

The Night Sky

My husband and I like to sit out in the evening and watch the sky get darker and the stars emerge into the blackness of night. Having spent decades camping in the desert, as well as the tropic and temperate areas, I am acquainted with the stars and, even more so, with their constellations. So when I took a group of Presidio students on an eight day camping trip across Texas the two other teachers and I intended that they learn something about the night sky.

The bad news first, most nights had too many clouds (and some rain, which we did not complain about) to do much star gazing. Plus our trip was really too short to accommodate a full night of star gazing. As the teachers and I talked we decided to add more days to next year's trip so that the students could learn more about the night sky. But for this year, we had but a single night and it had clouds scattered about. Nevertheless, we looked up and beheld the universe and it was awesome.

The most dramatic constellation in the pre-midnight sky this time of year is the scorpion (Scorpio). He has been recognized by all cultures that knew what a scorpion was and is hard to miss with the brightest star (Antares) at its center. The students looked up and could see enough of the scorpion through the scattered clouds to know what it was. I told them the story of how the lowly scorpion had killed the great hunter, Orion, and had been given this spot in the sky for his courage. The greatness of Orion's hunting skills also earned him a spot in the sky but it is away from the scorpion, not appearing in the sky until the scorpion has set. I think Orion might be a little intimidated by the lowly scorpion that killed him when no others could!

I talked with the students about constellations and the names of stars, mentioning that many of them had names in Arabic and asking if anyone knew why. It wasn't long before I had the answer about long black nights spent on the desert ground. We talked about how it was that people could see things in the night sky when there really wasn't anything there. The students said that it helped pass the time and that a good story teller could make things appear where there was nothing.

At that point I broke out the binoculars that, up to that point had been used for birding, and pointed toward the upper tail of the scorpion, " See what you can see in the tail while using binoculars", I said. The students dutifully looked up, studying the stars in the tail and then there was a shout as the first student recognized the Gecko, a Hawaiian constellation that can only be seen with the aid of a lens. As we marveled at the beautiful little constellation we wondered

how it was that the Hawaiians could even see the constellation, yet alone make up stories about it to tell their children.

It was a magical evening but we were exhausted. I asked the kids to make a journal entry about the night sky before going to sleep in their tents. Already we could see lightning to the northwest and wondered what the night would bring.

Posted by Patt Sims - June19, 2012