

Black Mesa State Park, Oklahoma September, 2025

So far, for most of the 2025 observing season here in the northeast, it's been a cloudy and wet experience. Starting with the September New Moon, I was hoping to turn that around with a trip to the Oklahoma panhandle desert for the 2025 "Okie-Tex Star Party"! This spring, a group of us Western Pennsylvania ORAS club "Cherry Springs" regulars decided to make the 1,370+ miles trip in September to Kenton Ok to observe under the Bortle 1 skies at Camp Billy Joe where the 42nd annual Okie-Tex starparty was being held. (36° 53.87' N, 102° 57.12' W, Alt. 4,439 ft.)

Mid-September, Ed K, Dean M, and I hitched-up our campers and made our way out west. Our initial destination was the Black Mesa State Park campground, a mere 9 miles from Kenton, Ok, where we would spend several days recuperating from the long drive and also explore the Black Mesa area. The park was also a dark-sky park so we hoped to get in a little observing while there.

I left Pittsburgh on Saturday the 13th and after spending four days on the road, with overnight stops in Greenfield Indiana; Columbia Missouri; and Great Bend Kansas) arrived at the Black Mesa State Park near Kenton, Oklahoma.

The Drive Down:

Saturday 9/13/2025:

Headed out from Pittsburgh on the first leg at 8:35am. Finally arrived at the first stop of the trip in Greenfield Indiana at 4pm. Driving I70 westbound was a lot of "fun"! Road construction West on I70 from Columbus stunk bigly! It was so bad it vibrated my camper step out, lol. Definitely will not be coming back this way. The drive ended up taking about 7.5 hours. (Google maps said it should only have taken about 5.5 hrs, though I did make several gas stops, and rest stops with one of those also being lunch. And as I was towing my camper, I drove 5 miles under the speed limit the whole way.

Sunday 9/14/2025:

Starting day 2 on the road. Stopped outside of St Louis for lunch. Arrived in Columbia, Mo at 3:37pm. Not quite an 8 hr drive for me. Now in a different time zone. I70 from Indianapolis was a decent drive, but West of St Louis to Columbia was heavy traffic and bumpy road construction. (Inbound traffic heading eastwards to St Louis looked like a parking lot, lol)

Monday 9/15/2025:

Heading out for Great Bend, Kansas at 8:24am. Stopped for lunch at a truck stop on the Kansas Turnpike (I70), just outside of Topeka. Arrived in Great Bend at 4:30pm. From Columbia MO westward, I70 was pretty decent to drive. (Going around Kansas City with all its ramps was a little confusing but I successfully made it thru, lol). Pretty cool driving past the rolling prairie on I70. Boy is Kansas flat! After I got off the interstate a few miles past Salina, onto Rt156, it was interesting seeing how straight and flat that road was.

Tuesday 9/16/2025:

Heading for Black Mesa at 7:30am, should be there in about 6 hrs. Did my 1st touristy thing, the Spearville Kansas wind farm. 162 turbines.



Drove thru Dodge City, (yeehaw!). There were wind farms in every direction to the horizon, with hundreds of turbines. Also drove past several huge cattle feed lot/ranches. Probably over a 1000 head of cattle in each stockyard. The road is arrow straight, nothing to see to the left or right but corn and sorghum fields to the horizon, and an occasional silo off in the distance.



This may sound korny but I am no longer in Kansas. Now in Boise Oklahoma! About 30 miles from the park.

At Black Mesa:

Arrived at Black Mesa State Park in Oklahoma on Tuesday afternoon around 2:30pm. After stopping at the park office and checking-in, I headed over to my campsite to setup. Ed k already there, Ed arriving the day before. As I was just staying at the park for a few days, I only put out my camper visor-awning and chair. Later in the week, I did assemble the SeeStar S30 smart scope and tripod. Dean M arrived a few hours later and setup camp in the lot two down from me.



Went for a walk, met Phil(imager) and Lisa (visual) from Georgia.
The park has beautiful cliffs, picnic areas, and a swimming beach.



It also has lots of these little burrs that stick to everything. I was constantly tramping them into the camper where you didn't want to step on one in bare feet.



Dean M rolled in around 5:30pm. At 6:30pm, a thunderstorm with a hard rain went thru. We got a pretty rainbow over Ed's mobile observatory.



Met Ed's neighbor Nick from St Louis. (Would later join our motley crew at Okie-T.

Sky began to clear around 9:30pm, with a brilliant Milky-Way appearing from behind the clouds. I quickly setup the S30 SeeStar and after polar aligning, began a mosaic of Barnard's "E", dark nebula B142 & B143 in Aquila near the bright star Gamma Aquilae.



(SeeStar S30, 60 second exposures in EQ mode with the IR filter, livestacked for 90 minutes, then AI noise reduction applied in-app)

Ed also had out his Celestron Origin smart scope and spent the evening capturing M17. Dean M, tired from his 2 day drive to get here, called it an early night. I visited with Ed and Nick over by Ed's camper. The three of us watched a distant lightening storm to the SE. Back at camp, inspired by the naked-eye Milky-Way views, I got out my Minolta 12x50 binoculars and observed a number of bright Messier Objects: open clusters M6 & M7 in Scorpius and M11 in Scutum, along with the bright globular cluster M22 in Sagittarius and nearby emission nebula M8, M20, M16, and M17. I finished up the visual session with galaxies M31 and M33, both naked-eye objects in the clear dark sky of Black Mesa Park. Called it a night at a quarter to 2AM.

Wednesday 9/17/2025:

Slept in till 9:30am, then made a leisurely breakfast. Visited with Ed and Dean. After lunch the three of us went for a drive around the park to hunt dinosaurs. (Footprints that is,,, lol . The park had a nice viewing area with signs.





We then went looking for the much larger footprints about 25 miles away, towards the hiking trail to the top of Black Mesa. It was a bit of a drive along dirt roads, though scenic, and we finally located the tracks by an active stream bed. Compared to the parks, these footprints were huge!!



Had to be careful where you walked, as cactus are everywhere. But there was also beauty to be found along the way. The scenery around the area with the buttes and mesa's was beautiful.



While out, we drove past the little town of Kenton, and found the Okie-Tex star party site at Camp Billy Joe, and stopped and met several of the organizers: Susan, and Danny.

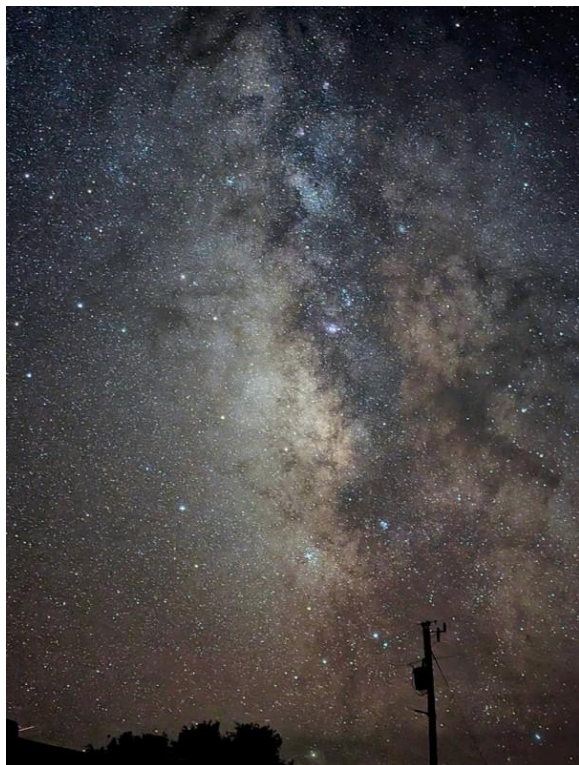
Back at camp, a tab teardrop pulled in and setup in the space to my north. (Janet and her two dogs). I decided to pull out and setup my 80mm visual refractor in hope of a late clearing. But, with a severe looking storm heading our way, I put away a few camping items and prepared for rough weather. While waiting for the rain, I made a cup of tea and sat outside reading. Before long, the black flies chased me indoors. Around 7pm, amid thunder the rain finally began to fall. After phoning home, I did some reading and surfing. With a break in the rain, I delivered cookies to Dean and Ed, took the trash to the dumpster and drove down to the restroom. (I would have walked it, but there was a lot of lightning flashes all around the park). Looked like there were another half dozen new campers down around the office and towards the dump station. I also got a new large travel trailer neighbor on the other side of my camper. Read a little more than early to bed around 11pm. No observing tonight.

Thursday, 9/18:

Was woken several times during the night by thunderstorms and heavy rain. I'm glad we went yesterday to look at the dino tracks. They'd be completely underwater today.

After waking around 7am and listening to raindrops tapping on the camper roof, I rolled over and slept in till 8:30am. Once awake for good, I made breakfast and then headed outdoors to uncover the telescope to make sure it was dry. It was still a little chilly, misty, and damp out at first from all the rain, but soon the sun broke thru and dried up the dewy grass. Spent the afternoon relaxing around camp. The temps were a pleasant mid 70's. By late afternoon, nearly all the open camping spaces have been filled. (Met Bill from Melbourne Fla with his 18' truss dob). Around 5:30pm, Dean, Nick, and I gathered over at Ed's for refreshments. The park manager (Polly) stopped by and we had a good discussion on the park.

Back at camp I prepped my notes and equipment and fixed dinner. Soon after dusk, the Milky Way was brightly shining. Unfortunately, my new neighbor to my south was not an astronomer so they didn't practice good blackout lighting; only using the normal camper window blinds which glowed from the indoor white lights. Still I made due experimenting with using my Pixel-8 cell phone in a phone tripod to do night-lapse exposures of our galaxy's core in Sagittarius. Worked out nicely! Using the phone settings and doing a 60 second exposure, I was able to capture starclouds, dark nebula of the Galactic Dark Horse, the large starcloud M24, and various other nebulosity's. Here's the photo.



While I was playing with the phone, the SeeStar S30 was doing a widefield mosaic of the Andromeda Galaxy, M31, M32 and M110.



(SeeStar S30, 60 second exposures in EQ mode with the IR filter, livestacked for 80 minutes, then AI noise reduction applied in-app)

I also used the visual 80mm f6.3 Bosma Refractor on an alt-az tripod with a 26mm eyepiece to sweep the Sagittarius Milky Way, re-observing M6 and M7, M8, M17, M20, M22, and over to the east to M31. Stayed up till 1:30am.

Friday 09/19/2025:

The three of us decided not to try and be at Camp Billy Joe at the crack of dawn, we'd let all the die-hards have that fun. So I slept in till 8am. Packed away the inside of the camper while having breakfast. Then moved outside to disassemble the visual scope and SeeStar tripod. Hooked up the camper and was ready. Headed out at 9am while both Ed and Dean had their rigs at the park dump station. The rest of this story will continue in the Okie-Tex report!

So the stay at Black Mesa State Park netted Dean M and I two nights of dark sky observing out of three nights. (Ed, arriving a day earlier had 3 nights). The park is well suited for casual dark sky observing, while the skies are just as dark as at the Okie-Tex site, the only downside is the park allows campfires and campers who are not strict about white-light usage. Still, I would recommend staying there, The park has great restroom/shower facilities, friendly and knowledgeable park staff, and interesting geological features to view. And especially as a final jumping-off point for going to the Okie-Tex Star Party.

Larry McHenry

Astronomical Webportal: <http://www.stellar-journeys.org/>