TIPS FOR WINTER OBSERVING

Looking after yourself

Even on a good night at this time of year it is cold out there. Stay warm and comfortable. A hat will keep your head warm and reduce heat loss from the top of your head. Wearing a scarf will keep your neck warm. A good pair of gloves will keep your hands warm. Layering your clothing will trap warm body heat in close to your body to keep your warmth in and the cold out. Using several good layers of clothing will work better for you than one heavy article of clothing alone. Socks, Long-Johns, 'T' shirt followed by heavy pants, socks and a shirt. Followed by heavy socks and a jumper. Now add a jacket hat and scarf.

Try normal socks on your feet with some thick heaver socks to keep your feet warmer for longer. Insulated boots will keep the cold from the ground out and keep your feet warmer for longer. If your equipment runs on batteries, well they don't like the cold and will soon run out of power so have spares to hand. Don't breath on the optics as the moisture from your breath may freeze on the cold surfaces.

Eating a good meal before observing and snacking on a few carbohydrates will help to keep you warm as food warms the body. Warm liquids to drink, try hot cider. The caffeine in coffee will cause your fingers to feel cold as caffeine shrinks your blood vessels. No alcohol!! You feel warm at first, but as the blood vessels dilate, they will cool the body off, and hypothermia will be accelerated. Besides alcohol does nothing for Viewing.

Keep out of the wind and if out for a while take breaks indoors to warm up again. Keep moving whilst outdoors to keep your circulation up.

Looking after your equipment

Observing in the cold is hard on Equipment. Power your equipment from a separate battery. Make sure your car battery is up to par, and or course make sure your mobile phone is fully charged. You photographers should have your cameras cleaned and ready for such use. Some cameras like Nikon, have accessories that replace the tiny silver-oxide batteries with AA size penlight ones. DSLRs should have their batteries fully charged before going out into the field, with at least one more on standby. Preferably in an inside pocket of your coat.

Your telescope mount. Make sure that all bearing surfaces of the mounting or drive are well greased (not oiled) before use. Check that they turn smoothly before setting off. Set off the drive from the moment you set up, when they still have some residual heat from the house in the metal. Always maintain optical collimation. It's a nightmare trying to make adjustments when out in the cold.

Use alkaline or preferably lithium batteries in all torches, and carry spare batteries if possible. A separate battery to power your drive and dew/frost cap is indispensable.

Your biros will freeze up, and keeping them inside your jacket only invites you to release all that heat you've retained. Use pencils and papers to record your observations. If it is cold MPS players and CD's will fail. So use a radio. The local news will keep your mind activated under these conditions more than Bon Jovi. Laptop computers must be kept warmer than 45 degrees F and of course away from the frost and the damp. So it is better to print your star charts and observing logs before you leave home.

The bottom line is if you feel uncomfortable or it's too hard to run your equipment. Then take the hint from nature, and pack up and go home.

Well with all this you might think that you would be better off leaving it until the spring. But a bit of planning can make your winter observing the best of the year.
Clear skies and keeping warm will add to joy to your winter observing.

Keighley Astronomical Society