

## ORAS Observatory April, 2026

For the April new Moon week, the weather forecasts were a toss-up between Calhoun and ORAS Observatory. But, as the facilities committee had a list of maintenance that needed done prior to the May Spring Stargaze event, several of us headed northwards.

### Tuesday 04/14/2026:

Packed the car and hitched up the camper the evening before. Headed out just after 10am. Uneventful drive under party sunny skies.

Arrived at the ORAS Observatory around 1:45pm, the gate was already open and Dean M was onsite at the Jones Activities Building doing cleanup. After stopping to greet Dean, I headed up to the east side of the observatory. Parked and leveled the camper, and setup camp. Then drove back down to the activities building to unload door prizes that I had brought for the fall AstroBlast convention. Dean S arrived on site and joined us.

A little later Susan P dropped by to help.



After we had finished straightening up the activities building, Dean M and Susan P headed home and Dean S drove up to the western field to setup his camp. I headed back to my camp and decided to assemble my main EAA telescope: 8" Celestron SCT optical tube @ f6.3 with a ZWO ASI294MC-Pro camera, ZWO filter wheel & focuser, on an Atlas EQ GEM mount, along with a piggybacked Sky-Watcher EVO 50mm refractor with a ASI294MC camera, and a 60mm Antaries refractor guidescope with an ASI120MC camera.

With clouds moving in, I decided to hold-off setting up my AllSky cam, a ZWO ASI224MC camera & fisheye lens in a DIY dome attached to a tripod. And I left my SeeStar S30-Pro smart telescope and equatorial wedge & tripod in the car.

The weather forecast was not looking good, and just as I finished balancing the 8" scope, rain drops began to fly. I quickly covered up and headed indoors. (Over the next several days I spent a lot of time dodging rain!). After the shower had passed, I headed back outdoors and finished prepping the C8 for the night.

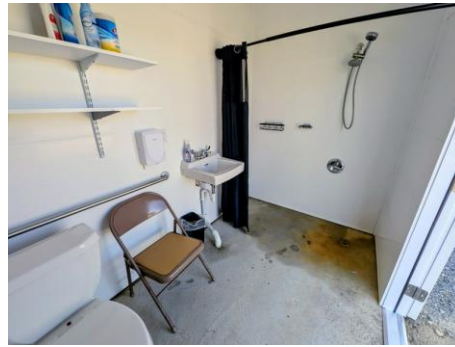
At 5pm, I joined Dean over at his camp for refreshments. Looking at the weather satellite, we might get a little time this evening. Headed back to camp at 6:30 for dinner and a quick call home, and then assembled the blackout clamshell tent.

At dusk, the clouds began to break so Dean and I waited patiently for Polaris to appear. Around 8:30pm, with the "Starry Plow" visible in the northeast, the North Star started to twinkle. I began my Polemaster polar alignment and had just about finished when thickening clouds prevented me from making the final steps. After walking over to talk with Dean and checking our weather apps, we realized that there would be no more stars that evening. But at least I was now fairly close to being polar aligned. After chatting a bit longer, I headed back to camp to read. Called it a night around midnight.

### Wednesday 04/15/2026:

Up at 8am, and after breakfast Dean and I went shopping for a few observatory items, including purchasing a 75" TV for the new outdoor classroom. (That was fun! ☺ )

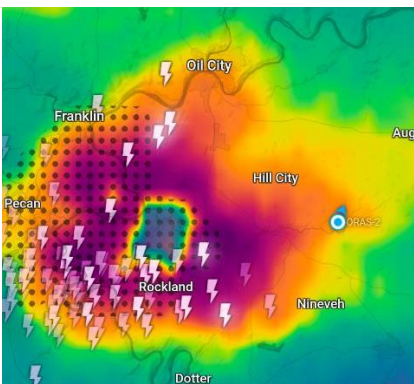
Back at camp, we stowed the big TV in the garage, as we needed a third person to help with installing, and then spent the afternoon working on the new restrooms, and cleaning out the garage. During our lunch break, I assembled my AllSky camera in hopes of using it the next couple of days. As the weather forecast was looking rough for later this evening, I left the SeeStar S30-PRO in the car.



Dean and I headed over to the pavilion at 5pm for snacks and drinks. At 6 we headed back to our campers for dinner. Around 6:30pm, with the sky growing ominously dark, I walked over to visit with Dean, bringing an ice-cream dessert. After a few minutes standing around watching the thickening clouds and listening to the nearly continuous rumbling of approaching thunder, I decided to head back to camp and put away my outdoor chair and secure a few things. Good thing I did!



Around 7pm a severe storm made a bee-line over us. The radar image showed a hole in the center of the storm, looking almost like a hurricane eye-wall.



Within a few minutes all hell broke loose. Under constant thunder, it was like someone was standing outside pointing a fire-hose at my camper. Literally buckets of water were pouring down the camper sides and off the visor awning. After about 10 minutes the rain suddenly stopped and it began to hail. At first it was tiny pea size but coming down quickly and soon covering the field. The size then dramatically went up to ice-cubes and at that point it sounded like that earlier person with the hose had dropped it and climbed up on top of the camper and was wailing away on the roof with a hammer. LOL

I began to fear for my vent cover! This went on for an incredible 5 minutes before the storm switched back over to rain. During this, the outside temp dropped a good 12 degrees! Once it let up, I ran out and grabbed one of the nearer large hail stones and brought it inside to snap a photo. (Using a life-saver mint for comparison)



By 7:30pm, the storm had passed, so I again stepped outside in the dim light to check for damage. Hail was everywhere! The car windshield wiper trough was full of them. Far as I could tell, the car and camper looked ok, but the light was poor. With the rain beginning to pick back up, I thought to quickly pull the cover off the AllSky camera. OMG!! The Plexiglas dome was shattered, with one large hole completely thru it and another large strike that didn't quite go thru.



As the AllSky camera was no longer waterproof, I detached it from its tripod and put the camera inside the car. There wasn't time to check the main scope as I was now getting soaked, so I headed inside and hoped for the best.

Another round of intense thunderstorms with torrential rains went over at 8pm and another at 8:30pm, and more boomers at 10:30pm. Dean S got a video with his cell phone of what looked like a cloud that was rolling on its side along the sky just to the north of us. Spooky!! With the electrical power having gone out, I called it a night at 11pm. Was woken at 2:30am by more storms and a last round of showers at 5am. What a night!

#### **Thursday 04/16/2026:**

Up early under a partly clear and sunny sky to survey the camp. The main telescope came thru the storm fine. But, both the car and camper have small divets from the hail. You have to catch the sunlight just right to see them. Dang!! (Dean S also had dents in his new truck, along with a punctured skylight on his camper).

After breakfast, I retrieved the AllSky camera from the car and plugged it into the laptop to test. Still works! And most of the dome damage is below the camera fisheye lens horizon, so it will be usable on Friday night! Yea!

Dean S and I then spent the day working thru his project list around the observatory.

Around lunch we were joined for the afternoon by ORAS member Dwayne D who was a great help in moving the classroom benches and installing the big TV.



Throughout the day, the partly cloudy sky looked like it could rain any time, and the wind was very gusty blowing things around. Geoff C arrived with his camper and setup on the west field. Then Dan and Sharon H dropped by to visit for a couple of hours. Around 4pm, clouds began to once again build and by 5pm we had another storm, though relatively calm compared to last night, LOL.

A little before 7pm, club president Tim S got home from out-of-town and visited. Dean and I updated him on our progress, and we reviewed Tim's layout for the walking solar system model that he laid out (pink flags) along the access road to the observatory.



While in the new pavilion classroom demonstrating the new TV, Geoff stopped over and also visited. We were treated to a nice rainbow over the observatory. With more rain on the way, the group broke up and I headed back to camp to settle in. Stayed up till 11pm. Woken by a thunderstorm a half hour later!

### **Friday 04/17/2026:**

Woke to cloudy skies and a damp morning, temp around 54 deg. Before long the clouds began to break and the sky went partly sunny by 10:30am. By noon, the sky was completely clear with the warm sun drying out the observing field. Tonight's forecast looked great!

After breakfast, I headed down to the Jones Building to clean up the old leftover construction material laying around and rebuild the fire pit. Dean S's friend and neighbor, Jim, dropped by to help and assisted. We then helped Dean further organize the garage, and Jim swept out the observatory.



During that, Dean's better half, Alice and her daughter Robin and her husband Ben arrived with their camper and setup next to Dean.

By noon, we had pretty much everything done on the spring cleaning punch list, so after hitting the shower, I made lunch, uncovered the C8 telescope and setup the SeeStar. Then spent the afternoon visiting. A little after 1pm, Chris T arrived, followed 30 minutes later by Dean M. Susan P also joined us at 2pm. (Both Chris and Susan were staying overnight in their cars by the observatory, Dean was leaving later that evening). Around 4pm, Ray M and his friend Donna pulled in and setup car camp on the north field. Getting a nice little crowd for Friday night!

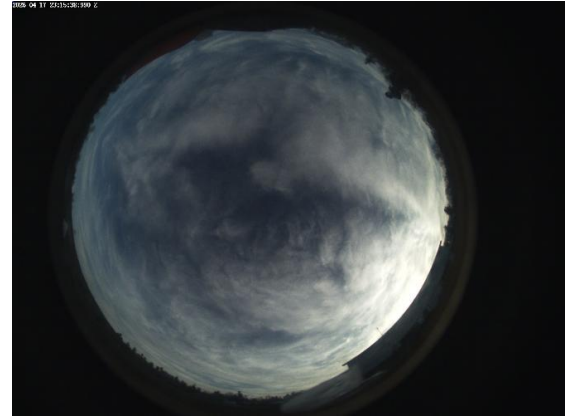
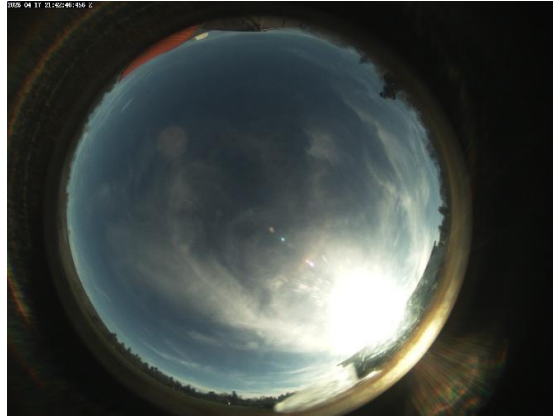
Tim S and Butch B also were here working on the field, with Susan and later Tim planting pine trees along the field for light blocking. The sky had gone a little hazy, but the weather apps were all still showing good for the night. I started up the AllSky cam.



With the great forecast, I was planning on making it an all-nighter, so I got in a late afternoon nap. After dinner, I walked around, visited, and took a few people photos.



The sky at sunset was starting to not look good! I was beginning to suspect the weather forecasts were drastically off!



At dusk, while waiting for Polaris to shine, I phoned home. Thru the light haze I was able to polar align, focus the telescope, and train PHD guiding. I skewed the scope over to Hydra to hunt for Arp galaxies, but the haze seemed to thicken. After consulting the weather app, it was very apparent that it would NOT be clearing at all during the night, and that a strong storm system out west in Indiana would push clouds our way all night! Arghh! Around 10pm, with the skies being unusable, I walked around and delivered KitKats to folks.



After talking with Chris in the observatory about what to observe under hazy conditions, I headed back to camp and decided to EAA observe some of the brighter Messier globular star clusters that were cutting thru the haze:

M3 in Canes Venatici, M53 in Coma Berenices, and M5 in Serpens.



(8" SCT @ f6.3 on an Atlas Gem, ZWO ASI294MC Pro camera with L-Pro filter, 15 second subs, dark & flat frames, PHD guided, livestacked using SharpCap for 5 minutes).

Due to the less than clear sky, the outdoor temp stayed in the low 60's, making it warm inside the blackout tent. For practice, I polar aligned the S30-Pro, but then powered it off. Headed inside the camper at midnight for awhile to relax. At 1:00am, with the sky still overcast, I headed outside to shutdown the C8, and disassemble the blackout clamshell tent. Then set an alarm to wake at 4:30am in hopes of comet hunting, and went to bed.

At 4:30am the alarm went off, I crawled from bed and checked the sky. It looked to be mostly clear! You could see the Milky-Way! I hurriedly dressed and went outside to power on the SeeStar. Comet PanStarrs R3 had just risen, but was lost in the trees and haze.



After several attempts to see it using the S30 and my 10x50 monocular, I went back inside the camper to wait for the comet to get higher in elevation. It was a race against dawn! Finally, just before 5:30am, the comet emerged from the trees. I had just enough time before twilight for a short livestack observation.

Here's both the full-size S30-Pro capture and a cropped/enhanced version.



(SeeStar S30-Pro: 20 second exposures in Stargazing Mode - 30mm lens, native FOV, EQ Mount, IR filter, livestacked for 3 minutes, then AI noise reduction applied in-app)

After enjoying a view of dawn and watching a bright ISS pass, I powered down the SeeStar and went back to bed at 6am.



Here's a timelapse video from my dented AllSky camera: <https://youtu.be/xn83BDqf8YM>  
(Note the blurred area by the observatory, that's a hail damage spot on the dome).

**Saturday 04/18/2026:**

Slept in till 9:30am. Woke to a partly cloudy sky with temps in the mid 60's. The folks staying overnight in their cars had left by then. Around 10am, Geoff C pulled out for home with his camper. Late morning Tim S brought a tractor over to re-level the dirt and fill in the low muddy spots along the west field utility line with Dean S and Ben giving him a hand rolling the field, and planting grass seed.

After I had finished breakfast, I broke down the telescopes, took down the shade visor, and put away most of the camping gear in anticipation of the afternoon/evening storms coming in around 4pm. Visited with Dean S, then sat around camp reading. The sky had gone to mostly overcast with strong wind gusts. Took a long mid-afternoon nap.

Made dinner at 4:30pm and watched the storm of the day roll in.

At 6:30pm, I drove down to the Jones Building to attend the April Public Night with Dean M presenting on the Artemis return to the Moon. Good presentation and a nice crowd considering the weather!



Afterwards I drove back up to camp and spent the evening till after midnight, working on photos and website updates.

**Sunday 04/19/2026:**

Slept in till 8:30am. It was a cold dreary morning, with occasional scattered light showers. While eating breakfast, I packed the inside of the camper. Dean S stopped over to visit for a few minutes. A little after 9am, Dean and family had everything packed up and headed home.

While I was cranking up the camper stabilizer jacks and hooking up, it began to sleet!! After locking the facilities gate, I pulled out for home at 9:45am, and an uneventful 2.5 hr drive south to PGH. A quick drive thru town and I was soon backing the camper down the driveway at 12:15pm.

So five nights spent at the ORAS Observatory this trip, with maybe half a night of EAA observing! (being generous, it was more like just an hour or two,,, ☹ ) Not a very productive observational week. But it was still overall a good trip, seeing old astro-friends and getting the ORAS Observatory ready for the year!

That brings the 2026 tally so far up to 11 nights camping, with only 4.5 clear nights, and 6.5 cloudy/rainy nights. Not a good start. Hopefully the May ORAS Informal StarGaze trip, will put my clear-sky ledger back in the black!

Larry McHenry

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