

A Winter Sky from Suburbia

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A beautiful Florida winter sky sans Geminids

Did you see any Geminid meteors this past week? (The peak of the 2013 shower occurred Saturday morning, Dec. 14, at about 1:00 a.m. EST or 06:00 UT.)

I decided to try the day before maximum since skies were clear Friday morning (Dec. 13) and the forecast for the following morning was very poor. However, I saw only a few meteors and my camera unfortunately did not record any Geminids during early Friday morning hours. Still, I did record some beautiful views of the winter sky from my backyard. Seeing and transparency were very good although some occasional passing, thin clouds appeared during the early morning hours. Stars barely “scintillated” (twinkled).

I have attached one of the images taken Friday morning. Hopefully, this will encourage people to observe our winter skies despite possible cold temperatures (but fewer bugs).

Fortunately, areas near Gainesville are dark enough so one does not need to travel terribly far to see some of winter’s wonders. In fact, the attached photo was taken only six miles southwest of UF’s Cultural Plaza, site of Powell Hall where the club meets.

See if you can identify some of winter’s major constellations and bright winter stars in the attached photo. Orion, Gemini, Canis Major, Canis Minor and a bit of Taurus are all there sporting their bright stars including Sirius, Procyon, Betelgeuse, Rigel, Pollux and Castor. Yellowish Aldebaran in Taurus appears near the right edge above the tree line. Lepus is also above the trees just below Orion. The head of Hydra sticks out from the upper left corner. Do you see the Orion nebula in the sword of Orion? Can you find the “Beehive Cluster” or Praesepe (M44) in Cancer (at top edge)?

The winter sky does not have the richness of the summer Milky Way but is filled with an abundance of very bright stars.

But don’t be confused by the brilliant “star” in Gemini – it’s Jupiter! And, do more stars seem visible horizontally across the midsection of the photo? These stars are in winter’s Milky Way Band.

The next morning proved that the dismal forecast for Saturday morning was correct. At 4:00 p.m. EST I observed a very bright Geminid east of Sirius, probably brighter than Jupiter, striving to shine through increasing haze and clouds. So, I set up my camera again but the cloud covered increased and photography was thwarted.

Anyone have better luck?

For those interested, here are some photo details about the attached picture:

Photo Date: 2013 December 13, 4:05 a.m. EST (09:05 UT).

Camera: Canon DSLR EOS 5D II on a fixed mount.

Lens: Canon EF 20-35mm USM, f/3.5-4.5 Lens at 20.0mm.

Exposure: 30s @ f/4.0 (ISO Equiv. 1600).

Processing: Corel PaintShop Pro X5.

(Because the camera did not track the stars, some slight star trailing occurred, which reduces limiting magnitude. Still careful inspection of the photo reveals stars down to nearly magnitude nine!) ☼

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