

2026-04 Southwest Research Station (SWRS) Summary

Introduction

This document summarizes the results of a survey attendees of the Southwest Research Station (SWRS) star party completed. The star party was held from April 15th (Wednesday) to April 17th (Friday) with departure of April 18th (Saturday) morning.

The SWRS is located in a remote area along the Arizona/New Mexico boarder by the town of Portal, in an area managed by the [American Museum of Natural History](#). The site is a [biological field station](#) hosting room and dorms for researchers that is open to the public when capacity allows.

The night sky at SWRS is extremely dark measuring Bortle 2 or better, but is in a valley, so there is an elevated horizon approximately 30° due to surrounding mountains and trees at the observation site.

This was an experimental star party with a small number of participants to evaluate the suitability of the site for possible future parties and to discover benefits, pitfalls and gather feedback from attendees for possible future star parties. There was a total of 14 persons who attended the star party.

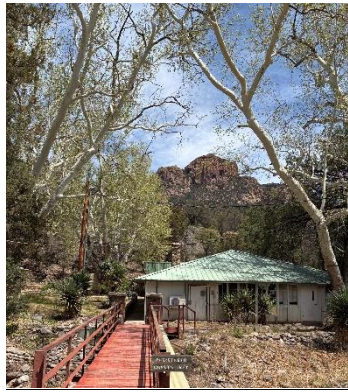
Further information on SWRS local activities, and event photographs can be viewed on the [Southwest Research Station Star Party webpage](#) located on the [ArtCentrics website](#).

Survey Result Summary (9 respondents)

- Persons Interested in participating in next one if offered: 9/9
- Preferred Number of days of event
 - Three Nights: 4/9
 - Four Nights: 5/9
- Best parts of the event
 - Dark skies & Astronomy
 - Social Interaction with fellow astronomers
 - Room & Board
 - Extra activities: Birding, Hiking, etc.
- Least enjoyed parts of the event
 - Long drive to location
 - Elevated Horizon
 - Observation sites were limited due to trees
 - Heater in dorms made noise in middle of night
- Additional Feedback
 - Would be nice to have presentations

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Photos: Location and Events

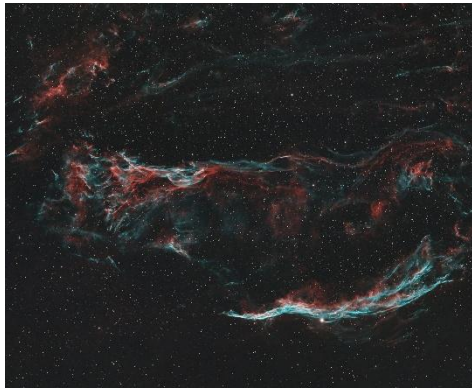


Photos: Accommodations



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Photos: Astrophotography



Photos: Scenic



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Photos: Wildlife



Conclusions

- Event was enjoyed by everyone, and this seems like a good venue to hold future star parties.
- Room and board were very reasonably priced and star party much more enjoyable.
- Providing option for 3 or 4 night stay would be ideal for the next star party.
- Should stake out observing sites for attendees so they know where they can access Polaris.
- It would be nice to organize additional activities including astronomy related presentations, and even excursions such as small nature walks and birding trips to local sites.

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Survey Results (9 Respondents)

1. Would you be interested in attending this event again if it is offered
 - a. Yes = 9/9
 - b. No = 0/9
2. How many nights (including the arrival day) do you think would be ideal for this event?
 - a. Three Nights = 4/9
 - b. Four Nights = 5/9
3. What were the best parts of the event to you?
 - a. Dark sky, perfect weather, good accommodation and food service, excellent location for daytime activities of hiking and bird watching, great opportunities to socialize especially during meals.
 - b. The scenic views during the day and sky at night. Being around other club members and discussions that came up, there was information I learned and was able to share with others. I enjoyed sharing the photos Friday night the reaction brought a smile to face.
 - c. Didn't have to cook, Hiking, weather was great.
 - d. The camaraderie, dark skies, bird watching, hiking, Astro planner.
 - e. The location. I had no idea a place like that could exist in the middle of the desert.
 - f. Everything about the event was excellent: the dorms, food, location, guests, doing some outreach. Absolutely loved it.
 - g. To be able to use the classroom to store astronomy equipment. To have full meals provided.
 - h. Having a room (instead of a tent) to warm up in after getting cold; Having really good meals prepared for me and not having to worry about food. Meeting new people and socializing with people with the same interests. Knowing it was coordinated by James I knew it would be well thought out and would go smoothly and it did. Having the zoom meetings beforehand so we knew what to expect was helpful.
 - i. The Dark Skies, Not having to worry about room & board, The very reasonable rates and ability to interact with fellow astronomers.
4. What elements of the event did you not like so much?
 - a. Obstructions by trees and mountains. Ground is soft, making it difficult to maintain good leveling. Be nice if the standard rooms have proper desks for work during the day.
 - b. Heater waking people up, understand that is not under your control and attendees can only be warned up to them to heed such. Set up the 1st night and having tree partial blocking view of Polaris, think there was mention of marking "good spots" in advance on future visits. Did the 4-5hr drive deter club members? Is there something with a similar Bortle level and food/sleeping arrangement closer (Flagstaff/Sedona/Tucson/near Jerry's ranch) aware possible cost increase. Search for flagstaff <https://www.flagstaff.com/cabins> search for

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Sedona <https://visitsedona.com/where-to-stay/cabins/> Tried searching Tucson and did not find a sharable link. Aware if going somewhere else a test trip necessary.

- c. Poor internet connectivity
 - d. Nothing
 - e. The distance. It seemed like a longer drive than it was.
 - f. Maybe the porchlights on dorms, but totally understandable.
 - g. More recommendations to the touring of the trails close by and more clearing space for the astronomers to set up.
 - h. It would have been nice if drinking water were more readily available somewhere on the property. It was really only available in the cafeteria which was only accessible part of the time. It wasn't easy to find a great spot to polar align on Polaris, but with careful planning it was possible.
 - i. Elevated horizon, Non-ideal site for setting up the equipment for viewing. Some dorms had issues with the heater making excessive noise in the middle of the night.
5. Any feedback on the event you would like to add?
- a. I would suggest reserving a table at the dining facility for our group. This will help include everyone during the meal time social. Remind participants to bring sleeping bag or blankets in case of cold nights since the rooms do not have heating.
 - b. During the day would want some classes/panel discussion on astronomy related topics time wise 1hr to 90 minutes and some topics could have more than 1 speaker w/note if folks wanted to stay longer could. Given the work organizer does they should teach/lead/moderate 1 class/discussion any others should be by an attendee. Topic ideas: apps/software (what is used/why) if someone wanted to do a full demo optional, equipment care and maintenance, different types of telescopes and what target(s) are they best for, binoculars type to get and target(s) best viewing, sharing of any images would also invite staff/other groups as an outreach effort (I can see Alice smiling already), question time attendees could ask questions/share something struggling with/can I or how to I do this and everyone else can offer their response, and one-shot wonders through eye piece mentioned such to a couple of attendees and they had no idea (i.e. cell phone or DSLR). Any future visits when sending out the invite or payment notice include 2 questions. "If there were any classes/panel discussion what topic(s) you would want covered?" "Would you be willing to teach/be a panelist/moderate a panel?" Group visit of nearby scenic viewpoints with minimal hiking/walking similar to the frog pond visit. Think 5 nights could also be good, question unless there was enough stuff to do during the day any longer desirable. More structures outreach, plan each night say at least 30 minutes a couple of targets to look at and coordinate/plan with astro-images to have personal digital photos for folks to see from that day's targets.
 - c. A really nice area to hang out and do some birding, hiking and astronomy.

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- d. No
- e. The place itself was fine. Room better than a tent. Food ok, not gourmet but not bad either. I don't think anyone went hungry or turned anything away.
- f. Maybe one more night. But if not, would not be a deal breaker.
- g. I would prefer there are keys for my room rather than to let it unlocked all the time. And may be telling the facilities have no heater so that the renters can bring their own sleeping bags. We have a spare blanket that we use and we are fine.
- h. It was a great experience. Thanks so much to James for planning this event!
- i. Staff were wonderful,