

## ATTACK OF THE MARTIAN MOSQUITOS

**By Stephen (Smitty) Smith**

*(This article, which first appeared in the May, 1997 issue of the Observer, tells you all you need to know about preparing for spring summertime observing.)*

Now that warmer weather is here, mosquitos, redbugs, gnats and other pesky insects aren't far behind. They can turn a potentially great evening of stargazing into an ordeal of annoyance, pain or downright misery. Skywatchers and their guests at springtime and summer observing sessions should begin preparing to combat flying insect pests before heading for the observing site.

Odors attract bugs. Wearing after-shave lotion, cologne, perfume, or any strongly scented powder is an open invitation for insects to inspect the exposed areas of your fair and tender body at point-blank range. Similarly, you might want to consider bathing and changing clothes before going out to observe; by doing so, you will eliminate your "natural" odor that attracts insects and repels friends and observing companions during an evening of stargazing.

Shorts, tank-tops and sandals may be comfortable attire for the hot, humid summer months – but you should bear in mind that the temperature drops when the sun goes down, and dress accordingly. Wear (or at least bring along) a long-sleeved shirt, long pants made of a light, cool material, and shoes or sneakers. Enclosed footwear will protect your toes from unexpected encounters with unseen rocks and sticks in the darkness, and prevent your feet from getting cold and wet when dew settles on the grass.

Spray your clothes lightly and evenly with insect repellent, but not to the point of saturating your clothing or feeling greasy. Have someone spray vulnerable areas that you cannot reach. Read the application instructions and warnings for your repellent, and avoid getting any on your eyelashes or in your mouth, nose or eyes.

After using insect repellent, wipe your hands thoroughly with a cloth or paper towel before handling your observing equipment. Most repellents contain powerful chemicals that can melt plastic parts in flashlights, Telrad finders, binoculars and telescopes; they can even dissolve the protective anti-reflection coatings on lenses in binoculars, telescopes and eyepieces! You should always avoid touching your lenses with your fingers, of course – but

you should also be aware that your eyelashes can foul your eyepiece with harmful amounts of repellent. Eyepiece coatings are so expensive to repair that it's usually cheaper to replace the eyepiece!

Do not use spray fogger when you're observing at home, either, for the same reason. I'm not sure what its chemical effects might be on your optical coatings, but I suspect that you might find it expensive to find out.

A final caution regarding insect repellents: if you spray yourself at the observing site, first move downwind and far enough away from other observers that the resulting mist will not reach or settle on your own observing instruments or anyone else's.

Although they may be attractive in your backyard for cookouts or parties, you should avoid the temptation to burn citronella candles or oil lamps in the area where you're observing. First, they constitute a fire hazard; second, the light from even a red-shielded flame will adversely affect your night vision; and third, burning such items fills the air with small waxy, greasy particles, some of which are bound to find their way onto the optics of your observing instruments.

Keeping your optics clean for good light delivery to your eye is very important – but that's a subject for another article. Until then, keep an eye out for those Martian mosquitos, and for those june bugs from the Whirlpool Galaxy. Word has it that they are using cloaking devices to hide their approach, and the repellents we're currently using to stop them are as useless as a Telrad with dead batteries!

##