



The pelican saved my night...somewhat



On the way into the Earth's shadow

Brunswick Wildlife Zigged when I should've Zagged!

On the morning of the February 18 total lunar eclipse, I was suddenly driven to photograph the event. Without planning and with little study, I grabbed my camera and birding scope, jumped into my SUV, and headed to Fort Fisher's rock seawall. I was the first to arrive around 6:30 PM and the last to leave around 11:30 PM. Can't say I didn't try!

As it turned out, my lack of experience and planning did not contribute to my demise. I was not totally defeated but it hurt the next day to see photos from around the country, including downtown Wilmington, of the red phase of the total eclipse taken while I sat out a period of heavy cloud cover. Dang!

The downtown view had no cloud cover? The dang angle based on the fifteen miles caused that much of a doggone difference? %#*@!!! I should have stayed at home in Leland or gone to Mason Inlet at Wrightsville Beach as I originally planned. I zigged when I should have zagged! Dagummit!

Earlier in the day I e-mailed friends for advice. They suggested Fort Fisher might offer great, unobstructed views because that is where astronomy classes and clubs go to witness such celestial events. I took their advice and would probably do so again. The astronomy class was there and suffered with me. Did I mention the lack of clouds downtown just fifteen dagum miles away?

A lunar eclipse, either partial or total, occurs only during a full moon and only if the moon passes through a portion of Earth's shadow. A total eclipse occurs when the inner or umbral shadow of the Earth completely blocks sunlight from reaching the moon.

Since there is a full moon every 29.5 days, you may ask "why is there not an eclipse each month?" The plane of the orbit of the moon around the Earth is at a slight angle to the

plane of the orbit of the Earth around the sun; therefore, the moon is usually either above or below the Earth's shadow.

However, at least twice and sometimes up to four times a year, the Moon passes through a portion of the Earth's shadow for everyone on the night side of Earth to see. Total lunar eclipses are fairly rare because they make up about thirty-five percent of all eclipses and we do not get to see those that are not in our night sky.

Anyway, I enjoyed the cold air, roar of the ocean, and occasional commiseration with others. We speculated about our chances with as much actual knowledge of circumstances and insight as the political pundits on today's talk shows.

We were able to watch the process. It was as if the moon was swimming upstream against the ripple of clouds like a big pale yellow salmon going to spawn.

The night sky was like a negative image of the daytime sky. The dark areas were the darker clouds not blue sky. In the lighter areas some open space and lighter clouds existed. By timing my observation of the moon's "path" with the light ripples, the eclipse's progress could be watched but just not photographed.

Part of the attraction of a total lunar eclipse is the enhanced ability to see stars, planets, and the Milky Way given the darker than usually background. About halfway into the total eclipse, I looked to the west and I saw stars. Literally!

A clear area of sky was headed my way. In it I could finally see the pointer stars of the Big Dipper as they showed me the way to the North Star.

Unfortunately the clearing was a few minutes late arriving. Did I see the totality of the total eclipse? Almost...I had seen the last sliver of light going in and now I got to see the first small arc of light coming out.

Still I expected to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat by photographing stages of the moon as it continued to emerge from the Earth's shadow. My hopes, however, were dashed on the nearby rocks as additional water vapor started to form overhead. Instead, I had a nice view of the totally reemerged moon forty-five minutes later from my driveway.

It was a great, magical experience and I was not completely skunked. I'll just try again on December 21, 2010. That is the winter solstice!

The last time the winter solstice occurred with a full moon was Dec 22, 1999. The 2010 date will feature a full moon, total lunar eclipse, and winter solstice occurring almost simultaneously. That should bring out the doomsday folks!

For those that got the dang photos I cherished, at least I got to see the rings of Saturn through my scope and, before the eclipse started, I got the cool pelican photo. So the night was saved...somewhat....

John Ennis

