

Winter Star Party in the Florida Keys

Changes in Latitude, Changes in Attitude

By Alex McConahay

There is a place in southern Florida where frozen astronomers flock every winter.

Ralph Megna and I went exploring there this year.

It is situated on the south side of West Summerland Key, about ten or so acres of sand, grass, and a few trees wedged between the Overseas Highway and the 71 degree water of the Atlantic Ocean. This puts it 43 miles east of Key West, and nearly as far south as one can get in the continental United States.

And that about says it all.

People come here for lots of reasons, but the weather has to be foremost for most. Just talk to the

attendees, and you hear story after story of how they observe in 4 degree weather, after shoveling their way to their backyard observatory. Or worse yet, how they have not observed in three months because of the clouds, rain, and snow. The breeze blowing through the palms, the shirtsleeves, the screen-enclosed sleeping huts, the swim trunks and sandals all tell you this is a different place for a winter observer.

Ralph had gone early to visit some family and friends (he grew up in Florida), and met me at the airport after the red-eye from LAX. We had both come with the bare essentials. Some t-shirts, shorts, sandals, and cameras. Neither of

us had brought a telescope, preferring to do "parasitic astronomy," where we would spend the evening wandering and asking "What you looking at?" Of course, one essential that I did not know about, but Ralph had brought, was a fishing pole to use on the nearby bridges.

The lines at the gate before entry were pretty much like those at RTMC AE, except for the police cruiser on duty at the head of the line, and, of course, mugginess replaced the dry dust. We had a three hour wait for the gate to open, so Ralph went off to catch his lunch (or at least relive some memories).

On opening, we were assigned to Chickee #5—Dreyer. A chickee, you see, is a hut. It is made up of a raised wooden platform, a few poles, window screening, some tarps, and lots of palm fronds. Inside are six bunks, and in our case the other four inhabitants were some very likable gentlemen from the great frozen north. The weather was mild enough that a simple sheet on the bunk sufficed and a sleeping bag was too much.

We spent our first afternoon touring the facility. "Vendor Alley" was relatively small, with about ten vendors, including Astronomy to Go, Televue, Astro Gizmos, Moonlite Focusers, and a few other mount and accessory manufacturers. I



Chickee Hut Dreyer was home for Alex, Ralph, and four friendly amateur astronomers from the frozen north in early February's Winter Star Party.

recognized most of them from RTMC AE, and met a few whose products I had only seen in the magazines.

The camp was a long strip of land, maybe a hundred yards wide. At one end were the chickees and some of the camping, in the middle was a large two story building that had been ruined a few years back in a hurricane, and was fenced off, awaiting the wrecker's ball (or another hurricane!). A small trailer/catering station and eating shelter offered hot snacks and drinks. Then the centerpiece: a sand berm topping maybe three or four feet above high tide. It ran about a

hundred yards, was covered with a little bit of grass and simply full of very expensive telescopes. No junk. Just really good stuff.

I had been told by Jim Burnell that inch for inch this place had the most expensive set of astronomical equipment of any gathering of amateurs—and I can attest to it. Astro-Physics, and Takahashis, and refractors, and fancy motorized Dobs, and ccd's and equatorial tables, and Paramounts...it just went on and on.

There was campfire/assembly area, and at the far end of the

camp was a two-story combination bunkhouse- lecture hall, and some showers, along with lots more camping spaces and ad-hoc-telescope fields.

On Monday afternoon, Tippy D'Auria, who helped establish the Winter Star Party twenty-four years ago (and whom I had wanted to meet since the days of the Compuserve AstroForum) opened the party by greeting the 650 campers, volunteers, and vendors allowed to enter the campground. He stood there with a stogie in his hand, told us of the history of the activity, and encouraged us to get



RAS Planetary Imager, Ralph Megna (cup in hand), holds court, as two budding astro-imagers (Sean Walker (of S&T) and Damien Peach) listen intently for words of wisdom and encouragement.

into the mood.

So we did. After the greeting, Ralph and I went into town to the Winn-Dixie to get some provisions, and hit Rick's Island Grill, where we had a Corona or two, dinner, and of course, some Key Lime Pie. On return to Camp Wesumkee (the official name of the Girl Scout camp which holds the WSP), there was a stiff breeze blowing, and clouds rolling through, but we chased sucker holes till midnight.

The observing was different. It was February but shirtsleeves, maybe a light sweatshirt, sufficed. There was skyglow from both the east and the west due to bright lights on adjacent Keys. Across the highway from the camp is a three hundred fifty foot radio tower with a red flashing strobe. And a couple of times the Florida Highway Patrol stopped a speeder, and the whole sky would flash a faint bluish white for 45 minutes or so while justice was done.

And there was always moisture in the air. Sometimes it organized itself into clouds, sometimes not. Rarely did it cloud all the way over, so there was usually something to look at. And it was extremely stable air. Naked eye stars were softer than we are used to. There are not as many stars because of the moisture. Deep sky objects suffered from the light pollution. But, the telescopic images were rock-steady. No twinkles. Saturn at 500 power with details in the clouds in the upper atmosphere. At one point Monday night we

looked at a series of objects in a borrowed 18 inch Dob, and agreed that we had never seen such good views of those objects, one right after another.

But there were some peculiarities. We saw scopes set up next to the beach and right under trees. It did not make any sense until one realized that these astronomers were mostly from the far frozen north, and they had seen everything overhead and north. They wanted to see the south. So, the fact that their telescopes were going to spend the week looking south, and never up or north, meant they could set up under the trees. As long as they could point south, they were happy.

Also peculiar were the number of scopes that were not being used. At any given moment, fewer than one in four scopes were uncovered and catching photons. At first I thought it was because the evening was breezy or because the

observing had to go to the sucker holes. But even under clear and still conditions, most of the scopes were unused. The only explanation that made any sense to me is that one could observe only so long, and given that people were there for seven days/six nights, they somehow could still get their fill. It may also have been because many people had come to South Florida for the vacation and not just the observing.

One final peculiarity was due to the perspective of latitude. We were ten degrees further south than we were accustomed to. Scorpius rose claws first straight up from the horizon, instead of arching along the southern sky. Canopus rose high and bright, (and could be seen reflected in the sea) instead of our skirting-the-horizon views from GMARS. In the early morning we saw Omega Centauri and the Southern Cross in full.

By day there were workshops,



SWAP MEETS are an essential part of any big star party, and the WSP has one on Tuesday and another on Friday!

attended by maybe 60 people at a time. Topics included astro-imaging, observing, and one rather interesting presentation by Tom Clark about the great star parties he had visited. Various references he made: RTMC was the largest star party in the world, Astrofest in Canada was the largest in North America, and Oregon's was the largest in the US. We could not quite figure out how that could work out, but enjoyed the different perspectives. Other events included two swap meets and one very congenial Friday afternoon ice-cream social, in which a few hundred attendees sat around in the lazy sun loading on sugar and cholesterol.

The two dozen or so kids had a Young Astronomer's Camp—where they worked on assembling an observing log, making models of the planets, listening and participating in special lessons, and engaging in other activities geared just to them.

Friday had an awards and recognition session. The scale of the door prizes was not that of RTMC, but still took an hour to dispense.

As at any big star party, there were people to meet. I watched as Sue French added to her observing log (very meticulous) and then conducted an outreach for a couple of newbies (very gracious). I thanked Atilla Danko for the Clear Sky Clock. (I found out that he only predicts the weather, but has no actual control over it!) Don Parker and Damien Peach, two very accomplished planetary imagers, gathered photons on the beach. Marcus Ludes, the German exporter of fine equipment, Al Nagler of Televue, and the newest Meade Crew were there. I met a few Astromarters, and it was fun to put a face to their names.

RANDOM SHOTS: One of the Young Astronomers' Camp kids looks over the "Pluto is a Planet" display, binoculars made from a pair of six inch refractors, the telescope berm waiting for the evening, and a Schmidt-Cass set up at sunset.

Ralph had his fishing, and I spent a couple of days snorkeling. We even hit the Coral Castle in all its mystery and glory. We went down to Duval Street in Key West one day to have a cheeseburger in paradise in Jimmy Buffett's Margaritaville. (Ralph kept saying Megnaritaville!) Oh, and more Key Lime Pie.

All in all, it was a great week under the sun and the stars.

