope points at the target (ON) and disappears when it points away (OFF). Two things decide how good a search is: how many real signals it finds, and how many interference signals it wrongly keeps. A pipeline can always find more by keeping more, so the fair comparison is how many planted signals each finds at the same rate of false candidates.

Method

- **Data.** Breakthrough Listen's high-resolution spectra (about 2.8 Hz channels) of a whole ON-OFF cadence: three ON looks at the target, each followed by an OFF look elsewhere. In 2017 and 2016, 121 blocks of frequency of each session, 61 crowded with interference and 60 clean, chosen at random within each class; in 2019 all of the session's 64. The false-candidate rates weight each class by its share of the session's blocks; the recovery counts are of the blocks measured, and are also given weighted to the session below.

- **Planted signals.** 110 a block, in the ON looks only, across 11 strengths (S_in 10 to 400, the signal-to-noise a search would give collecting all its power in ideal noise) and five drift bins up to 4 Hz/s. Each look's signal is scaled to that look's own measured noise, so a signal has the same S_in in every ON look: this measures recovery at a controlled signal-to-noise, not of a transmitter of fixed flux whose signal-to-noise would vary from look to look.
- **Found** means detected in all three ON looks within ±6 Hz and ±0.05 Hz/s of the planted signal (the tolerances of Margot et al. 2023).
- **False candidates** are counted by running each pipeline with the wrong looks called ON: the 19 other ways of choosing three of the six looks. Anything a pipeline keeps under a wrong choice is interference or noise. Candidates sharing a hit count once. This is a wrong-cadence control rate, not a calibrated false-alarm probability: the telescope's pointings were not assigned at random, the looks share their interference, and a wrong choice's looks are put in ON, OFF order, not in time order. How well it predicts false candidates in real cadences has not been measured.
- **Matched comparison.** Each pipeline's cut (its signal-to-noise threshold) is set where it gives at most 0.1 false candidates a block, and recovery is compared there.
- **Pipelines.** turboSETI 2.3.2; BLISS at commit 2b98afe with its GPU backend and its own event stage; this search, which sums along every drift up to ±4 Hz/s with the smear removed, keeps hits from S/N 5 as shadow hits, and calls a candidate only when every ON look shows the signal and no OFF look does. Its candidate needs a hit at the cut in one ON look and the signal measured along its track in the others; turboSETI's needs a hit in each. So these are whole pipelines compared, detector and cadence test together; BLISS's hits through this search's test separate the two in part.
- **The second and third sessions** used criteria frozen before their data was read, with a fingerprint of the code checked at each stage; the third was chosen by a rule fixed beforehand, from the archive's metadata alone.

Results: the 2017 session (KIC8462852, AGBT17A_999_68)

pipeline	cut	false candidates a block (95% interval)	signals found of 13,310
this search	30	0.068 (0.023 to 0.13)	4,520
turboSETI	30	0.049 (0 to 0.13)	442
BLISS's hits, this search's ON/OFF test	30	0.052 (0.0065 to 0.12)	4,048
BLISS as published	none reaches 0.1	lowest 4.54 (at 100)	—

At its tested cut, each matched pipeline's measured false rate is at or below 0.1 a block. These are point estimates, and they differ; each 95% interval reaches above 0.1, and the cuts were chosen on the same blocks they are judged on. The pipelines are matched on the measured rate against the target, not shown to lie below it. On the same 13,310 signals, this search and BLISS's hits through its test both found 3,829; this search alone 691, BLISS's hits alone 219. The difference, +0.035 of the signals (0.0261 to 0.0456, block bootstrap, 4000 draws, seed 2), holds for this session, these cuts and this signal grid.

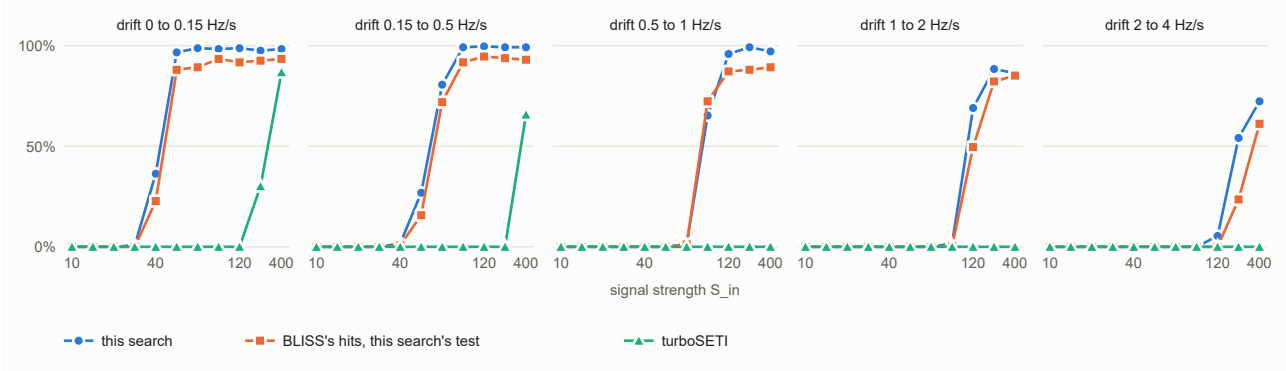

Figure 1. Share of the planted signals found in all three ON looks at each pipeline's matched cut, against signal strength (the eleven steps of the grid, evenly spaced), one panel per drift range (242 signals at each point). At each pipeline's cut its measured false rate is at or below 0.1 a block; the rates differ, and their 95% intervals reach above 0.1 (the table above).

Why BLISS as published has no matched cut. On the two blocks that carry most of its false candidates, one list of BLISS's hits at S/N 30 was given to each ON/OFF logic in the same run:

False candidates at S/N 30 (distinct, over the 19 wrong choices):

block	BLISS's event stage	this search's test	this search's test, with shadow hits	this search's test, hits grouped at S/N 5
35	1,610	85	85	1
129	2,627	205	130	0

With the hits the same, this search's test removes most of them: BLISS's event stage is the larger cause. The rest come from BLISS grouping its hits at the higher cut; grouped at S/N 5 and cut afterwards, almost none are left. These are two blocks, run after the main result was seen.

Results: the 2016 session, fixed in advance (HIP17147, AGBT16A_999_192)

criterion, frozen before the data was read	result
this search's false rate	**fails**
turboSETI's false rate	**fails**
this search's recovery above turboSETI's	**holds**
the pass's false rate	**fails**
the pass's curved recovery above production's	**holds**
the pass loses none of production's recoveries	**holds**

The code changed after the freeze, once: independent.py, logged as a deviation at each of the 4 stages that ran on it (choose, measure, curved, verdict) and printed in the verdict. The reason logged: "choose read search_version from the blocks table, which holds none (it is the run's); the query now goes through store.done_blocks. Plumbing only: the block rule, seed 10 and the measuring code are unchanged." (data/step10/deviations.json).

At the frozen cut (30), this search raised 39.1 false candidates a block (13.6 to 69.2) and turboSETI 1.27 (0.268 to 2.8), against a limit of 0.1. Recovery held: 4,337 of 13,310 against 417; paired, +0.294 of the signals (0.284 to 0.304). A second pass for curved tracks, tested with it, found 2,769 of 7,260 curved signals against production's 389, losing none.

Looked at afterwards, not one of the criteria: nearly all of this search's false candidates lie in blocks overlapping known satellite bands (GNSS, Inmarsat). No band has been masked, and the test has not been changed, because that would be choosing the rule after seeing the result.

Results: the 2019 session, chosen and fixed in advance (NGC6946, AGBT19B_999_104)

The session was chosen by a rule fixed before any listing was read: Breakthrough Listen's target list (Isaacson et al. 2017), telescopes and bands in a fixed order, the first session with a whole ON-OFF cadence and a file layout on which planted signals are recovered as on Green Bank's (checked on synthetic noise). No Parkes session qualified; this is Green Bank at C band, one recording node's 64 blocks, all measured. (A first run of the rule, on a shorter target list, found no session; the list was then extended once, before anything else was read.)

criterion, frozen before the data was read	**result**
this search's false rate	**holds, its interval reaching above the limit**
turboSETI's false rate	**holds, its interval reaching above the limit**
this search's recovery above turboSETI's	**holds**
the pass's false rate	**holds, its interval reaching above the limit**
the pass's curved recovery above production's	**holds**
the pass loses none of production's recoveries	**holds**

The code changed after the freeze, once: tools/turbo_curves.py, logged as a deviation at each of the stages that ran on it and printed in the verdict. The reason logged: "tools/turbo_curves.py sets a 4 GB floor on blimpy's load limit, which follows free memory: with another program holding the RAM, blimpy kept files on disk and turboSETI refused them (data shape (1,)); the data read and every hit are unchanged" (data/step12/deviations.json).

At the frozen cut (30), both pipelines raised 0 false candidates a block (95% interval 0 to 0.115), against a limit of 0.1: a rate of zero, but 64 blocks cannot show it below the limit. This search found 2,404 of 7,040 signals in all three ON looks, turboSETI 247. The curved pass found 1,621 of 3,840 curved signals against production's 265, losing 0. The band was quiet: 3 of 64 blocks crowded, against 184 of 304 in 2016.

Recovery at every operating point

A single cut does not give one ratio between the pipelines. For each session, the same planted signals at the frozen cut (30 each), the published one (10 each) and each pipeline's matched cut (step 4's rule: the lowest tested cut from which the false-candidate rate's point estimate stays at most 0.1 at every higher cut). Supplementary and exploratory: the frozen verdicts above are unchanged.

session	operating point	cuts (this search, turboSETI)	found in the sample	false a block	paired difference in the sample	weighted to the session
KIC8462852	frozen (30 each)	30, 30	4,520 against 442 of 13,310	0.0682, 0.0487	+0.306 (0.301 to 0.311)	34.4% against 3.5%, +0.309 (0.305 to 0.314)
KIC8462852	published (10 each)	10, 10	8,706 against 1,709 of 13,310	3.3, 0.286	+0.526 (0.514 to 0.536)	66.5% against 13.0%, +0.535 (0.528 to 0.541)
KIC8462852	matched (step 4's rule)	30, 30	4,520 against 442 of 13,310	0.0682, 0.0487	+0.306 (0.301 to 0.311)	34.4% against 3.5%, +0.309 (0.305 to 0.314)
HIP17147	frozen (30 each)	30, 30	4,337 against 417 of 13,310	39.1, 1.27	+0.294 (0.284 to 0.304)	32.0% against 3.0%, +0.290 (0.278 to 0.301)
HIP17147	published (10 each)	10, 10	8,258 against 1,550 of 13,310	107, 1.95	+0.504 (0.485 to 0.521)	60.9% against 11.3%, +0.496 (0.474 to 0.515)
HIP17147	matched (step 4's rule)	—	no matched cut for this search			
NGC6946	frozen (30 each)	30, 30	2,404 against 247 of 7,040	0, 0	+0.306 (0.302 to 0.311)	34.2% against 3.5%, +0.306 (0.302 to 0.311)
NGC6946	published (10 each)	10, 10	4,702 against 952 of 7,040	0, 0	+0.533 (0.525 to 0.54)	66.8% against 13.5%, +0.533 (0.525 to 0.541)
NGC6946	matched (step 4's rule)	8, 5	5,049 against 1,714 of 7,040	0.0156, 0	+0.474 (0.466 to 0.481)	71.7% against 24.3%, +0.474 (0.466 to 0.482)

The sample's crowded blocks against the session's: KIC8462852 61 of 121 against 61 of 308; HIP17147 61 of 121 against 184 of 304; NGC6946 3 of 64 against 3 of 64. Weighting each class by its share of the session (bootstrap over blocks within each class) moves the difference by at most 0.009, so no conclusion here rests on how the blocks were sampled. The paired difference in the sample has a bootstrap over blocks; resampling instead whole windows of four consecutive blocks of the session (block numbers, gaps of unmeasured blocks kept) barely widens it, but that tests only correlation between neighbouring blocks, and windows of sixteen leave too few windows (20 or fewer) for an interval (all in the record).

At the lower cuts the ratio falls (about ten times as many found at 30 each, about three times at the matched cuts in 2019) while the difference in share grows. In 2016 no tested cut of this search reached the rate.

Limitations

- Three observing sessions, one telescope, one recording pipeline. Nothing here speaks for Parkes, MeerKAT or another receiver.
- Steady drifts within ±4 Hz/s, plus one experiment with curved tracks; no pulsed or broadband signals.
- The 2017 session's cuts were chosen on the same blocks they were judged on. The 2016 and 2019 sessions were fixed in advance: in 2016 both false rates failed, in a band crowded with satellite signals; in 2019 every criterion held, in a quiet band where the rate's interval still reaches above the limit.
- BLISS's hits through this search's test, and the same-hit control, are combinations of two pipelines, designed after the main result was seen.
- Of the planted signals BLISS finds at S/N 10 and this search raises no candidate for, 28 were traced stage by stage. 17 are found strongly in all three ON looks and then called interference because one OFF look reaches S/N 6 to 8 along the track with no OFF transmission identified: low-level OFF evidence consistent with noise (0.66% of 10,000 random unplanted tracks reach 6; that is the test's rate on noise, not a loss rate for these signals, which were chosen because BLISS found them). 2 meet something real in an OFF look, 7 are missed by the detector (mostly in crowded blocks) and 2 are too faint. The threshold was set beforehand and is not moved for this.
- The 8 signals the detector gave no matching hit for were measured through its stages, the detector unchanged; the first cause in each: 6 the hit cap, 2 found, but measured outside the tolerances. The hit cap is the 2,000 hits kept a look: in crowded looks the signal, at S/N 12.3 to 40.6, lies below that many stronger hits, and a cap of 5,000 to 20,000 finds it. Those measured outside the tolerances drift fast (2.0 and 1.6 Hz/s); their measured drift was 0.05 Hz/s off, just outside the tolerance. Neither is changed here: the detector stays as step 10 ran it.
- The frozen recovery criterion compares two Wilson intervals, which treat the planted signals as independent; signals share their block and their session. The paired difference with a bootstrap over blocks (above) is the better measure, and it is supplementary. All the blocks of a session come from one observation, so none of these intervals speaks for other sessions.
- BLISS's hits through this search's test, supplementary in the third session, could not be run there: the step that hands BLISS each block expects a slice width these blocks do not have, and the frozen rule records that rather than adapting it.

Data and code availability

The observations are from the Breakthrough Listen Open Data Archive (Lebofsky et al. 2019, PASP 131, 124505). Breakthrough Listen is managed by the Breakthrough Initiatives. The code is at https://github.com/Ryan-Clinton/SignalSearchYoke (this version was built from the commit named on its page). The code and the result records behind every number here are to be archived on Zenodo; the DOI will be added here when they are.

References

- Lebofsky, M. et al. 2019, PASP 131, 124505: The Breakthrough Listen search for intelligent life: public data, formats, reduction and archiving.
- Margot, J.-L. et al. 2023, AJ 166, 206: A search for technosignatures around 11,680 stars with the Green Bank Telescope at 1.15-1.73 GHz. doi:10.3847/1538-3881/acfda4 (the ±6 Hz, ±0.05 Hz/s tolerances).

Revisions

- 0.1 (2026-11-18): first draft.
- 1.0 (2026-11-19): first release: the signals BLISS finds and this search misses traced stage by stage, and the detector's misses measured.
- 1.1 (2026-11-19): the code's repository, now public, linked.
- 1.2 (2026-11-19): the third session, chosen and fixed in advance (NGC 6946 at C band): every criterion held.
- 1.3 (2026-11-19): recovery at every tested cut for all three sessions, with the paired difference and blocks resampled in runs; step 12 described as meeting its criteria at the point estimate; what the injections, the false-candidate control and the comparison of whole pipelines do and do not measure.
- 1.4 (2026-11-19): recovery weighted to each session's share of crowded and clean blocks beside the sample's; the neighbouring-block check made over consecutive blocks of the session; the matched cut by one rule throughout; the blocks of each session stated.