

Vice President's Report – Wiruna 2017

By Joe Cauchi

The four months leading up to the Star Party was a very busy time at Wiruna. We were determined to finish the new kitchen (lounge room) and install a whole new cooking and preparation area in the original kitchen.

We started with ordering new bench tops and a double sink to be placed along the west wall extending around to the southern corner with the pizza oven at the end of the line. Our local plumber installed new gas and water piping along the same area. I purchased four new gas cookers of much better quality than our original cookers, and now the pizza oven is also piped up to the one large gas bottle. I built two large food preparation work benches with stainless steel tops, which were placed parallel to the cooking benches.

In the new kitchen, we opted to use shade cloth for the two rectangular sections, east and west of the building. This proved to be far less expensive, more practical and easy to install. The fireplace was a work in progress as once it was installed, the problem was smoke, the whole inside of the building would be engulfed in smoke. Over the next two months, a large steel grate and an extra length of flue seem to have fixed this problem. Three roll-up clear café blinds were purchased and installed on the south wall of the building.

After the continuing problems with the kitchen's hot water unit, it was decided to purchase a storage unit similar to the one up at the house. This was plumbed in and used for the first time during the Star Party. It was a real luxury to have hot water on tap again.

To cap off all this work, Peter Moore installed red and white lighting over the cooking area, which has made cooking and eating, especially during the winter months, a lot more manageable. Peter installed red lighting in the new building and updated the existing red lights in the old kitchen.

Peter Moore also installed a new screen in the meeting hall, this screen is used for formal presentations during the Star Party and for watching videos on wet weekends.

Leading up to the Star Party, the usual preparations were carried out however this year there was a 12 tonne load of aggregate spread and levelled in front of the breezeway and around the two amenities blocks to stop mud being taken into the building and as a safety issue. The Society put on a communal dinner for all the helpers.

We had a similar spread in November. As the new moon fell at the end of the month in December, quite a few of us celebrated New Year's Eve at Wiruna, with those attending providing Steak and Salad, even ice cream, plus the occasional celebratory drink.

The house also got a lot of attention. General maintenance was carried out to repair loose tiles and fix leaks in the plumbing system. The grass was mowed around the house to make it more comfortable for those setting up their equipment there.

During the year one or two individual batteries of the 12 in our battery bank were failing and not holding charge. This caused the whole system to shut down on a regular basis. The committee decided to purchase new, bigger capacity batteries and send the old units back for a pro rata refund. You would not believe it but the new batteries arrived late Wednesday the day before the start of the Star Party. Chris Ross organised a large working group, and the old units were removed and the much larger and heavier batteries installed into the same metal box. The operation took the best part of the afternoon and we ended up finishing in the dark.

After this initial hiccup, the Star Party was a great success. The weather was good with the Saturday night being a truly magic night that all took advantage of. The hire company, as well as proving the marquee, also supplied a 20KVA diesel silent generator which was much cheaper than the 2 smaller units which we had used on previous years. Our two guest speakers, David Malin and David Gault gave very interesting talks to full meeting halls.

The Kandos Scouts as usual provided hot meals throughout the event. The roast dinner served by the chefs and their large number of helpers capped off a fantastic day. This year we had a mobile coffee van on the site for the 3 days. This was well received and it will be back for future Star Parties. This and all the other activities help to make the Star Party the Society's premier event of the year.

The attendance numbers this year were similar to the previous years at around 300 people. This number is what Wiruna, its facilities, parking, camping the organising committee can handle on a safe and comfortable level. I feel, as VP Wiruna, these numbers should be kept for future Star Parties.

Our Librarian Michelle Elliott did a stock take of the library which is housed at Wiruna and sorted out a lot of obsolete material. This task was long overdue and we now have cupboards full of more updated astronomical publications.

Throughout the 12 month period (July to June) Wiruna has gone from very green with good rainfall for the start of the period to drought conditions after Christmas - snow in June 2016 was very pretty but cold to catastrophic heatwave weather conditions in January where if they happened during a new moon weekend, Wiruna would have to have been closed as it would have been far too dangerous to be on the property in such conditions.

In June we set fire to 3 large piles of leaves and branches, one near the front gate, one near the camping field and the largest west of the Meeting Hall. Those there really enjoyed a good old fashioned bonfire. This was a good opportunity for Warren Neal, our Safety Officer, to demonstrate fire safety and how to use a fire extinguisher the correct way. We all had a try with the old extinguishers that had gone past their "use-by date".

During the year Warren purchased all new fire extinguishers for the buildings and property. They were all installed in their proper places.

Attendance was substantially up on last year with 39 people per month on average including new members using Wiruna. Income was also up with \$4582.00 collected for camping bunk house and house fees. There is about \$200.00 still outstanding to be added to that figure. As I don't collect annual fees for on-site tents and caravans, income for these is not included.

Mainly because of the drought and good timing, the number of all clear and half clear nights has increased to 15.5 clear nights for Friday and Saturday nights of the new moon weekends.

The demographics of Wiruna have changed from the early days when observing was by far the king to the present, where astroimaging has overtaken observing. This has become very noticeable with the latest observatory at Wiruna being robotic when completed. During the Star Party there seems to be a fairly even mix of visual and imaging at both the lower end observing sites, while the house seems to be used mainly for astroimaging.

Wiruna could not operate throughout the year and at Star Parties if it wasn't for those dedicated members who help and give up their time to make Wiruna the fantastic dark sky site it is today.