

Calhoun Stargaze - May, 2017

With the weather forecast being variable, I decided to head down to Calhoun Cty Park a day earlier to maximize my chances of observing.

In addition to having the best prospects weather-wise on Thursday, I also wanted to be able to setup and get a quiet evening of observing in before the event.

Thursday 05/18/2017:

Having packed the car and camper the evening before, after taking care of a few house chores, I was on the road by 10am heading toward Grantsville, West Virginia.

The day before was unseasonably warm, and today was going to be another scorcher, with temps in the upper 80's. About half-way thru the drive, the car's AC decided to stop working, so I ended up with the windows down for the rest of the trip. I arrived at the park mid-afternoon, hot and windblown. I quickly chose a spot on the ridge in-between the pavilion and the playground and got my camp in order. Shortly afterwards Chrissie and Rich pulled in with their R-Pod camper and headed down around the Red Barn to the little campground. Besides being able to plug into the single RV power hookup to run the video equipment, I wanted to be on the ridge in hopes of video-observing the globular cluster Omega Centauri and the active galaxy Centaurus-A - NGC5128. From talking with other observers at the fall Calhoun Stargaze, I learned that both were visible from the ridge.

Took longer to setup the telescope than usual, due to my not having touched my travel equipment for a good seven months. I usually try to assemble it in my garage before my first trip to re-acquaint myself with the telescope, but I ran out of time. Having photos of the setup on my cell-phone helped a lot. While I was finishing balancing the ensemble, John D arrived and chose a spot on the other side of the playground. John setup just his telescope, a nice looking refractor, but decided not to pitch a tent, as one of his buddies, (Shawn), was coming down the next day with a large cabin-tent. Instead, John would haul his sleeping bag down to the barn later that evening.



As it was just too hot to cook anything for dinner, I went with having a pasta cup unheated. Reminded me of my college days and left-over pizza.

Once the sun had set, I uncovered the telescope and prepared for the night's observing. As usual, my main instrument is an 8" Celestron SCT optical tube at f6.3, mounted on a CGem, along with a 80mm Kson refractor and a 60mm guide scope. My video-cameras were the Stellacam-3 on the 8", Stellacam-II on the 80mm, and the ZWO-ASi120MC on the 60mm. Also was using a QHY Polemaster USB camera on the mount. Turned out that from not using the scope for such a long time, I had forgotten how to use the Polemaster for polar alignment, and that took several tries. It didn't help that the sky conditions and equipment were unsettled from being so warm, so when trying to do the final alignment step, the polar axis on the monitor screen was jumping around like a basketball! I finally said the heck with it and accepted what I had and moved on to doing the GOTO align. That led to new issues from having selected several poorly placed alignment stars.

Having now wasted over an hour, I just went with the poor alignment and quickly slewed the telescope over to Centaurus on the southern horizon. I spent several minutes slowly

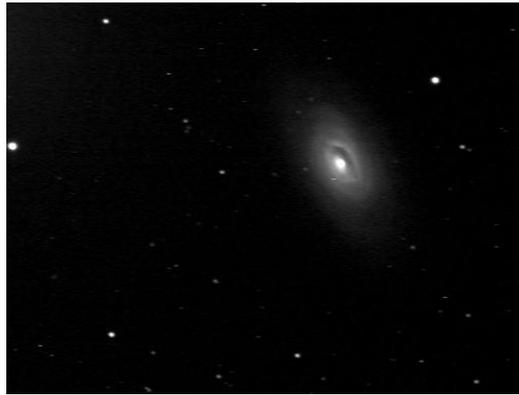
'star hopping' the GOTO, going to one star after the other and syncing on that location to the point that I was confident that the final jump would land me on Omega. So I gave the command to slew and waited for the globular to display on the monitor, and waited, and waited. Nothing there! I went over to the telescope and as I was using a flip-mirror, flipped it up to the 40mm eyepiece. Bisecting the field-of-view was tree tops! Omega was just inside the tree line! Scanning where the telescope was pointed and consulting my planetarium program, I quickly realized that Omega would never rise any higher. Arghhhhh!!! Getting in an observation that night was not going to happen. Maybe If I can catch it earlier in the evening over the next two days, it might hit a small gap in the trees. (my hopes for this was dashed by the weather on both Friday and Saturday, so a binocular view from Florida a few years back will have to stand as my only official observation of Omega). As a consolation prize, I was able to clearly video-observe NGC5128 - Centaurus-A. Was surprised by how large the galaxy and it's dark obscuring dust-lane was!



I then headed over to Libra to pull in several low-hanging galaxies. Finally, I decided to do something about the annoying poor alignment, so I shut down the telescope and re-did the Polemaster polar align, which this time I 'mastered', and re-did the GOTO align using better selected stars. Now the telescope's tracking and slewing was dead on for the rest of the evening!

Seeing that M51 was now sitting high on the meridian, I slewed the telescope to the Whirlpool and took a series of video-image captures, of 3 minute exposure each. The autoguider & PHD worked awesome, with the galaxy's image looking great on the video monitor! In addition to the bridge arching over to the interacting companion, you could also make out the stripped off gas and dust from the smaller galaxy. While I was in the area, I headed over to the Pinwheel Galaxy - M101 and also grabbed a series of images. The face-on spiral filled the monitor screen and showed numerous HII regions embedded within its spiral arms. I then moved back over to Canes Venatici and made an observation of M64 - the 'Blackeye Galaxy'. Then I began chasing down small Herschel galaxies for the next couple of hours. These include NGC4111, 4181A & B, 4227, 4229, & 4392.





Finally, around 3am, the waning Moon rose over the trees in the Southeast, and as I was tiring from the long day, I decided to call it a night. Powered down the telescope and cameras, covered everything up and headed to bed.

Friday 05/19/2017:

Slept in till near 9am, finally being woken-up by the camper becoming warm. Lots of wind today, sky partly cloudy, very warm, but no rain. I tried to stay out of the Sun so as not to get burned, but still managed to get a little toasty.

John and several of the park folks put up a tarp around the Red Barn deck to help shield light coming from the main door. Additionally, they installed several red light bulbs and covered windows with paper and cardboard to help with the indoor lighting. I lent a hand with getting tables and chairs setup inside for presentations.

The ARC folks from the University of Tennessee - Cat, Tim, and Laura arrived around noon and setup the registration table. They pitched their tents up on the ridge, but the windy conditions almost took them down. Several other attendees arrived and setup on the ridge, including Shawn and Craig. For dinner, the parks folks served up chilly-hotdogs with potato & macaroni salads, along with coleslaw and various bags of chips, with sodas, ice tea and water to drink.



At sunset, I uncovered the telescope, but soon put the cover back on, as the sky quickly clouded up and thunderstorms began firing up along the western horizon. For awhile we sat and watched the lightening show, but once the raindrops began to fall, everyone gathered up their chairs and headed back to their camps. Several of us headed down to the Red Barn where we watched movies and ate popcorn for a couple of hours. In bed by 12:30am.



Saturday 05/20/2017:

Woke at 9am and headed down to the barn for a great breakfast of eggs, pancakes, biscuits, and two types of gravy! Yum!!!!

After a quick shower, I visited the swap-meet and picked up a set of 'Uranometria 2000' starcharts and their field guide. They'll make a nice addition to my camper's library.



Visited with folks for a bit, and then it was time for a lunch of cold-cuts, cheese, fruits and chips. I was still full from the biscuits & gravy, but it wouldn't be polite to not eat some of the lunch spread,,,,, ☺

Shortly after lunch, Al and Paul arrived and setup their telescopes next to me on the ridge. We spent some time catching up and staying out of the Sun, and then headed down to the Barn for the 1pm ARC / Dark-sky park update from Cat and Tim. The parks board rolled out their official architectural master-plan for the park, which incorporated suggestions from the Fairmont University students from the past several years. Their concept for the dedicated astronomical observing field was a bit different from what we were expecting. Permanent RV sites with full hookups and a playground in the middle of the field! After a lively discussion, I hopefully convinced them to ditch the laid-out RV sites and playground and go with the original plan of just having an access road and 110v power post placed on the observing field. Let the amateur astronomers self-organize as to where they want to setup on the field and not confine them to a limited number of RV sites.



After the park update was done and the Historical Village tour started, Paul, Al, and I headed back up to our camp and discussed what we had heard. The good news from the park update, it sounds like progress may finally happen this year on the new observing field. We then headed back down the ridge to the barn for the 4pm keynote presentation by Dr Tim Hamilton of Shawnee State University - my ole alma-mater - when it was just a community college back in the late 70's. The keynote talk by Dr Hamilton on Eclipses and Transits was very interesting! It's amazing what amateurs can accomplish with modest equipment in the search for exoplanets. Once the talk finished up, it was time for dinner. We had our choice of barbecue pulled-pork sandwiches or ribs, (or both!!), along with more sides! It was all very delicious!! Afterwards, we made our way back up the hill to sit in the shade and check the weather radar & forecast. It was gradually clouding up.



At sunset, I went ahead and uncovered my telescope and prepared my observing list, as the forecast was calling for a late clearing. Had a lot of local visitors, including several amateurs who had read about the event in the paper and driven up from Parkersburg. Dr Hamilton stopped up and checked-out my telescope and we had a nice discussion on video-astronomy, and he and Al and Paul talked optics.



As it was getting darker, I decided to cover the telescope back up. I was scheduled to do a green-laser tour of the night sky and with folks gathering on the hillside by the pavilion, I conferred with Cat, and we decided to take everyone down to the Red Barn where we setup the digital projector and I gave a talk on the constellations and mythology. Afterwards upon leaving the barn, the sky had somewhat cleared, so we went back up the ridge where using the laser I was able to give a partial tour of the brighter stars and constellations poking thru the light haze and scattered clouds. The local folks went home happy!

By 11:30pm, the sky really began to clear, so I again uncovered the telescope and powered it up along with the cameras. The alignment from Thursday night had held, and I was soon hopping around the Messier Showcase objects for Cat, Laura, and other folk - the Ring, Hercules Cluster, the Dumbbell, the Whirlpool, the Pinwheel, the Sombrero, M22, the Swan, and the Eagle. Al and Paul had their DSLR cameras going, while John, Shawn, Craig, and the ladies from Univ of Tenn played a game of who could make up the most interesting new constellation. I think the winner was John, who came up with a new constellation called the GBT, (Green Bank Telescope), made up of the stars of the Big Dipper.



Finally, around 1am, the ARC folks and last of the local guests called it a night, and with the sky having totally cleared-off into a beautiful dark night, I switched over to serious video-observing, hunting faint Herschel Objects up in Bootes. These included NGC55239, 55251, 5293, 5446, 5500, 5522, 5570, 5598, 5603, & 5610. By 3:30am, most of us had run out of gas, and at that point I was falling-over tired, so I closed-up the telescope and headed for bed, happy to have been able to observe.

Sunday 05/21/2017:

After a restless sleep, I rolled out of bed around 8:30am. Looking out a window, I noticed that other than Craig, I was the last one left on the ridge. I also noticed that the sky had clouded over and rain was on the way. I quickly began packing the inside of the camper. I soon moved outside and began to pack up the telescope. Once that was finished, I said goodbye to Craig who was staying an extra night and headed down to the Red Barn to grab a coffee and Danish. As I was pulling into the parking lot, Chrissie and Rich were pulling out from the campground. We both stopped and visited. Went inside and thanked the Calhoun parks folks, had a quick bite, and was on the road home by 10:00am.

Overall, the 2017 Calhoun Stargaze was a success. The weather wasn't the most cooperative, but I was able to get in a good night of observing on Thursday, and a partial night on Saturday. I look forward to being able to observe from the location, hopefully again later this year, and to future Stargazes under dark skies!!!

Larry McHenry

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