

Observer Safety

I think it's important to mention safety and astronomy. Part of observing visually is finding the darkest skies you can which is becoming harder. So, we are forced to drive to remote areas that are sometimes not improved and do so even in cold weather. Such conditions and locations can lead to significant risk. So can other people who don't understand what you're doing or are just untrustworthy.

A tried-and-true tool is the buddy system. My personal preference is to observe at one of our dark sky sites either at a scheduled event or with one or two observing buddies. They're simply safety in numbers, and if someone finds two or three men or women together, they may think twice before messing with them. One of you may get sick and need assistance from the others; if nothing else, they can call for police or ambulance. It's just a good policy to always try to have another person there with you, especially in cold weather when things can creep up on you fast.

Let someone at home or one of your friends know where you are at. That way, if you don't show up to work the next day or something, they will at least know where to start looking. If it is possible let them know the path you plan to take there unless it is already well established.



Another real problem is sleep deprivation. When the sky is nice and the views may not come again for months, we try to see as much as we can and stay up as late as we can. This is great but can lead to a sleepy driver. I know about this problem very well. Although I had not observed that night, just getting my telescope ready to go to a star party, on the way home I fell asleep and totaled my car into a tree. I lay there by the road until my wife came and got me. Somehow due to the airbag I was uninjured, but sore from head to toe. Only bright spot was when I left the telescope back at the observatory. Otherwise, it would have been destroyed too.

Unfortunately, that was nowhere near the first time I had been sleepy and driving. Our club used to visit Adams Ranch, an even darker site that was three hours from my home. Even though it had a great bunkhouse, sometimes I would observe there and then drive back home. There were many times when if there hadn't been an upbeat song on the radio, I don't know... If you're tired, stay at the site or pull over and take a little nap. You can always start home later after you have a little rest.



Speaking of roads, I just had a fantastic blowout on one of our freeways coming home when a piece of debris in the road tore an inch wide hole in my tire. If there had been more traffic my severe turn to the right trying to get off the highway onto the shoulder might have been resulting in an accident. Luckily, I was unhurt again and had a good spare. Unfortunately, the trucker who stopped after seeing all this and tried to help me could not figure out the jack either. So, I called my road assistance service through my insurance, and they were able to come help me.

That's not the first time something like that happened either. One time I went to see the Capulin Volcano in New Mexico while I was at OkieTex in the Oklahoma Panhandle. It's about a 3-hour drive there and back and there are modern highways to take you the entire way. Of course, I didn't want to do something that simple, so I took my rental car down extremely worn-out roads that were apparently U.S. 66 at one time. They were horrible and then on the way back I was late for dinner, so I ran along them as fast as a hundred. Sure enough, by the time I got back to the campsite I had a flat. Once again, I called roadside assistance and was fine but just imagine if it had gone flat about a hundred miles earlier. I don't even know if I had cell service at that point. If you think it's just because I'm a lousy driver, one of our local weathermen just had the same thing happen here in 2025. He made it back to camp also, barely.



Your safety and well-being is paramount because if you do suffer an injury, it may limit what you observe in the future. My fear is falling off ladders observing with big telescopes. I try to use my step ladder as little as possible with my 22-in UC, but on occasion there are bigger telescopes (= bigger ladders). I try to avoid those as much as possible. And again, if you're sleepy you may fall off the ladder which I have done more than once. My rule about that is the same as at the bar if I fall off the stool, it's time to go home.

The weather is not our friend. Even though it may be very clear and nice when you start, winter storms and cold fronts come in faster than predicted, leading to all kinds of problems if you're out too far. It's always tempting to try to go and look when it's crystal clear and very cold, but exposure can be fatal. And don't forget summer, when you can become dehydrated and overheated, especially setting up during twilight, which may be the hottest and most humid part of the day.

Choose your site carefully. Most of the time as I've grown older, I've been smart enough to go to our observatory, established star party or Adams Ranch. When I was younger, I would often just go out to the middle of nowhere, find the end of a road and set my telescope up. So far, I haven't been approached by anyone about trespassing, but I was scared out of my mind by a deer coming up behind me in the woods a long time ago. If you do need to go to a new site, try to contact the landowner or the park service etc., and make sure they know ahead of time and agree that you can observe there.

While the trucker and I were working on my tire, the people on the highway were not getting over in the other lane or giving us any room to work at all. Many people have been injured trying to change a tire on a highway and luckily, we weren't part of that count. This is another risk that amateur astronomers take, they often go to dark sites on the weekends and return at wee hours. So, beware of the people around you on the road and try to anticipate that all of them are drunk and that you're going to have to adjust your driving to suit.

And it's half past four and I'm shifting gears. *"Radar Love", Golden Earring*

Worst of all is getting older. As we grow older our responses slow and sometimes our ability to stay awake in boring situations like long expressway drives can occur. Again, don't think of yourself as bulletproof. Turn up the radio, drink some coffee or pull over and take a little nap if you have to it's not worth getting home 30 minutes earlier if you're going to risk running off the road or having some other kind of accident or mishap. Gene Shoemaker is the most famous example of an astronomer that has been lost due to an accident on a long, lonely road, but I'm sure there are many more that we just haven't heard of. Don't add yourself to the list.